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An Achilles Without a Zeus: Liberalism and the Predicaments of "Nietzschean Vitalism"

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Introduction

Costin Alamariu's *Selective Breeding and the Birth of Philosophy* (self-published, 2023) is an offensive book. Alamariu defends the practice of "breeding" human beings on the grounds that some people and even peoples are naturally, in their "blood," superior to other, inferior people or peoples. What is more, he defends tyrants and tyranny. It is hard to imagine anything more offensive than this. But just in case you are not offended, Alamariu will remind you, again and again, that you should be. At times, he gets so carried away by the thrill of transgression that he will tell you that the idea of breeding, even just the word itself, is "deeply painful to mankind *at all times*" (16, 46, emphasis added), which, were it true, would contradict one of the lynchpins of his own book's thesis: that breeding was the whole point of ancient Greek aristocracies, to say nothing of other, long-gone civilizations (7–9, 11–12, 21), not "deeply painful" to them. There is no doubt that indignation is a bad counselor. When Alamariu's dissertation adviser—the book is "very little" changed from his Yale dissertation—called him a Nazi, Alamariu "found this amusing" (2). Who can blame him? But the thrill of transgression, the search not so much for knowledge as for

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"forbidden knowledge," to which young people are surely drawn (40, cf. 2), is no guarantee of inner freedom either. Just the opposite: if Plato's analysis of the tyrant is any indication, the thrill of transgressing the moral law is psychologically impossible without lingering respect for the moral law.

The suspicion aroused in this manner—the suspicion, that is, that Alamariu is somehow in the grip of the law he transgresses—is ultimately confirmed when this subversive waving the banner of eugenic tyranny takes a page out of Callicles's book and quietly comes out as . . . a natural law theorist. Alamariu, who insists that he is not a historicist, is certainly no nihilist either. According to "natural right" (190, 340n279), what is "just by nature" (177, 200), or the "law of nature" (170, 181), it is good people, not bad people, who, he believes, have a right, indeed, "a *duty*" (180), to rule (cf. 338n269). And what "most concerns," angers, and saddens him is what "most concerns," angers, and saddens Callicles too (cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 511b6): "tyranny," if you can believe it, which, according to him, is what happens when good people are ruled in a "tyrannical" way (175, 195, cf. 110, 117, 148); for example, when they are killed (182, 184) or brainwashed by the rulers (181). But then, somehow, these perfectly ordinary, inoffensive moral opinions lurking in the background of Alamariu's natural law theory—siding with justice, against tyranny—get tangled up with the extraordinary, offensive opinions standing in the foreground about what virtue is and how it comes to be, about tyranny and eugenics, which are bound to arouse indignation. Those who check their indignation at the door, however, if only for a moment, are liable to find cause to pause and reflect. How, exactly, are we to make sense of this tangled web of justice, eugenics, and tyranny?

Alamariu is a Nietzschean. This is unusual. Usually—though, to be sure, not always—Nietzsche is ignored, or when he is not ignored, he is defanged or carped at. The fact that it is unusual for Nietzsche to be taken so seriously creates the impression that he does not deserve to be taken so seriously. Anyone who, contrary to the impression created in this way, takes Nietzsche so seriously as *to be* a Nietzschean, fangs and all, is bound to seem unserious, or

worse, and (by acting as a deterrent) that only makes it all the more unusual for him to be taken so seriously. But Nietzsche, one of the few, great thinkers of the not-too-distant past, and one of the most—if not the most—influential thinker at present, deserves to be taken very seriously indeed. It is we, insofar as we do not rise to the occasion, who do not. Usually, then, we do not deserve to be taken seriously. Alamariu, who ought to know, traces the ongoing "'radicalization' of the youth," not to "dysgenic unions" (37), but to "the inability of our intellectual establishment, right or left, to provide a fair and convincing education to young people" (45), which is largely true, I think, if not entirely consistent of him. Their radicalization follows, he adds, "upon the complete collapse of Western-intellectual life that has rendered our authorities . . . boring, authoritarian, and stupid" (45). The way we usually treat Nietzsche is just one of many examples.

Nietzsche's mistreatment is due primarily to the fact that he was a critic of liberalism, and we are liberals. The academic discipline of political philosophy, which is supposed to be seriously concerned with such things, came closest to concerning itself with the critique of liberalism back in the 1990s, when "communitarians" like Michael Walzer, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre took potshots at the liberalism of John Rawls. But the "communitarian" critics were, with few, if any,[1] exceptions, liberals themselves. When the dust finally settled, the liberal-communitarian debate served only to reinforce the view present from the start that there are no viable alternatives to our own way of life.[2] The only "communitarians" worthy of the name—they go by many other names—were never given a hearing and thus, not entirely unreasonably, their intellectual heirs remain completely unfazed by this. Since then, the sputtering or silence to which serious questions reduce us has had the unintended, albeit foreseeable consequence of giving rise to the view that we have nothing to say for ourselves, that we are "boring, authoritarian, and stupid," a view that has, like Mike Campbell's bankruptcy, arrived on the scene in two ways: "gradually, then suddenly."

Now that it is here we are indignant and even scared, where before we were smug. The fact that it all happened so suddenly, it seems, only heightens the tension. For many, Alamariu's brand of Nietzscheanism—a brand in more ways than one—represents this view best or most. But indignation and fear are not going to help us understand the situation we are in now, as liberals or as human beings, any better than complacency did then. So I wonder whether, by understanding Alamariu's recently self-published, bestselling dissertation, which, if nothing else, is in little danger of being a sheep in a wolf's clothing, we can do better.

