

Political philosophy in Michael Psellos:  
the *Chronographia* read in relation  
to his philosophical work

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The political thought explicitly or implicitly present in Michael Psellos' historical masterpiece, the *Chronographia*, has attracted the attention of modern readers and given rise to studies using diverse methods and reaching diverse results.<sup>1</sup> In general, however, this has been done without taking much account of the large body of texts produced by Psellos in relation to his teaching activities as a philosopher, with one notable exception: the autobiographical section in the *Chronographia* (VI 36ff.) where Psellos presents his philosophical education and interests, a passage evidently connected with Psellos' own philosophical work. The absence of research comparing the political thought of the *Chronographia* with what might be found in Psellos' philosophical works has the disadvantage of giving the impression of a double personality in Psellos: the political thinker and actor of the *Chronographia* and the teacher in the philosophical works. There is also the danger that we may deprive ourselves of means allowing us better to understand passages in the *Chronographia* involving fairly technical concepts and theoretical constructs which find fuller expression in the philosophical works, with the result that we may fail to grasp, or even misinterpret, Psellos' views in the *Chronographia*.

One reason for this situation is the long-standing absence of critical editions of Psellos' philosophical works, a problem which is now slowly being resolved. A further reason may be that historians might be tempted to think sometimes (may Clio forgive my rudeness!) that they can adequately discuss philosophers of the past without having a serious grasp of their philosophy. Perhaps the principal reason, however, is the feeling that the Psellos we find in the *Chronographia* is a real, interesting, even original thinker, whereas the Psellos of the philosophical works is an anthologist, an excerptor making patchworks out of ancient Greek philosophical texts, just the type which Byzantines were long supposed to exemplify and from which modern research wishes to save them. Yet the judgment dismissing Psellos'

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Gadolin (1970); Kaldellis (1999). The latter book stimulated my interest in this subject, which led me however to different conclusions.

philosophical work as patchwork can be shown to be inadequate.<sup>2</sup> One should also consider that Psellos had a deep knowledge of the Greek philosophical tradition, a knowledge more extensive than ours could ever be, a tradition in which he was steeped and in which he situated himself. It is precisely in relation to this tradition that we can reach a better understanding of Psellos' ideas and a more accurate view of his particularity.

In the following pages I would like to propose some elements of a study of the political thought of the *Chronographia* read in relation to comparable ideas in Psellos' philosophical works with the purpose of connecting these two facets of Psellos' mind, hoping thereby to reach a better understanding of Psellos' thought in the *Chronographia* and of its relation to the political philosophy of antiquity. In this article some examples of such comparative work can be proposed, not of course a complete examination.

## I

Perhaps a beginning might be made with a passage in the *Chronographia* (VI a 8) where Psellos provides a characterization both of the different conditions (καταστάσεις) of human souls and of their 'lots' (μερίδες) in relation to these conditions. We might say that what is involved is both the metaphysical and the ethical dimensions of human existence. Psellos distinguishes between two conditions of the soul, between soul taken *by itself*, living by itself separate from body, and soul as taken *with the body*, living with the body. The latter condition involves two possible 'lots': that of a soul which gives itself to the passions of the body, and that of a soul which avoids this, maintaining a moderate, intermediate position between the lower lot and the higher, that of soul living separately from the body. This higher lot of soul is described as 'divine', whereas the two lots of soul living with the body are identified as that of the 'political' man (πολιτικός ... ἄνθρωπος), with regard to the moderate position, and as that of the pleasure-loving life (ἀπολαυστικός; φιλήδονος), with regard to the soul given to the passions. The description of the two lower lots already involves ethical ideas to which we will soon return.

Psellos' distinction between three types of lives lived by souls may remind us of the three lives distinguished by Aristotle at the beginning of his *Nicomachean Ethics* (I 5, 1095b17–19): the life of pleasure, the political and the theoretical (or contemplative) life. However, Psellos' distinction is based

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<sup>2</sup> See O'Meara (1998); Ierodiakonou (2002b). Duffy (2002) shows what an exceptional figure Psellos was in the context of Byzantine philosophy.

on a metaphysical division between two conditions of soul, soul living separate from the body and soul living with the body, which does not seem particularly Aristotelian. The division between the two conditions of the soul in the passage of the *Chronographia* can be found elsewhere in Psellos' works, for example in his letters, where the condition of soul living with the body is described as 'human' and that of soul living separately as 'divine', and where Psellos situates himself in the middle,<sup>3</sup> that which he describes in the *Chronographia* as the lot of the 'political' man. In a short text *On the Soul*, Psellos presents the distinction between soul taken by itself and soul as taken in relation to the body in a way which recalls his Neoplatonic sources, in particular Plotinus' insistence on the need for soul to see itself by itself, separate from the body, where it discovers its divine nature, as compared to soul's view of itself as related to the body.<sup>4</sup> In the Neoplatonic philosophy of late antiquity, 'man' is defined as soul using the body as instrument and 'we' are identified with the soul, a doctrine also found by Psellos as attributed to Plato in Nemesius<sup>5</sup> and mentioned in Psellos' philosophical handbook, the *De omnifaria doctrina*, the more extensive versions of which he dedicated to the emperor Michael VII.<sup>6</sup>

