CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE BEST OF THE ACHAEMENIDS:
BENEVOLENCE, SELF-INTEREST AND
THE ‘IRONIC’ READING OF CYROPAEDIA

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The argument of this chapter may be summarized as follows. Critics argue that although he maintains a pretence of benevolence, in reality Cyrus is always relentlessly pursuing his own interest. This, however, is a false dichotomy. For Xenophon, the pursuit of self-interest does not contradict either benevolence or beneficence. On the contrary, benevolence and beneficence contribute to obtaining self-interested ends and therefore the pursuit of self-interest requires them (see Memorabilia 3.1.10, Oeconomicus 12.15). This is because the most useful possessions are friends, and these are acquired by acts of benevolence. More difficult is the question of conflicts between self-interest and the interests of one's friends and allies. But conflicts between true interests, as opposed to wishes and desires, need not arise often, since different individuals deserve and benefit from different things. This compatibility of interest is illustrated especially by Cyrus' gaining the upper hand over his uncle Cyaxares. Rather than harming him, this development advances both his and Cyrus' interests simultaneously.

INTRODUCTION

Xenophon’s Cyropaedia tells the historical-fictional story of how Cyrus founded the Persian empire. It is easy to assume that in composing this tale Xenophon attributes to Cyrus all the best qualities of his ideal leader. However, a surprisingly large number of scholars has argued that there is irony in the portrait and that in fact Xenophon has serious reservations and objections to the behaviour and modes of governing he attributes to Cyrus.¹

This argument was presented first by Carlier (1978), and has been repeated and developed by numerous other writers.² Carlier’s argument was

¹ I am glad to see that in her recent book Gray 2011: esp. 246–290 agrees with many of the arguments I made in this paper.
perhaps the most theoretically satisfying because he offered an explanation for the negative portrait of Cyrus. Accepting the earlier view that *Cyropaedia* concerns a possible Greek conquest of the east, Carlier argued that rather than offering a favourable view of this prospect, Xenophon offered an unfavourable one. While Cyrus does succeed in conquering his foes, argued Carlier, he also subjugates his friends and allies, depriving them of their freedom and independence and establishing a tyrannical regime. In support of this argument, Carlier considered some nine features of Cyrus’ regime which seem to confirm its tyrannical or bad character.

More recent writers have dropped the assumption that Xenophon is addressing the possibility of an eastern invasion and confine themselves to observations about the negative characteristics of Cyrus’ behaviour or his regime. Gera (1993: 297) lists some thirteen negative features and reaches the moderate conclusion that Cyrus is a benevolent despot. She adds that despotism may be necessary for the governance of an empire, and one can perhaps hear in this conclusion a reflection of Carlier’s argument that conquest itself is a bad idea.

We may distinguish four general arguments that appear in these critiques of Cyrus. One is that the original Persian regime was already an ideal regime. Since there can be only one ideal regime, that instituted by Cyrus cannot be so. A second is that the final chapter, outlining the degeneration of Persia after Cyrus’ death, shows the insufficiencies of his institutions. A third is that the modes of governance that Cyrus establishes, especially after the conquest of Babylon, are tyrannical or oppressive of his friends,

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Johnson 2005. See also Pangle 1994: 147–150. Perhaps influenced by *Hiero*, Pangle argues that Cyrus himself suffers from his success in that he ‘has had to abandon or forget the good of his soul’ (149–150), and that the portrait of Cyrus thus provides a negative proof of the superiority of Socrates to that of the most successful political actor (150). Neither Due 1989: 147–184, 207–229 nor Higgins 1977: 54–55 offers an ironic reading, even when considering Cyrus’ later career as ruler of an empire. Higgins refers to Cyrus as ‘clearly the best man’ (53) and says that his entire life ‘represents an ideal of action’ (54). At the same time, he does doubt that Xenophon believed that monarchy is the best form of government (55) and finds some implicit criticism of Cyrus’ optimistic belief that his good example will ensure the virtue of his sons (57–58: 7.5.86). He concludes that ‘reality resists perfection’ (58) which seems to mean that we cannot blame Cyrus for deficiencies inherent in nature.

3 But see Tuplin 1993: 35–36.