Alamariu's appeal to his young audience is a complex phenomenon, extending to partisans of both the right and the left, for which there are sure to be many reasons. Too many to list. Some are very bad. Others are shallow. Still others, however, are deep. Alamariu knows his history, particularly such history as brings to light long-forgotten, no longer actualized human possibilities. He reminds you that our world is not the only possible world. There have been other, perhaps better, more ennobling worlds before. Maybe there will be again? It sounds paradoxical to say it, but in this way Alamariu fulfills a canon of liberalism. The respect for human diversity, for the equality of different ways of life or "cultures," to which we hold dear often fails to issue in respect for what is truly different in all its difference from us. The result is, generally speaking, tiresome self-congratulation. In bringing to light such alien features of human history as he does, however, Alamariu excites. The merry bands of men doing unspeakable things of whom he merrily reminds you were never really supposed to be given citizen's rights under liberalism. They are "the Other." For this reason, not even departments of military history are permitted to exist anymore in our universities. Alamariu thus follows one canon of liberalism, including our powerful urge to peruse the costumes in the storage room of history (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 223), to the point of breaking with another, mutually exclusive canon of liberalism: the faith in progress. This is bound to appeal not just to those who, being young, enjoy the taste of forbidden fruit but also to those who are dissatisfied with

themselves and with the "progress" we have made thus far—or, to use Nietzsche's metaphor, with the fact that nothing in their own closet seems to fit. At the same time, while opening the door to exhilarating and terrible possibilities, possibilities your teachers (popular culture included) either did not dream of or did not want you to dream of, Alamariu gives the impression that the only thing stopping you from going through the door is . . . you. That is, your guilt, your fear that you will be struck down by lightning for girding your loins and going through. Once through the door, however, no lightning strikes, you breathe a sigh of relief, and he warmly, playfully invites you to take in the crisp, clean air. The old you, by contrast with the new you, starts to look increasingly like a guilt-tripped, scared, half-voluntary patient in an unhygienic, overbureaucratized insane asylum. Following on the heels of Alamariu's stirring reminders of other worlds there are also pointed, even poignant expressions, not just of the frustrations, humiliations, and degradations associated with our world, but especially of the lies our world tells itself about itself. When the last men say they have invented happiness, Nietzsche adds, "they blink." Alamariu thus speaks to his young audience in a way that echoes how, I suspect, Mishima's longing for the past in all its heights, on the one hand, and Houellebecq's despair of the present in all its depths, on the other, first spoke to him.

That said, the many reasons for Alamariu's appeal should not be sought in his dissertation. The dissertation reveals the (one or two) basic predicaments he is in, which, I think, it is worthwhile simply to understand. But since he is not alone in his predicaments, there may be some overlap between them and his appeal on the deepest level, especially when it comes to a small subset of disaffected youth.

A Tall Tale

The book covers a lot ground. Chapter 1 is on the historical origins of Greek aristocracy, chapter 2 is on Pindar, chapter 3 is on Plato's *Gorgias*, and chapter 4 is on Nietzsche. But Alamariu believes that all four chapters "recapitulate [the] same argument from four

different points of view" (29, 56). Though I have my doubts about that, there is no doubting that he is trying to assimilate the Greeks, Pindar, Plato, and maybe even Strauss to his Nietzsche. Roughly speaking, Alamariu argues that the Greeks, Pindar, Plato, and maybe even Strauss are all in agreement with him that lawless behavior, if not tyranny itself, is virtue from the perspective of philosophy or nature; that virtue so understood is observably hereditary; and that breeding is therefore required for virtue and philosophy. Now, even if they are all in agreement about this, one must still wonder whether they are right to agree. But Alamariu does not. Or, at least, he does not directly make the case that they are. For example, when the time finally comes to make the crucial case against justice, not simply make the case that others made the case, Alamariu begs off (144, cf. 54, 178, 154, 181, 221, 235, contrast 175, 229). So we are only ever told *that* "the teaching of nature" (55) purports to justify lawless behavior, not *how*, by what reasoning, it does so. The result of this is that the book amounts largely to an argument from authority. In Alamariu's defense, the authorities in question carry considerable weight. But Nietzsche would agree with me in thinking that the bearing of the historical argument on the question of the good or best way of life is much less considerable (*Gay Science* 345). So too, perhaps, would Alamariu (277).

Let me briefly summarize the historical argument Alamariu makes, especially in chapter 1, about the roots of philosophy and tyranny.

According to Alamariu, the idea of nature, the precondition for philosophy or science, emerged—not by accident—together with the phenomenon of tyranny in the course of the decay of Greek aristocracy. A more rudimentary form of the idea of nature was already emerging in the heyday of Greek aristocracy: specifically, in the Greek practice of breeding human beings for virtue (courage and prudence only) on the assumption that virtue is observably heritable or in the "blood." The Greek aristocracy ultimately responsible for discovering this idea of nature and thus for paving the way for philosophy and tyranny was itself preceded by

prephilosophic, "primitive and totalitarian *democracy*." "Totalitarian democracies" are not democracies by any stretch of the imagination—they are ruled by chieftains, kings, or village elders (30, 58, 78, 80), which is probably why Alamariu adds at one point that it is really only a democracy "of sorts" (75, cf. 85)—but they are totalitarian, at least, insofar as ancestral custom, *nomos*, the opposite of nature, is "ubiquitous and all-powerful" (59, 80). Even so, the purpose of the "totalitarian democracy" is mere self-preservation. Virtue, "the rejection of the whole world of . . . mere life around which the primitive *nomos* is oriented," is entirely lacking. The idea of nature (as breeding) and aristocracy begin to emerge only when a "foreign elite" comprising pastoral marauders, unafraid to die and used to breeding animals, conquers and enslaves the tame, ignoble inhabitants of "totalitarian democracy."

Alamariu "relies heavily" on James George Frazer's *Golden Bough* (29). Or, at least, the picture Alamariu paints of prephilosophic, "totalitarian democracy" relies almost exclusively on the five pages of *The Golden Bough,* in the course of which Frazer relates how "totalitarian democracy" gives way to kingship. This comes as a surprise, not only because the five pages of the abridged text on which Alamariu relies seem to be entirely speculative, if not simply imagined—they are completely uncorroborated, even in the unabridged text—but also because Alamariu professes to want "to understand the prephilosophic regime as it understood itself . . . without the aid of philosophical or of modern notions" (56, cf. 58) and Frazer viewed the whole past through the distorting lens of historical evolution and Enlightenment rationalism. Frazer immediately reduced early religion to "magic," by which he meant something fundamentally identical to modern science—the only difference being that "magic" is hobbled by a pair of "logical misunderstandings" (74) from which modern science is free.[3] Frazer's reduction of early religion to an illogical natural science, which takes its inspiration from Hume's critique of religion, joins hands with his faith in historical progress to lead him to see the magician from the start as fool or a knave jockeying for power who, when he gets it, enlightens the tribe and breaks the chains of

"totalitarian democracy." Alamariu accepts Frazer's account of early religion, if not in all particulars, in all essentials (cf. 315n109). For Alamariu, too, early religion is tyrannical, and it is up to "an energetic, deceitful man," pretending to be a magician, to overturn the ancestral *nomos* and gradually introduce the "liberty to think one's own thoughts" (75–79, cf. 72). But the prephilosophic regime did not understand itself to be an outrageous tyranny ripe for a trickster's picking. This is the prephilosophic regime as Alamariu understands it with the aid of a vivid imagination and sophisticated, "modern notions."