According to this theory, then, we live, as souls separate from bodies, a divine condition, or, as souls living with the body, a human condition. These differing conditions involve differing ethical dispositions and actions, which, as the passage in the *Chronographia* makes clear, may be morally appropriate or not. In particular, the human condition may be directed to the life of the passions, a pleasure-loving life, or may be characterized by moderation, the life of the 'political' man. It is clear that it is this moderate life that Psellos endorses as regards the human condition, that of soul taken in relation to the body. The term 'political' and the expression 'political man', as used by Psellos here, should probably not be taken in a modern sense, but in a moral sense as indicating a virtuous disposition in human life characterized by moderation and contrasting with the vice of a life given to the passions. The appropriate moral sense can be found in the context of a conception of 'political' virtue which is mentioned in an earlier passage in the *Chronographia* (VI 44.6–8), where 'ethical' virtue, 'political' virtue and a virtue even higher than these, reaching to the paradigmatic, are contrasted with the 'natural' virtue (or its opposed vice) which we have from birth. The

<sup>3</sup> *Letters* 30 and 35 quoted by Jenkins (2006: 143–44).

<sup>4</sup> *Phil. min.* II 1, 1.1–2 and 17–23. See Plotinus, *Enn.* 4.7, 10.7ff.

<sup>5</sup> *Phil. min.* II 12, 23.21–24; *Epist. ad Cerul.* 32–33; see Plato, *Alcib.* 129e ff. and O'Meara (2003: 48).

<sup>6</sup> *De omn. doct.* 31.11–14; 33.2–3 and 8–14.

reader of Psellos' *De omnifaria doctrina* will recognize in this passage the presence of the theory of a hierarchy of the virtues (natural, ethical, political, paradigmatic, and so on) which Psellos explains at length in the handbook's chapters on the virtues (66–81), which he describes elsewhere in his philosophical works (*Phil. min.* II 32) and which, no doubt under Psellos' influence, reappears in John Italos, Eustratios of Nicaea and Michael of Ephesus.<sup>7</sup> Let us then turn to the *De omnifaria doctrina*, where we find more information about what the virtue of the 'political' man, 'political' virtue, is.

## II

We note first that the hierarchy of virtues follows the (metaphysical) division discussed above between soul in itself and soul in relation to body:

There are three orders of the virtues. For some of them order the human, that is soul with the body; some of them purify the soul from the body and turn it to itself, virtues which are called 'purificatory'; some of them occupy completely the purified soul with the contemplation of intelligible realities, those called 'theoretical' and 'intellective' (*De omn. doct.* 66.1–7).

The order of virtues not given a name here, those of the human, of soul related to the body, are named in a later section (69.6–7) as the four 'political' virtues of Plato which order human life (πολιτευόμενον ἄνθρωπον). Psellos is thinking of the four cardinal virtues defined by Plato at the end of *Republic* Book 4 and which concern good ordering of the functions both of the inner 'republic' of the soul and of the outer republic, Plato's good city-state. The term 'political' is used for these virtues by Plotinus in his treatise on the virtues (*Enn.* 1.2, 1.16) in a way which suggests that he is thinking of the inner 'republic', the ordering of soul in its life in relation to the body, whereas Porphyry, in his version of the Plotinian theory in the *Sentences*, refers to relations within a human community, an outer republic (32.6–8), a text copied by Psellos in *De omnifaria doctrina* section 70, where these 'political' virtues are introduced as ordering the 'phenomenal' man, i.e. man as soul living in the world of sensible appearances.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, in an interpretation of a passage in Synesius,<sup>9</sup> Psellos indicates that the 'political' virtues of the Greek sages are named by 'us' the 'practical' virtues and he then

<sup>7</sup> John Italos, *Quaest. quod.* 87ff.; for Eustratios, see O'Meara (2004: 113) and Papamanolakis (2007), for Michael of Ephesus, see O'Meara (2008: 48).

<sup>8</sup> For the expression 'phenomenal man', see Proclus, *In Alcib.* 25.3–6; *In Tim.* 1, 16.16; 117.1–2. For the expression 'political man' as used in connection with the concept of 'political' virtue in Neoplatonism, see O'Meara (2003: 44; 48; 57).

<sup>9</sup> *Phil. min.* II 32, 109.14–15.

provides a fairly extensive version of Porphyry's chapter on the virtues in the *Sentences*.