When Alamariu finally does turn from his secondary sources to our primary sources of information about the prephilosophic mind, he proves unable to listen to what they have to say for themselves, even when he has them right there in front of him. His Frazerian deprecation of the original experience of sacred awe or belonging coexists, not unpredictably, with an equally modern, albeit romantic tendency to insist on an unbridgeable gulf between courage—which, severed from its connection to myth and law, risks becoming mere "resoluteness" (cf. 65)—and self-preservation. So, at one point, Alamariu quotes a lengthy passage from Thucydides to establish that the early Greek way of life amounted to "the rejection of the whole world of preservation and mere life" (90–91). Alamariu frequently quotes a passage in the belief that it supports his claims when, in reality, it pulls the rug out from under them. In this case, while he rightly notes that the early Greeks saw "no disgrace" and even "some glory [honor]" in turning pirate, he somehow manages to overlook the fact that according to the passage he himself quotes, the Greeks' motives in turning pirate were "to serve their own cupidity [love of gain] and to support the needy [poor]," since this was "the main source of their livelihood." Whatever else this may be, it is not simply "an antagonistic attitude to . . . the preservation of mere life" (91).

Alamariu's failure even to try to do what he said he would do is explained, easily enough, by the growing realization that he has little interest in understanding the prephilosophic regime "as it

understood itself." Frazer, in particular, simply gets Alamariu where he wants to go. But where is that, exactly?

The bad guys in Alamariu's story are the benighted, self-interested, utility-minded members of "totalitarian democracy," which, it is crucial to note, threatens to reestablish itself today in the form of the last man's universal and homogenous state (37, 75). The good guys are the aristocrats enlightened by the discovery of nature who live to die—apparently for fame (128, 130, 149), though Alamariu occasionally denies that men can be satisfied with praise (10, 240). Supposedly, Alamariu feels the need to tell his elaborate story about a "foreign elite" pouncing on a tame, homogenized people because he cannot fathom how the idea of nature could have emerged otherwise (72, 83–85, 100, 102, 107–8). In prephilosophic, "totalitarian democracy," law, *nomos* reigns supreme. "Conventions, laws . . . ruthlessly quash any form of . . . questioning or dissent" (30). To question tradition is "criminal," and there is "a simple remedy for . . . questioning: death" (84). Thus, "*nomos* prevents such questioning to begin with, even within one's mind" (83–84, cf. 69, 102). This is funny, considering the source. Does Alamariu of all people not know that criminals have, in all times, a bad habit of committing crimes? Speaking seriously, though, for Alamariu to deny in this way the possibility of crimes, even just thought-crimes, amounts to an abandonment of the distinction between nature and convention (cf. Thucydides III.45). Alamariu succumbs—despite himself, but by his own standards (276)—to historicism. Laws forbid what is possible to do, not what is impossible to do, so anything illegal is bound to be possible. In fact, the basic premise of law enforcement is an awareness, however dim, that the laws are not automatically, naturally self-enforcing; they *can* be broken, and broken with impunity. Alamariu is confused. If the "remedy" for questioning is death, if questioning is "ruthlessly quashed," then *nomos* does not prevent such questioning "to begin with, even within one's mind"; and vice versa, if *nomos* does prevent such questioning "to begin with, even within one's mind," then there cannot be any executions or ruthless quashings. However pervasive and powerful it may be, law is never

"ubiquitous and all-powerful," as Alamariu says (58), if indeed there is nature. Besides, precisely if it were "ubiquitous and all-powerful," Alamariu's appeal to a "foreign elite" for help in getting nature's foot through the door of *nomos* is question-begging. After all, to say nothing of the fact that the door is hermetically sealed shut in that case, where did they come from? How did they extricate themselves from "totalitarian democracy"? The arrival of leisure on the scene does not cut it (86). Nor do lying Frazerian magicians whose lying is not even conceivable on the basis of Alamariu's lapse into historicism.

If Alamariu's supposed reason for telling such an elaborate story makes no sense, then—and only then—not only are we entitled, we are compelled to wonder what really lies behind it all, which I take to be this: Strauss seems to date the discovery of nature to a time *after* the heyday of Greek aristocracy. This would have to mean that Greek aristocracy, including aristocratic virtue, leaves something to be desired from the perspective of philosophy. For one thing, aristocratic virtue was bound up with conventions and myths, now widely believed to be false. The effect of Alamariu's story is to disentangle aristocratic virtue from conventions and myths—the doubtfulness of which threatens to render virtue doubtful too—and to place it on the firm footing of nature and hence philosophy. Alamariu's less than fully conscious intention, which follows from the effect, is to save virtue—to save it from convention, from myth, and thus from philosophy—while leaving democracy or utilitarianism (66) to die in darkness.