If section 66 of *De omnifaria doctrina* mentions three orders in the hierarchy of virtues, section 69 mentions four, whereas section 67 gives a yet more extensive list including six orders, virtues which are 'natural', 'ethical', 'political', 'purificatory', 'theoretical' and 'theurgic'. However, this more extensive list continues to span the fundamental distinction of section 66 between virtues of the soul as related to the body and virtues of the soul taken in itself: natural, ethical and political virtues concern soul in relation to the body, the three higher orders of virtues having to do with soul separate from the body. The more extensive list of section 67 also shows that Psellos is inspired not only by the accounts of the hierarchy of virtues in Plotinus (*Enn.* 1.2) and Porphyry (*Sent.* 32), but also by accounts in later Neoplatonists in which the hierarchy of virtues was developed further, in particular by Iamblichus, in a work *On the Virtues* (no longer extant) which Psellos seems to be using, as well as by Proclus.<sup>10</sup> These sources are also Psellos' inspiration for the idea that the hierarchy of virtues constitutes a scale of perfection, of ascending degrees of assimilation to God (sections 71–72). The highest degree of assimilation of soul as separate is reached in theurgic virtue, whereas the highest degree of assimilation of soul as related to body is reached in 'political' virtue:

For God says in the gospels 'If thou wilt separate the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth' [Jer. 15:19]: you see how He placed the most true [i.e. highest] assimilation in theurgy. But we would be well content if we were able to order ourselves through the political virtues.<sup>11</sup>

It will be of use to look a little more at the more modest (human) degree of assimilation represented by the level of 'political' virtue, as described in the sections on the virtues in *De omnifaria doctrina*, before coming back to the *Chronographia*.

In section 72, ascribing to Plato the idea that political virtues lead man to God as assimilating man to God to the extent possible, Psellos describes God in terms of a double activity: the knowledge of the principles of things prior to creation, and providence or care exercised in respect to lower things. For man, as imitating God (72.5–7), this means, (i) in the political

<sup>10</sup> *Phil. min.* II 32, 111.17–19. An overview of the Neoplatonic theory of the hierarchy of virtues can be found in O'Meara (2003: 40–49) (with further references).

<sup>11</sup> *De omn. doct.* 71.11–15; see *Phil. min.* II 32, 111.13–16. In the passage I quote Psellos gives the Neoplatonic hierarchy of virtues a biblical authority. An adequate answer to the question as to how Psellos may have sought to integrate the Neoplatonic virtues with Christian virtues would require an extensive investigation which cannot be attempted here.

virtues, turning to the things of this world and ordering 'those' who are inferior by means of the virtues that produce moderation of the passions (μετριοπάθεια) and, (ii) in the theoretical or contemplative life, ascending to the principles of all things.<sup>12</sup> The moderation of the passions finds more detailed expression in sections 75–80 where Psellos summarizes the doctrine of moral virtues as means between the extremes of excess and deficiency of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* Book II. He then connects this in section 81 to the psychology and virtues of Book IV of Plato's *Republic*. In other words, Psellos interprets Aristotle's doctrine of moral virtue as relating to the (Neo-)Platonic doctrine of political virtue. However, in speaking of these virtues, Psellos names them 'ethical' as concerning the acquiring by the irrational part of soul, from reason, of a quality of *ethos* (81.1–3). We need then to distinguish between the 'political' virtues, also called 'ethical' in certain contexts, and the level of virtue subordinate to the political virtues in the later Neoplatonic hierarchy of virtues, also called 'ethical' (as noted above), but which merely concerns moral habituation, for example in children and animals, without the contribution of reason (67.2–3).

In referring to the providential function of political virtues in ordering 'those' who are inferior, Psellos seems to have in mind the 'outer' republic, the sphere in which humans live in a political community. However, if we examine Psellos' Neoplatonic sources, we can observe that political order is the extension to others of the 'inner' republic, the ordering of the soul's life in relation to the body, an ordering that can extend first to the domestic sphere and then to the political. Thus the distinction between the sciences of ethics, economics (domestic life) and politics, in the Aristotelian division of the sciences adopted by the later Neoplatonists, is a distinction merely in quantity, the same 'political' virtues obtaining in the individual, in the household and in the state.<sup>13</sup> And the root of good order as extended to others is the order in the 'inner' republic of the soul.<sup>14</sup>

### III

We may come back now to the *Chronographia*. It has been noted that Psellos' history of Byzantine emperors is to a large extent an account of the *ethos* of these rulers and, to a lesser extent, of those who shared in their rule

<sup>12</sup> 72.7–12. On μετριοπάθεια (of Aristotelian origin) in the Neoplatonic hierarchy of virtues, see Hadot (1978: 150–61).

<sup>13</sup> See O'Meara (2003: 56).

<sup>14</sup> See O'Meara (2003: 45). For the inner and outer republic in Psellos, see below section *V*.