Eugenics

Alamariu goes so far as to say that "the question of sexual and breeding laws is . . . *identical* to the question of regime, constitution" (10, emphasis added). Throughout, this is what is emphasized most: "the fundamental principle of *breeding* as the foundation for . . . personal distinction [in virtue]—the *low* valuation, that is, of the idea that true virtue can be *taught* and therefore the low valuation of *nomos* as mere instruction, leveling, or indoctrination" (108, 139, 149). For example, "virtue or *arete* cannot be taught . . .

it is a matter of the *blood*, of birth, of nature" (116, cf. 32). "Good and bad can't be taught" (140n205). Even wisdom, we are told, "can't be taught, but is a matter of the blood" (153). Strong medicine. But then, something funny happens. Alamariu blinks. "Though a certain kind of training may be necessary to cultivate [virtue]," Alamariu says, "this is not primarily a matter of *being taught* and certainly not being taught by *nomos* or custom, but of being *bred*. . . . Excellence, virtue," he then reverts to saying, "is a matter of nature, of blood, and it cannot be taught" (140, cf. 153–52). May be necessary? Primarily? In fact, Alamariu does not just blink, he turns tail and runs. Breeding turns out to be only one of *two* elements required for "virtue"; the other is training or education (118, 268). Effective training is "indispensable" (142)—for philosophy too (240)—and well-bred natures, despite being well bred, are "ever in danger" of being "corrupted" by defective training or education (170, 175–77, 181, 182, 201). Even Alamariu cannot help but link breeding the next generation with the question of "how they are to be raised . . . educated" (17). Accordingly, he usually, though (in keeping with his confusion) not always, absent-mindedly speaks of "breeding and education" or "breeding and training" in one and the same breath. Sparta, he thinks, is "*the* aristocratic regime that fits the [aristocratic] model . . . *par excellence*" (244, 239, 106). But Sparta's all-encompassing education system, the ruthlessness of which Alamariu stresses on more than one occasion, obviously put precious little trust in the spontaneous goodness of well-bred natures.

If you pull on this thread, everything unravels and falls to the floor in a giant, convoluted, self-contradictory mess. Imagine a dog breeder who insists that dogs "cannot be taught" because, for dogs, "[good behavior] is a matter of the *blood*, of birth, of nature," at which point he offers to breed you the best of dogs, a dog well behaved by nature, on just one condition: that you follow up with a "severe," "strict," "intolerant," and "cruel" training regimen starting when the dog is a puppy and ending never. Somehow, the difficulty completely escapes Alamariu. But if breeding must be supplemented by training or education, nature is not enough. At

most, nature makes it possible for someone to be receptive to training or education to virtue. Breeding does not cut it, then, not even for Alamariu; he needs habituation or learning, too. So, *both* nature *and* nurture. But that is just good old-fashioned Scholasticism, if not common sense.

Alamariu senses, however vaguely, that admitting the need for training or education threatens to drag virtue back down from the sunny freedom of nature into the dark dungeon of convention. For this reason, he insists that the training, education, or cultivation of nature "indispensable" for virtue is *not* a matter of "mere instruction, leveling, indoctrination" (108). That is what "totalitarian democracy" does, "it homogenizes" (30, 72, 154, 169). "The primary function of *nomos* is 'social control,' homogenization, taming" (139–41). Virtuous aristocrats, however, harken back to their "'feral,'" "'antinomian'" predecessors who sought to reestablish disorder and "wild, heroic, *unsettled* life" (103–5, contrast 111). But they are not "antinomian radicals who reject all historical traditions" either (118). So, after having described *nomos* as "homogenization" and "inculcation," Alamariu goes on to speak of "aristocratic education" (251) as "homogenization" and "inculcation," which forcefully restrains and even resensitizes the aristocrats (250, 251, 258, 259). But how, then, is this any different from "'conventional' training" (142–43)? "Aristocratic traditions," it turns out, "must *in large part be the same as any other traditions* in requiring of [their] members conformity, in requiring them to be bound, and in requiring discipline and obedience—perhaps the strictest discipline" (119, emphasis added).

To get out of this knot, Alamariu ties himself up in another, deeper one. Alamariu looks down on self-preservation with contempt. Slaves differ from aristocrats in that slaves aspire to self-preservation (24, 89, 90–91), whereas aristocrats have contempt for "mere life" (128, 148, cf. 269, 96, 100). Likewise, "aristocratic traditions and conventions" differ from the conventions of the "totalitarian democracy," if not in their means or methods, in their ends. "Aristocratic conventions" produce specimens that "possesses contempt for death as well as for mere life. . . . Whereas by contrast

the *nomos* . . . of all 'default' populations whatsoever, is entirely directed to the preservation of mere life" (118–19, cf. 59). This, then, is the specific difference. The purpose of *nomos* is "the self-preservation of the many" (154): "*tribal survival*, *the continuation and preservation of mere life*" (140, emphasis added). The purpose of "aristocratic conventions," though they are homogenizing, inculcating, and all that too, is not (cf. 95). There is no need to dwell on the fact, which Alamariu unwittingly admits (cf. 66–67, 69), that "totalitarian democracy" is hardly thinkable without people ready and willing to make sacrifices when duty calls. It suffices to note that Alamariu goes on to say that the tyrant who "is outside all *nomos*," "embodying the chief aristocratic virtues in their 'distilled' form," the tyrant who is "aristocratic *phusis* 'radicalized' and unbound," arises for no other reason than "to defend" the city from "existential" threats of "extermination" and "annihilation" (158–59). So, "survival." As if that were not bad enough, "the aristocratic regime is originally intended for one thing: self-defense, self-perpetuation in the face of danger" (246, 257). Worse still, "the qualities [aristocrats] call virtues" are just the qualities necessary for "continued survival" (246, 257), "political survival" (259). Yet again, Alamariu is confused. But this is where philosophy would get its foot in the door if he were not so set on rescuing virtue from any of its thought-provoking entanglements with other beliefs and concerns. Is virtue the purpose of the "aristocratic conventions," as Alamariu says, or is "the continuation and preservation of mere life" the purpose of virtue and the "aristocratic conventions" that cultivate it, as Alamariu also says?[4] It is impossible to appreciate the true greatness of Achilles—his death-defying decision to go back on his word and stay and fight—without appreciating how bravely, how deeply he wrestled with this question,[5] which is to say, without appreciating the question for oneself.

Alamariu's incessant talk of breeding is silly, idle chatter. Though he can blaspheme, he cannot advocate for the devil. Despite constant reminders that he is stunning and brave for going on and on about breeding, against the rules, he is not even tough enough to acknowledge the existence of the most immediately

recognizable objections, which are trivial, perhaps, but true. For example, Odysseus's son fell short of his father. So did Achilles's. Achilles's father fell short of his son. Paris fell short of his brother Hector. The list goes on. Homer did all of this (and more), when he could have done everything differently. For the same reason, Xenophon (who stressed the importance of education) separated the "birth" of Cyrus, his purported lineage, from his "nature" (*Cyropaedia* I.1.6–2.2). Forced by the plain meaning of Pindar's words, if not by common sense, Alamariu has to admit that virtue can "'skip a generation'" (132–33). Only one (cf. 134, 137)? Even in that case, "the persistence of inherited qualities across generations" cannot possibly be observed, as Alamariu has to maintain, given the observer's brief life (154, cf. 95). No wonder Alamariu—who at one point makes the remarkable admission that "the *genius*" ("the prerequisite for both the tyrant and the philosopher") cannot be bred (227)—looks forward to further research in genetics (16, 18). Until he finds the nuptial number, it looks like we are back to believing in myths about godlike ancestors. If virtue can skip a generation, even just one, then it can do so as often as every other generation. Nothing prevents Thersites's ancestors from being on the whole just as good or better than Diomedes's. Maybe they are distant cousins. The wide variation between siblings, which Alamariu studiously avoids mentioning, is the final nail in the coffin. Priam, by some accounts, had fifty sons, but only one Hector. There is no need to keep stating the obvious. None of this matters much anyway, given Alamariu's earlier admission that virtue is not by "blood," after all.

Alamariu likes to say that he means what he says about breeding "literally," indeed, "quite literally," "very literally" (83, 118, 130, 132, 142). But this is just him being transgressive again. The biggest mistake you can make would be to take Alamariu literally, when he asks you to, because he simply does not know what he is saying. If anything, it is a tell: he is compensating for self-doubt with pluck. Just try to take him at his word. The Greek state was "nothing more or less than a breeding project for superior specimens" (23, 95); men were "*quite literally* . . . bred for *areta* as one

might breed a plant or stallion for a particular purpose" (142, emphasis added). All right, who was renowned in the ancient world for, "quite literally," breeding humans? Pyrilampes, we are told, was renowned for his peacocks. Who, then, was renowned for his humans? Say for the sake of argument that we have evidence in Xenophon's short works for a "fascination" with breeding horses and dogs—we really do not, contra Alamariu (95, 277, contrast 358n400), but say we do. Why are there no surviving fragments or even testimonies, to say nothing of full texts, dealing with the breeding of human beings? Why, if "we find Greek aristocrats in Plato's time enjoying especially the past-time of breeding animals" (95), do we find no one dutifully doing the work, for which the Greek state existed, of breeding humans? The prize in horse races was, we are told, given to the victorious horse's breeder, not to the rider (131). Why then, when discussing athletes, does Alamariu make no allusion to the breeders of the human beings who were victorious in foot racing or wrestling? Did the victorious Strepsiades get the prize for wrestling (130), or did his breeder? If you take Alamariu "quite literally," you end up with Aristophanic comedy.

The Birth of Philosophy

To judge by its cover, Alamariu's book is about philosophy. But it is not, not really. Anyone reading the earlier summary of Alamariu's story was probably left wondering, among other things, what is the idea of nature? Why is it the precondition for philosophy? Good questions, both of them, which it somehow never occurs to Alamariu to ask. Alamariu repeats the Straussian formula that the idea of nature is a "precondition" for philosophy like a lullaby on loop, without ever letting on that he has the slightest inkling why. Philosophy is "contemplation of nature" (240, 150). Nature is "the object of investigation of the philosopher" (154, cf. 216). All right, but why is philosophy's subject matter also its precondition? It is not even clear, from his constant repetitions of the Straussian formula, whether Alamariu really means to say that the idea of nature is a "precondition," a "prerequisite," which is to say a necessary condition. Sometimes, it is the (sufficient) condition by which

philosophy "*stands* or falls," "*lives* or dies" (43, 55, 150, 154, emphasis added). Alamariu also repeats the Straussian formula that the idea of nature was "discovered." Another lullaby on loop. But again, what was discovered? Alamariu says that the idea of nature is eventually "identical" to breeding (21, 24, 29, 32, 36, 38). Nevertheless, he also says that the idea of nature "arises out of" the "primitive" identification of nature with breeding, which, like the first ever mention of *physis* (94, 117), implies that the idea of nature is not identical to breeding (28, 287, cf. 175). What then, assuming philosophers are not just contemplating the breeding of philosophers (an infinite regress, which renders the meaning of "philosopher" unintelligible), do philosophers contemplate? An offhand remark or two is probably the closest Alamariu ever comes to saying what the idea of nature is: "nature exists apart from both the divine and from convention and could be argued to be superior in power even to the divine" (117, 115). But to say nothing of the lack of cogency of continuing to speak of "the divine" if nature is "superior in power," that does not tell us what the idea of nature is so much as what it is not. It is not the divine. So, what is it?[6] When Alamariu speaks of "the birth of philosophy," he means the discovery of something, though he does not know what, which is, though he does not know why, either the necessary or sufficient condition for philosophy, though he does not know which.

You would think a study of the birth of philosophy would be based chiefly on a study of the first philosophers. If not, it would run the risk of being a study of the birth, not of philosophy, but of something else entirely. Even Alamariu appears to think that the study of the "earliest philosophers" is a "must" (232–33, cf. 55). But he makes virtually no mention of the fragments and testimonies of the first philosophers, the pre-Socratics, or of the numerous passages in Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, which are our best sources of information about the original, secret meaning of philosophy. Maybe he studied the pre-Socratics but chose to keep his findings to himself because—like me—he cannot think of a single place where they evince any interest in breeding, much less equate it with the idea of nature. However that may be, a study of the birth

of philosophy that is too preoccupied with Pindar to say anything about the first philosophers (simply because Pindar occasionally used a perfectly ordinary Greek word to which the philosophers gave entirely new, hidden meaning) is like a study of the birth of logical positivism that is too preoccupied with some poems by T. S. Eliot to say anything about Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the Vienna Circle.