as advisors, ministers, relations, rivals, the account of their *ethos* serving to situate policies, actions and reactions to events.<sup>15</sup> It has also been pointed out that part of the background to Psellos' history is provided by the rhetorical theory and practice of royal panegyric, in which certain moral qualities (for example, φιλανθρωπία) are standardly attributed to the ruler to be praised.<sup>16</sup> However it is also clear that Psellos wishes in general to distinguish between his history and the writing of panegyrics, and his moral portraits of rulers mix praise and blame, presenting a series of variously contrasting combinations of virtues and vices. His approach evokes an influential precedent, that set by Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* with its edificatory tales of differing and contrasting moral characters and fates. Plutarch's work is probably also in the background to Damascius' *Philosophical History* (or *Life of Isidore*), where the Neoplatonist philosopher of the early sixth century presents an edificatory panorama of the contrasting moral characters and fates of a wide range of philosophers of late antiquity.<sup>17</sup> Damascius' work, portions of which are preserved in Photios' *Bibliotheca* and in the *Suda*, has the particularity of structuring the series of mini-biographies which it includes so as to illustrate in different ways the hierarchy of virtues of later Neoplatonism. Thus some individuals manifest certain natural virtues (or vices) and not others (for example, health, good memory); some display some ethical virtues (or vices) and not others; some reach the political virtues; and a few go even further, ascending the scale to the higher virtues, purificatory, contemplative and theurgic. Damascius' account concerns private persons, rather than rulers (although he does include some rulers), and it shows how different natural virtues or vices can develop into ethical virtues and vices and into political virtues affecting the lives of their possessors. I believe we can detect something comparable in Psellos' *Chronographia*: if the series of biographies concern those in power or associated with power, they often illustrate, not so much the rhetorical conventions concerning the virtues of the ideal ruler, as a conception of different types of virtue and vice, as these concern rulers, a conception which may be fitted into the theory of the hierarchy of virtues we have found mentioned in the *Chronographia* and explained in some detail in the *De omnifaria doctrina*.<sup>18</sup> The following examples might be given in support of this suggestion.

<sup>15</sup> See for example Gadolin (1970); Kaldellis (1999).

<sup>16</sup> Pietsch (2005). See Angelov (2007) for this theme in later Byzantine thought.

<sup>17</sup> See O'Meara (2006) on what follows.

<sup>18</sup> I do not wish to claim that Psellos here is directly inspired by Damascius' work.

At the inception of his reign the emperor Basil II was leading a dissolute, pleasure-seeking life, Psellos reports (I 4.5–13), in other words a life of immoderation, comparable to the lowest human life, a life subject to passions, which we have met already in Psellos' tripartition of the moral lots of the soul. However, Basil's character and way of life changed on his acceding to power: he became tough, rigorous, disciplined, an effective ruler (I 4 and 18). This means, I suggest, that Psellos considers Basil to have developed the equivalent of 'ethical' virtue, i.e. a virtue acquired for example by animals and children through training and not through reason which is part of the virtue next in the hierarchy, 'political' virtue. For it is the pressure of events (πράγματα) that changed Basil's character (I 4.7–8). That Basil's rigour was not true political virtue is suggested also by his autocratic approach to ruling, his refusal to take advice (a failing in Psellos' eyes, as we will see), his attending, not to the written laws, but to the unwritten laws of his own *naturally* well-endowed (εὐφροσσύνη) soul (I 29.9–11). Basil may then have had great military success and accumulated riches, much to the material advantage of his empire, but he ruled, we may conclude, on the basis of his natural virtues and of ethical virtues imposed by the constraint of events, not on that of political virtue. Basil's brother and successor Constantine VIII was also immoderately given to the life of pleasure (ἀπόλαυσις), possessing natural strength of body, but too old to change in character as had his brother (II 1–2). Constantine was succeeded by his son-in-law, Romanos III, whom Psellos characterizes as falsely pretending to have knowledge which, had it been genuine, would have been beneficial to all (III 4.5–6). Another pseudo-virtue in Romanos was the piety inspiring excessive expenditures on Church building, an appearance of piety denounced by Psellos as also false, since it involved much injustice and the ruin of the body politic (III 15.8–11). With this exaggerated show of imperial piety Psellos contrasts the true piety of the intellect clothed in divinity, the soul stained in the purple of intellectual royalty, i.e. proportion in action and measure in thought.<sup>19</sup> Here also we cannot speak of genuine political virtue. Michael IV cuts a much better figure: his character was ordered, reason dominated his passions and he emerges as a good ruler. Yet here again, it was his natural qualities and the demands of rule, rather than an appropriate moral education, which gave him his virtues (IV 7.6–10; 8.6; 9; 11.8–10). At the end of his life Michael turned to another, higher life, that directed to God (IV 52–53).

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<sup>19</sup> III 15.18–20. See Kaldellis (1999: 72–74), for useful indications concerning Psellos' Neoplatonic sources on this subject.

Considered in the light of the theory of the hierarchy of virtues, we can say that these lives of the emperors describe a variety of natural qualities and defects of soul and body, natural virtues and vices.<sup>20</sup> From these can develop ethical vices or virtues, immoderation in the passions or disciplined dispositions. However if such ethical virtues develop, it is due, not to an appropriate education and to reason, but to the pressures brought by rule. False versions of virtues occur as does false knowledge. Genuine knowledge is generally lacking as is, I think we can infer, genuine political virtue. If emperors are nonetheless successful, it is due to their natural endowments and ethical virtues imposed by the harsh lessons of political reality. Psellos' differentiated appreciation of these emperors contrasts with the accounts which come at the end of the *Chronographia*, where Psellos follows more and more the standard rhetorical practice of imperial panegyric.<sup>21</sup>