For the first philosophers, to let them get a word in edgewise, nature meant primarily the first, necessary, and thus eternal being or beings on account of which the contingent beings of our experience ultimately come to be, endure for as long as they do, and perish. The first philosophers worried that if there were not some necessary cause or causes of the world, then anything could happen. The beings, able to change (or be changed) on a dime, would lack the stability required to be objects of genuine knowledge. They would lack natures, to use that word in its secondary meaning. The discovery of the idea of nature was by no means the sufficient condition for philosophy, then, since only by going on to actually demonstrate the existence of nature in its primary meaning could the philosophers be sure that they were not living on a prayer. If "the Socratic turn" is any indication, the first philosophers failed, leaving Socrates and his successors to grapple, in strange, new ways, with the same old question of whether the world exists "in virtue of natural necessity" or "in virtue of the purpose of one who purposes" (Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* II.19).[7]

Alamariu speaks as if the discovery of the idea of nature was, or could be, the work of communities (24, 84)—as if, for the idea of nature to be discovered, it must be "publicly expounded" (85). But this, like his Kojèvean, historicist claim that the discovery of the idea of nature was a "revelation" (82, 94, 95, 154),[8] is a figment of Alamariu's imagination, only made possible by his apparently near-complete ignorance of the source material. Even Protagoras, who boasted of his openness as compared with his more secretive predecessors, dared to speak of nature only in mythical language, despite being "in good company," in the privacy of Callias's home.

Alamariu's book rests, from start to finish, on a simple misunderstanding. The only pre-Socratic text Alamariu ever mentions—of course, not knowing the sources, he just lifts it from Strauss—is the "crucial" statement of Heraclitus to the effect that the good, the *kalon*, and the just exist not by nature but by convention alone (339n273). The first philosophers denied the existence of *natural right* (true justice) in the name of *nature* (necessity). For Alamariu, however, the idea of nature (as breeding) is a "principle" (e.g., 28, 58, 59), by which he means "a principle of rule" (83, 85), an "ethos" (85), an "'ideal'" (85), a "morality" (57, 87, 94). He mistakes the distinction between nature and convention for the distinction between natural right and conventional right (116–17, cf. 148, 123, 109–10). In other words, the discovery of what Alamariu mistakenly calls "the idea of nature" (he means, rather, "natural right") was so far from amounting to the birth of philosophy that it was precisely what the first philosophers—whose statements about that to which they themselves gave birth should count for something, at least—denied could ever be discovered.

From his casual perusal of Strauss, Alamariu did pick up on the fact that the pre-Socratics denied the existence of natural right (178, 216, 340n279, cf. 170). It is hard not to. But instead of accepting that none other than the first philosophers were diametrically opposed to his own take on the original meaning of philosophy, Alamariu does what he so often does when he encounters worthy opposition: rather than stand and fight, he assimilates his opponent to himself. It is a neat trick (cf. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 148, 261). In this case, Alamariu insists that "the Calliclean option," including Calliclean "natural right," "*is a genuinely philosophical conclusion*" (178, cf. 235); that Callicles's "duty" is "*literally guided by the love of truth*" (180); that Callicles is "*the voice of pre-Socratic philosophy become political*" (181). But repeatedly putting absurdities in italics does not make them less absurd. Nor does rambling about the pre-Socratics without the ability to cite, much less discuss, a single one of the fragments or testimonies grow less fatuous the longer it goes on (177–84). Callicles breaks with the pre-Socratics according to the plain meaning of Alamariu's own

words (340n279), which is why, at one point, Alamariu himself shows signs of breaking *with them* (over their denial of the *kalon*)—if not with anyone who, like Socrates, "cares about nothing but truth and nature"—too (217, cf. 216). Assuming that the first philosophers knew what philosophy was, Alamariu is squarely on the side of *nomos*, against philosophy, "truth and nature."

I do not agree with Alamariu that the four chapters of the book "recapitulate [the] same argument" (29, 56). That is partly because he argues in chapter 3 that according to Plato, philosophy taught tyranny or trained tyrants (55, 163, 166, 167, 203–5, 219–23) by liberating promising youths "from *nomos*" so that they could "return to nature" (221), whereas in chapter 4 he argues that according to Nietzsche, "high culture," tyranny, and philosophy arise all at once from the dying star of a decaying aristocracy. Furthermore, whereas in chapter 1 Alamariu argues that the idea of nature (as breeding) and thus philosophy emerged initially from aristocracy, he rarely mentions "the idea of nature" and its "discovery" in chapter 4, presumably because, so far as I can tell from a survey of every substantive mention of the word there (243, 261, 264, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 357n395), he was unable to find a single place where Nietzsche himself does so (cf. 4), which leaves one wondering whether Nietzsche and Alamariu are on the same page when it comes to "the true meaning of 'nature'" (cf. 37) too. Alamariu concludes the book by asserting that there is a "link" here, such that for Nietzsche "the idea of nature and ultimately philosophy" arises from "nature as breeding" (287), but I do not see it. Nor should I, since Nietzsche gives an account of "the true meaning of 'nature'" in *The Anti-Christ*, which confirms that there is none. Especially in aphorisms 15, 47, and 49, Nietzsche develops the view that "the concept 'nature' . . . had been invented as the counterconcept to 'God.'" "Science," he suggests, is not just "the healthy grasp of cause and effect" but is the healthy grasp of nonimaginary, real, natural causes and effects, whereas the supernatural, imaginary causes and effects ("God," "punishment," etc.) known only to "faith" are attempts to destroy "the human *sense of causation*." This, while it bears a distinct resemblance to the

pre-Socratic view, contradicts Alamariu's assertion of a "link," in Nietzsche's thought, between "the true meaning of 'nature'" and breeding. But it has the distinct advantage of being something Nietzsche actually said, and of making some sense.

Interpretations and Texts

Sometimes Alamariu will make claims about a text so false you have to wonder whether he ever read the book, as when he says that "the principle concern" of the *Oeconomicus* "seems to be the estate holder's relationship with his wife, including their meeting and courtship" (15), neither of which is ever discussed. Other times he will take giant leaps, unaware that he has been refuted in advance by our most reliable sources, as when (uncritically accepting the word of an ancient gossip) he says that "Aristippus is a Socratic" (219–22), evidently because he never read Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. Maybe the most important example of this—I will stick with Xenophon, whom Alamariu rightly takes to be an authority on Socrates (94, 199, 223)—is Alamariu's obliviousness to the fact that Xenophon takes up and roundly rejects Alamariu's entire thesis in *Memorabilia* IV.1–2, where Socrates explains in great detail that those who think they are good by nature—the *erromenesteroi*, in fact—are bad natures incapable of an education, though they're held by opinion (convention) to be best.