#### IV

What then is the *ethos* of the truly good ruler, in Psellos' eyes? It seems to follow from the theory of the hierarchy of virtues that such a ruler should possess 'political' virtue, both within, in his soul, and without, as it applies to his function as ruler. Rule, Psellos assumes, is monarchic in form and has as its aim the good of the monarch's subjects, promoting lawfulness, justice, moderation.<sup>22</sup> The 'good' in question relates, we can assume, to the subjects as humans, i.e. as souls living in relation to the body, as distinct from higher goods attained by soul separate from the body through the higher stages of the hierarchy of virtues. Psellos compares the monarch to Plato's demiurge, i.e. the divine world-maker in Plato's *Timaeus* who brings order to disorder, imposing cosmic harmony, justice, equality.<sup>23</sup> However, the human monarch is not a god, Psellos insists. He complains in particular of rulers who claim to have the highest wisdom and highest virtues and who are only satisfied if they rule as gods rule (VI 74.15–20). Such rulers would rather die than have recourse to the support of collaborators providing them with God-sent help (20–25). We can discern here Psellos' critical attitude to the persistence in Byzantium of Roman imperial divinization.<sup>24</sup> His criticism

<sup>20</sup> For further references to these natural or innate virtues in the *Chronographia*, see Kaldellis (1999: 24–25).

<sup>21</sup> For the last part of the work (VII a–VII c) as added later, see Pietsch (2007: 111–12) (with references to earlier studies).

<sup>22</sup> *Chron.* IV 47.3–4; VII a 2 and 15.

<sup>23</sup> *Chron.* VII 62.6–9.

<sup>24</sup> But compare the change in the last part of the *Chronographia* (VII c 1.12–13: on Michael

involves a distinction between divine and human rule. Divine rule can be absolute, requiring no collaboration, being based on divine power, knowledge and virtue. However, human rulers are not so qualified: their mediocrity as regards knowledge and virtue is made all too evident in Psellos' portraits.<sup>25</sup> They must rule as humans; they require the assistance of advisors and experts in various fields; their rule, at best, will reach the level of 'political' virtue.

This is the point which Psellos makes in the passage of the *Chronographia* concerning the differing conditions and lots of the soul with which our study began. The context of this passage is the criticism of Leo Paraspodylos, the man the empress Theodora put in charge of government.<sup>26</sup> This man, in Psellos' view, was lacking in 'political' virtue, in political *ethos* (VI a 6.13–7.3). He was rough, unsociable, difficult to approach. His rigour, Psellos feels, is a virtue appropriate to eternity, but not to time; impassibility and inflexibility belong to another world, not to this world, to this life, a life related to the body, which is 'more political', adjusted to present circumstances, where soul relates to the passions (7.9–16). It is precisely at this point that Psellos introduces his distinction between the divine life (soul separate from body) and the human life of soul related to the body which may be 'political', as moderate, or dissolute, as given to the passions. Psellos criticizes the confusion which consists in applying moral dispositions appropriate to the divine life to the conduct of human affairs (8.18–24). In other words, in terms of the theory of the hierarchy of virtues, the virtues of soul separate from the body are appropriate for the divine life, not for human bodily existence, where the relevant desirable virtues are the 'political'. Rule exercised by humans over humans requires human virtue which includes flexibility and accommodation of the passions which are part of soul's life with the body.

One might doubt that Psellos' critique goes as far as assuming that Leo Paraspodylos actually attained divine virtues and lived a divine life. The impression given of Leo is far from flattering and Psellos' tone is ironic. What is at issue is Leo's autocratic, unsociable inflexibility. These characteristics may evoke divine virtues, but it does not follow from this that Leo actually possessed these virtues. It is more likely that they were, for Psellos,

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VII).

<sup>25</sup> Psellos' account of the deficiencies of rulers does not warrant Kaldellis' inference (1999: 51) that Psellos thought that these deficiencies were desirable.

<sup>26</sup> My interpretation of this passage differs from that offered by Kaldellis (1999: 155ff.), which I believe to be misled, in particular in that it does not take account of the Neoplatonic theory in the background of the passage.

pseudo-forms of such virtues. A little later (VI a 18), Psellos attacks monks, the ‘Naziraeans’, who behave as if they were demigods, who pretend to model their lives on the divine, but who do not in fact do this, while throwing into confusion the natural, corporeal order of human life. Such monks thus represent a double perversion: the confusion of the divine and human levels of existence (with their appropriate virtues); and the false pretence to divine virtues which they are far from possessing.

A good ruler ought to aim at ruling on the basis of ‘political’ virtue. Such a ruler also requires the collaboration of others, of advisors and experts in various fields. We might explain this requirement in Psellos by saying that one would need to be a god not to need such collaboration and that, in Psellos’ experience, the mediocrity of the rulers he describes, mediocrity in knowledge and virtue, demands recourse to others who might dispose of the requisite political knowledge and virtue and compensate for the deficiencies of the ruler.<sup>27</sup> Thus we sometimes meet in the *Chronographia*, in the entourage of the ruler, competent specialists, good generals, administrators, judges, men naturally talented and possessing expertise in rhetoric and law, having practical intelligence in relation to public affairs, representing the desirable political virtues, men such as Constantine Leichoudes (VI 178) and, we can safely assume, Psellos himself.

There is an exception to this, but a revelatory one. In the panegyric of Michael VII in the final part of the *Chronographia* (VII c 4), Psellos refers to the diversity of fields of specialization (kingship, philosophy, rhetoric, music, astronomy, geometry, logic, physics), each with its particular subject-areas and corresponding experts. So great a ruler was Michael VII, however, that he mastered all fields, he was, *mirabile dictu*, a specialist in everything! Perhaps Psellos’ *De omnifaria doctrina* deserves some credit for this surprising omni-competence. We may also suspect that Psellos, too, considered himself a specialist in many fields, if not in all, able to outshine many an expert. However, strictly speaking, the claim that the emperor was a specialist in everything makes no sense outside the imaginary world of imperial panegyric. Psellos himself reminds us implicitly, in his account of technical and scientific specialization, of the principle of specialization in Plato and Aristotle. In Plato’s *Republic*, humans, having diverse talents, function best in developing their specific expertises in collaboration, those best suited to rule ruling, those best suited for auxiliary or productive tasks

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<sup>27</sup> There may have been in the distant past perfect rulers such as Numa Pompilius, as he is described in Psellos’ (?) *Historia syntomos* 2 (cf. O’Meara 2003: 79 n. 21 for Julian the Emperor’s use of the figure of Numa as a Pythagorean philosopher-king).

assuming these functions. Ruling expertise is referred to in Plato's *Statesman* as the 'royal' science. Like the 'political' science of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (I 1), this science is 'architectonic', i.e. it commands and uses subordinate sciences such as rhetoric and military science (*Statesman* 303e–305d).

In view of the ruler's need to use specialists in the various fields concerned by his rule, we may wonder in consequence if there is a specific expertise in ruling, a royal or political science corresponding to political virtue. And what, we may also ask, is the role of the philosopher in relation to such a ruling science? In the reality of Psellos' history it seems clear that, in general, the rulers have neither the requisite political virtue nor the requisite political science. They must rely on advisors such as Psellos, a philosopher who advises Michael VI, for example, on how to govern as monarch (VII 39.8). However, for a fuller treatment of Psellos' understanding of the philosopher's position as regards political rule and of his views on political science, we need to leave the *Chronographia* and look elsewhere in his works. While not hoping to provide here, in the final part of this paper, anything like an exhaustive study of these questions, I would like to draw attention to two texts where Psellos addresses these matters in a way that may be relevant.

## V

The first text is a speech (*Or. min.* 8) given on the occasion of Psellos' declining of the rank of πρωτοασκηρῆτις, or Imperial Secretary. The editor of the text suggests a date of c. 1055 for the speech, which would then situate it in the difficult period when Psellos found himself obliged to withdraw from the imperial court and retire to a monastery (1054: *Chron.* VI 191–99). Indeed we can detect in the speech a bitterness felt at a time when things ran contrary to Psellos' ambition to combine philosophy and politics, leading him to retire to the higher life of philosophy, a life which only a sorceress, he claims (219), could make him leave. The text, in expressing Psellos' frustrated ambitions, is a statement of these ambitions and thus of how he himself saw his mission as a philosopher involved in politics. I will summarize in what follows the main ideas Psellos introduces in this regard.

Psellos begins his discourse with the sages of old who attributed little importance, he says, to political affairs (πράγματα), giving priority to the ordering of the 'inner nature' (5), i.e. the inner republic of the soul as com-

pared to the external political order. However, not all of these sages abandoned material existence for the transcendent realm of pure form, since some of them, as Psellos describes them, starting above, from this realm, ordered, by reason (λόγῳ), affairs here below: ‘For the philosopher is not to despair of political affairs, but is to go to them with reason,’ for these affairs relate to body and require soul as a form to remove from them their inherent tendency to dispersal (13–17). As examples of such philosophers Psellos names Pythagoras and Socrates, the one honouring Italian laws, the other Attic laws (18–19). The examples of Plato and Aristotle are developed in more detail: Plato, who composed in discourse the best republic and who attempted in Sicily to bring about a change from tyranny to lawful authority, in vain (20–28); Aristotle, who educated Alexander, correcting the *ethos* of his soul through philosophy (30), accompanying him on his military expeditions and even instructing him in the details of military science!<sup>28</sup>

This ancient order, where philosophy brought reason to individual lives, where all shared in intelligence and grace (69–73), is now reversed (73ff.), Psellos laments: what is base is exalted and philosophy is despised (99). Psellos then comes (121ff.) to his own case. He describes himself as having attempted, from his youth, to join the two ways, the higher and the lower, the way of philosophy and that of political affairs, not closeting himself as a philosopher in the isolation of a small house,<sup>29</sup> nor abandoning his books for judicial occupations, but keeping the philosophers’ books at hand as he involved himself in politics, being consequently admired both by philosophers and by politicians (121–34). This mixed life is described then by Psellos as a combining of philosophy with rhetoric (136ff.), Socrates and Pythagoras combined with Demosthenes (185–86), which gives Psellos the opportunity to describe his work with the various branches and authors (including Proclus) in philosophy and in rhetoric. The speech ends with the breakdown of his attempt to mix philosophy and politics. Having been weighed down by political affairs and filled with earthly afflictions, having contemplated the transcendent pure light of philosophy, he will not willingly descend from this to earthly matters (211–19).