But the most striking failing of Alamariu's interpretations, to which I have referred once already, is that they are often contradicted by the passages he himself quotes. Three examples, which I single out because they touch on three fulcrums of his argument, will have to do.

To make his case that "the blood of a king . . . nature, the truth . . . reveals itself" regardless of circumstances (138), Alamariu recalls the episode in which "Odysseus, meeting his father Laertes who is working as a gardener, remarks that, although unkempt, uncared for, poor, malnourished, the old man . . . has the true bearing of a king." From this Alamariu concludes, "[Odysseus] recognizes his father's nature—it is revealed to the eye despite all outward and conventional signs to the contrary" (137). Poor Alamariu, Homer plays tricks on people like him. Did Laertes

recognize his son's kingly "blood," "despite all outward conventional signs to the contrary"?

Telemachus, of course, recognized his father, Odysseus, only when Athena lifted the veil, which brings me to my second example. Homer's comparison of Agamemnon to a bull standing out from the herd leads Alamariu to suggest that a principle of hierarchy "opposed to the authority of ancestral stories and laws" developed from "the practice of breeding livestock." But Homer attributes Agamemnon's preeminence on that day to Zeus's intervention (112). Alamariu habitually traces the virtues traced by the texts to the gods, whether by their actions or by their unions with mortals, to "blood" or "breeding" (cf. 147–48, 141, 153). This Alamariuean leap of logic is nicely summed up in the unintelligible statement that "[virtues] are divine gifts, ultimately gifts of the blood" (153).

Alamariu asserts that for Nietzsche, philosophy requires beautiful youths whose beauty is the result of breeding for beauty (241–46, 258). His only evidence for this seems to be two passages from *Twilight of the Idols*. Though you would never know it from Alamariu's quotation, which conceals this, the first passage is two aphorisms, not one (241–42). In the second aphorism, Nietzsche is obviously disagreeing with (his own rendition of) Plato about the fact that philosophy requires beautiful youths, after having agreed with him to a point, about the procreative power of "all" beauty, in the first aphorism. Breeding is never mentioned. Nor is breeding ever mentioned in the second long passage cited by Alamariu (243–44), where Nietzsche traces beauty not so much to *eugenic* as to *epigenetic* sources (training and diet). It is the Indians—not the Greeks—who are for Nietzsche the "greatest example" of programmatic breeding (*Twilight of the Idols*, "Improvers" 2).

Conclusion

For all its shortcoming—too many to mention—there is something (as Socrates once said) "somehow serious" about Alamariu's book. Again, Alamariu is concerned with virtue. The praise he lavishes on tyranny, among other things, seems to suggest otherwise. But, as

we have seen, his tyrants serve the public interest (cf. 54)—perhaps in other (Kojèvean) ways, too (cf. 36, 161–62, 163, 181, 201, 234, 265).[9] Moreover, while Alamariu insists that tyrants are "freed from . . . all law," as the heirs of aristocratic morality, they have virtue (98, 100, 119, 159). They have "a *duty*" (180). In fact, despite his insistence that tyrants are "freed from . . . all law," Alamariu claims that "what is natural is only the *binding* or *burdening* of man to precisely unnatural and unreasonable laws" (65). So, unless Alamariu thinks that tyranny is contrary to nature, tyrants must be bound by laws, after all. Alamariu is incapable of saying with any clarity what tyranny, or the tyrant's "motivation," is.[10] In accord with this, Alamariu praises Jason, "the foxy Jason," for using trickery, or "the mode of the fox," "most prized by aristocrats" (128, 144–45, 147, 155, 221). But he had only just approvingly quoted Nietzsche saying that "aristocratic" means "the truthful man," as distinguished from "the *lying* common man" (146). Furthermore, while he associates hedonism favorably with tyranny and philosophy (219, 222), which he likes, he also associates it with utilitarianism (65), which he loathes. His vacillation on this score comes across clearly from the way in which, he thinks, he comes to Callicles's rescue when Socrates shames him into contradicting himself. Alamariu suggests that hedonism is "allowed" only for someone, like Callicles, who has a "healthy soul," and although he never takes up the question of what in the world that is, he indicates that Callicles has one because he does not have "an inordinate desire" for pleasure (193–95). Alamariu is just as unwilling to let hedonism out of the bag as Callicles is, though like Callicles he cannot bring himself to reflect on the higher principle to which he subordinates personal pleasure. Recall that Alamariu, in keeping with his anti-utilitarianism, starts to turn on the first philosophers over their questioning of the *kalon*.

I suggested before that Alamariu wants to disentangle virtue from conventions and place it on the firm footing of nature. Turning to nature, in particular, is understandable in this situation. By now, liberalism has largely succeeded in radically transforming or even undermining the religions responsible not only for causing

their fair share of suffering in the world but also, by the same token, for giving meaning and purpose to virtue by placing it in a larger, eternal context. "Nietzschean vitalism"—that is not to say, Nietzsche—constitutes a self-defeating, last-ditch effort to restore the depth and height of premodern life on the level of just about the only authority left standing for us today: modern natural science. Another thing going for nature is that it surely does play at least some role in the acquisition of virtue. The popular, outright denial of this supplies yet another incentive, especially for the ever rebellious youth, to turn in this direction. But you can't even think Achilles, as he was, without Zeus. Virtue arising spontaneously from nature is bound to be something else entirely—namely, fanatical obscurantism (65, cf. 267)—for without an answer to the question "what do you serve?" it is bound to recoil in terror from the question. Courage is fully courage only if it is put to worthy ends. Alamariu, a burned child of his time, cannot say what courage is to be used for, and he is too afraid to ask, even though he feels in his bones that to live in a world without it is a fate worse than death. He is in a predicament, and he is not alone.