My brief paraphrase of ideas presented in Psellos’ speech may suffice to indicate his perception of himself as philosopher and politician. He clearly privileges philosophy as a life transcending the body, a pure intelligible ex-

<sup>28</sup> The editor (Littlewood) aptly comments in his apparatus fontium: ‘perverse meminerat Psellos quae in libello Asclepiodoti vel ... Aeliani vel Arriani de re militari legerat.’

<sup>29</sup> The editor rightly notes here a phrase taken from Demosthenes *Or.* 18, 97. Psellos’ attitude might also evoke that of Themistius in relation to the closeted philosophers of the Iamblichean school (*Or.* 26, 122.3–6; 130.12).

istence in which the soul can share. But as a philosopher he also has distinguished predecessors in the attempt to bring reason, λόγος, to the ordering of bodily existence, in particular in politics. The philosopher should care for politics, even if it is not of primary importance to him. This involvement took the form in particular in Psellos of the mixed life, combining philosophy and rhetoric. However, Psellos now feels that this is no longer possible and that retirement from political affairs is necessary.

## VI

What λόγος should the philosopher bring to politics, to the political ordering of bodily existence? We may suppose that this λόγος will be a political wisdom or science correlative to political virtue. How then does Psellos conceive of such a political science? The second text I would like to introduce provides some indications concerning Psellos' conception of political science, which I will summarize here briefly.

The work (*Phil. min.* I 2) is untitled, but has to do with the superior value of philosophy, its unity and its division into various branches according to various criteria dividing these branches and determining their relative value. Thus sciences are distinguished and placed in a hierarchy of value in terms of their differing subject-matters, their accuracy, their different finalities (12ff.). Among the sciences making up philosophy Psellos mentions the 'art [τέχνη] of political affairs' (42–43). The primary division of philosophy is made in terms of the division of reality into the corporeal and the incorporeal (49–54), in each division of which are grouped a number of sciences. In the higher division, that dealing with the incorporeal, we find the more demonstrative sciences, those treating of intellect, of soul. And in the lower division, that relating to corporeal things, are found disciplines which are less scientific, working with likelihoods (εἰκοτολογούμεναι), those dealing with nature (60, i.e. physics and its branches) and, inferior to these, those concerning themselves with 'political themes' (πολιτικὰς ὑποθέσεις), the legislative (νομοθετική), the judicial (δικαστική) and rhetoric (61–62).<sup>30</sup> While stressing the inferior scientific status and subject-matter of these latter disciplines, Psellos develops especially in what follows (67ff.) a comparison between the relative value of legislative and judicial knowledge as compared to rhetoric. If we recall that in Psellos' later Neoplatonic sources political philosophy is understood as constituted of legislative and judicial sci-

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<sup>30</sup> In the Athens colloquium it was noted that Psellos here appears to include rhetoric in philosophy.

ence, an idea going back to Plato's *Gorgias* (464b),<sup>31</sup> then we can see that the comparison Psellos makes between legislative and judicial knowledge, on the one hand, and rhetoric, on the other, is a comparison between political philosophy and rhetoric.

In some respects rhetoric claims superiority to the two other forms of knowledge, in Psellos' account, and in some respects it is found to be inferior to them. Rhetoric affirms its superiority, on the one hand, in terms of its ability to unify and give form to matters that are infinitely dispersed in legislative science (69–71), a dispersal compared to the dismemberment of Osiris (101–3). Rhetoric, its representative would argue, is a legislation to itself (αὐτονομοθεσία) and does not require the two others, whereas they are in need of it (76–84). On the other hand, rhetoric is inferior to legislative knowledge (including the judicial) in that rhetoric is concerned with words rather than with the truth and the beneficial, whereas the legislative provides laws and the judicial gives rational order (λόγον) to these, correcting the confusion of life and structuring the mores (ῥῆθη) of the populace (84–88).<sup>32</sup> However, being the lowest branches of philosophy, being concerned with lowly things, not being able to produce the assimilation to God achieved by philosophy,<sup>33</sup> the legislative and judicial are neglected by philosophers (88–96). Psellos deplores this neglect and ends his text with the suggestion that if someone with a scientific disposition had unified these forms of knowledge, making them harmonious, he would have produced, as Plato's demiurge did with the cosmos in the *Timaeus* (30b5–c1), a most beautiful creature on earth (97–101).<sup>34</sup>

From this we can conclude that, in Psellos' view, the current importance of rhetoric is relative to the scientifically ruinous state of legislative and judicial knowledge (i.e. political philosophy), in relation to which rhetoric is in principle, however, inferior. Legislative and judicial knowledge, although the lowest parts of philosophy, require the attention of the philosopher who will give them scientific order. If not actually divinizing man, as do more

<sup>31</sup> See O'Meara (2003: 56–57); O'Meara (2004: 115) (Eustratios of Nicaea). Later Neoplatonists, inspired by Plato's *Statesman*, also spoke of political philosophy as a 'royal science' (O'Meara 2003: 58; 94; 210), as does Psellos (see Angelov's contribution to the present volume). Psellos speaks of 'political philosophy' (πολιτική φιλοσοφία) in *Epist. ad Cerul.* 127–28. As was indicated to me at the Athens colloquium, a βασιλική ἐπιστήμη is mentioned as being what Numa Pompilius' Muse teaches him, according to Psellos (?), *Historia syntomos* 2 (the source seems to be Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* 2.60.5, who speaks of a βασιλική σοφία).

<sup>32</sup> For Neoplatonic sources for this, see O'Meara (2003: 56–58).

<sup>33</sup> See above section II.

<sup>34</sup> On the demiurgic image, see also above section IV.

especially the higher branches of philosophy, they can at least achieve an ethical ordering of the population in its earthly existence.

## VII

More research would certainly help to develop a fuller account than what is offered here. However, the above has perhaps gone some way in showing the following. The *Chronographia* refers to quite specific and elaborate philosophical theories for which we find a fuller explanation elsewhere, for example the theory of the hierarchy of virtues which is introduced and used in the *Chronographia* and described at length in *De omnifaria doctrina*. We thus have the possibility of better understanding the philosophical theories present in the *Chronographia* if we take account of Psellos' philosophical works and of the sources inspiring these works.<sup>35</sup> Psellos' position, both in the *Chronographia* and in the various other works we have considered, is fairly coherent and constant. A fundamental reference point throughout these texts is the distinction between incorporeal and corporeal existence, as this affects the human condition and the conduct of life. The incorporeal is preferred by the philosopher: it provides a higher life, concerns the soul alone, represents assimilation to the divine, the goal of philosophy, which, in philosophy, is found in the higher orders of the virtues and in the higher sciences. Psellos distinguishes this higher life from its counterfeits, in particular the sham divine life of certain monks. Corporeal existence represents a lower life, the life of soul in the body, a human life, which may be lived by bringing reason and order to bodily affairs (the 'political' life or 'political' virtue), or by allowing oneself to be dominated by the passions in a dissolute life. Without denying the higher, divine life, Psellos places considerable emphasis, in a way that is quite distinctive of him, on the mixed or intermediary life of political virtue, both as regards himself as well as regards his action in political affairs.<sup>36</sup> As a philosopher he finds models in antiquity

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<sup>35</sup> It is on these grounds that I do not think that Kaldellis (1999) proves his thesis that Psellos is anti-Neoplatonic. Kaldellis argues, for example, that Psellos' reference to the *Epinomis* (991e) in the *Chronographia* (VI 39) supports this thesis, given the main doctrine of the *Epinomis*. However, we should notice that the same passage of the *Epinomis* is referred to in a similar context by one of Psellos' favourite authors, Proclus (*In Eucl. I* 42.11–12; see also Iamblichus, *De comm. math. sc.* 21.18–29; 31.8–12) and I think few would be willing to argue from this that Proclus is anti-Neoplatonist. See also above n. 25.

<sup>36</sup> Psellos' emphasis on his middle position has been recently discussed by Jenkins (2006: 133; 143–44) and Delli (2007). Compare Criscuolo's emphasis on Psellos' 'humanism' (in his edition of Psellos, *Epist. ad Xiphil.* 31–43); this 'humanism', in Psellos' case, should be understood in the light of the concept of the 'human' and of human virtue indicated above section II; see O'Meara (2010).

for his ambition to bring reason, scientific order, to the ‘outer republic’, that of political power in Byzantium, by combining the ‘ways’ of philosophy and of rhetoric, in particular the lower branches of philosophy appropriate for this, the legislative and judicial, scientifically reformed and combined with rhetoric. Psellos’ development of this combination of ways is again quite distinctive and reminiscent in some respects of Themistius.<sup>37</sup> In the monarchical system in which Psellos lived, the monarch, far from possessing the perfect knowledge and virtue of divinity, often fell short—the *Chronographia* shows this in detail—of political virtue and knowledge and reached, at best, the lower level of ‘ethical’ virtue. Such monarchs consequently required, in compensation, advisors and administrators possessing the necessary political virtues and competences. Psellos saw for himself no mean role in this context, all the more so as he attributed to himself a wide range of such competences. What could at best be achieved would be the material well-being of the Empire and ethical order in its population. However the story Psellos has to tell in the *Chronographia* is often enough that of incompetent and/or dissolute rulers and their inadequate staff, who brought ruin to their subjects. Psellos himself might sometimes be forced to take refuge, to retire to the higher life of the philosopher, but one cannot but suspect that he hopes that this will be, if possible, temporary!<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Kaldellis (2007: 214).

<sup>38</sup> I am grateful for help given by Jacques Schamp and by the participants in the Athens colloquium.

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