There is something else too. Another, so to speak, more eternal predicament. Liberalism lets us enjoy the right to live as we please only so long as we do our duty to respect the right of others to do the same. It lets us live and—or, rather, if—we let live. Mill's harm principle is only the best-known expression of the duty in question, which can be understood in any number of ways, usually, though not always, depending on how narrowly or broadly "harm" itself is understood. By all accounts, however, rather than ask or require us to do justice come hell or high water, liberalism asks or requires us not to do injustice, whatever exactly that may mean, while pursuing our happiness in what is otherwise near-perfect freedom. In other words, liberalism asks or requires relatively little of us. The steep demands of morality or politics, which in other times or places are a matter of life and death, thus start to seem like ancient history, especially in the first world, where, generally speaking, the reward for meeting historically low expectations is an historically high standard of living. By defining our duty down to something like the

harm principle—all the way down, that is, to the point where we think we can have our cake and eat it too—perhaps liberalism eventually creates a situation in which last men take the place of citizens ready and willing to do their noble duty, on the one hand, and fits of madness break out from others looking for something, anything, to do, if only it is done with or for courage, on the other. This is well known.

Less well known, however, is that liberalism creates a situation in which it is particularly hard for us to appreciate the fundamental question: is virtue conducive to happiness? Simon Blackburn once said that an answer to this question is "the holy grail of moral philosophy."[11] But just as young, healthy people are unlikely to seek the holy grail of lore, sufficiently happy people assured of their virtue are unlikely to seek the holy grail of moral philosophy. For we do not go in search of solutions to problems of which we are unaware, and the outward conformity between virtue and happiness, particularly in places where, in addition to asking or requiring little of us, the machinery of the state keeps the "state of nature" at bay, helps us forget the tragic fact (if it is one) that vice may be conducive to happiness, virtue to misery. Alamariu's "problem," such as it is, is that he cannot bring himself *either* to forget *or* to face the question—the question with which Achilles wrestled like the demigod that he was.

Alamariu's isolation and elevation of the most spectacular part of virtue (courage, self-sacrifice) to the detriment of the whole, particularly evident in his preference for war over peace (90–91, 139, 140–41, 145, 246, 261), is only one side of the coin—the other side of which, paradoxically, is his attempt to lower the bar of virtue, as we saw him try to do in the case of tyranny, lying, and pleasure-seeking. If the former is largely the result of the lingering effects of liberalism, the latter is largely attributable to the question he is unable to forget or face (although liberalism's effects play a role here too, just as the fundamental question did there). Alamariu, who does not seem to have much time for Greek tragedy, is saddened and angered when people do not get what they deserve. As we saw, like Callicles he is saddened and angered by tyranny—for instance, when someone like Socrates is put to death

by a city like Athens.[12] Contradicting his anti-utilitarianism, Alamariu makes the admission that "men can't be induced . . . into accepting duties without commensurate rewards" (10). It follows that Alamariu must doubt that we have duties, or that we can do them, insofar as we do not necessarily get the rewards we deserve in this life. His attempt to lower the bar of virtue is therefore best understood, I think, as an attempt to close the gap between virtue and the rewards of virtue. By blurring the lines between might and right, rather than simply abandoning right altogether (186–88), he can tell himself that the mighty have a right to their might, the suffering a duty to their suffering. Alamariu's new natural law theory is an attempt to cope with the pain and suffering caused by his inability to accept in full awareness any of the religions, with their promise of justice in another life, left on life-support by liberalism.[13] But since he is not nearly as unmoved by that promise as he thinks—if he were, he would abandon right altogether—the fundamental question returns or, rather, remains: does the world exist "in virtue of natural necessity" or (as Alamariu, deep down, believes) "in virtue of the purpose of one who purposes"?

Alamariu's work is "inspired," he says, "by the fundamental tension between reason and tradition" (54). But he has not thought the tension through to the questions at its root, which is to say, he has not thought the tension through very far past the point of grasping it in name alone. I wonder whether the "'radicalization' of the youth," or at least the very best of them, is due in no small part to the fact that their teachers, knowing nothing of the philosophic life, are usually incapable of doing even this. If this sounds strange, forgive me. In my defense, do we not live in strange times?

Notes

1. See Robert Bartlett, *The Idea of Enlightenment: A Postmortem Study* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 45–64.
2. See Ronald Beiner, *Philosophy in a Time of Lost Spirit: Essays on Contemporary Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 16.
3. James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd ed., part 1, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1920), 220ff.

4. See Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 27.
5. See Christopher Bruell, *On the Socratic Education: An Introduction to the Shorter Platonic Dialogues* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 101–2.
6. For further discussion, see Christopher Bruell, "The Question of Nature and the Thought of Leo Strauss," *Klesis: Revue Philosophique* 19 (2011): 91–101.
7. See Dustin Sebell, *The Socratic Turn: Knowledge of Good and Evil in an Age of Science* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 25–44.
8. Alexandre Kojève, "Tyranny and Wisdom," in *On Tyranny: Corrected and Expanded Edition*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 151–52, 153, 256.
9. For further discussion of the origin and meaning of Alamariu's "strategy" to defend philosophy via progressive politics, popular enlightenment, or "spiritual warfare," see Dustin Sebell, "Ancient versus Modern Philosophy: The Socratic Refutations and the 'Napoleonic Strategy' in Leo Strauss's 'Restatement,'" *Political Science Reviewer* 45, no. 2 (2021): 371–78, 383–84.
10. For the classical analysis of tyranny, see David Levy, "An Introduction to the Hiero," in *Xenophon: The Shorter Writings*, ed. Gregory McBrayer (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 29–50; *Eros and Socratic Political Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 42–49.
11. Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 22.
12. Partly for this reason it is essential for Alamariu that philosophy and philosophers make philosophy and philosophers "safe" in the cities (36, 184, 208, 234, 260, 263). But then, since it is noble to be "ever ready to abandon safety and mere life" (130), philosophy and philosophers would appear to be base.
13. For further discussion, particularly of the link between Callicles and liberalism, see David Bolotin, "Is There a Right to Live as We Please? (So Long as We Respect the Right of Others to Do the Same)," in *Enlightening Revolutions: Essays in Honor of Ralph Lerner*, ed. Svetozar Minkov (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2007), 219–34. See also, for further discussion of Callicles, Devin Stauffer, *The Unity of Plato's "Gorgias": Rhetoric, Justice, and the Philosophic Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Alamariu added a footnote (306n46), absent from the dissertation, in which he again makes claims about the latter—the best treatment of the *Gorgias*, by far—so false you have to wonder whether he ever read the book.