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Astronomical and political space: The sun’s course and the statesman’s power in Plutarch and Dio

Abstract: One of the most relevant topics of Roman and Greek political thought between the 1st and the 2nd century CE is the problem of the princeps’ unlimited power and how it could be restricted institutionally; so the authors were deeply concerned, paradoxically, about limiting what was unlimited (ἀνυπερθρυμνος) by definition. To many of them the metaphor of the sun was the best answer to their question. The course of the sun made the princeps’ space of action as clear as possible: he was both absolute and limited, able to give life or death, essential for all creatures that were indispensable to justify his power. Astronomical space invests the space of politics and the metaphor of the sun with a common political language. In this chapter I focus on the transposition of this idea of space from the metaphorical dimension to the pragmatic field of the princeps’ power as it appears in the To An Uneducated Ruler of Plutarch and in the Third Discourse on Kingship of Dio Chrysostom, in order to highlight analogies and differences, according to their respective political visions.

The limits of the princeps’ absolute power (ἀνυπερθρυμνος ἀρχή) was one of the thorniest political issues for imperial authors during the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. Was it possible to limit what was unlimited by nature? What kind of boundaries, if any, could prevent a princeps from becoming a tyrant? The evolution of the principatus had rendered these questions crucial. The issue was important to Plutarch and Dio Chrysostom as well. These authors addressed this problem which they had seen arise dramatically during Nero’s and Domitian’s principatus. In Plutarch’s To An Uneducated Ruler and in the Third Discourse on Kingship by Dio, for example, the problem of the limits to the princeps’ power is widely discussed. Both authors stress it by using the sun’s metaphor, which allowed them to make a theoretical

1 On the significances of the adjective ἀνυπερθρυμνος, see LSJ s.v. On the uses of ἀνυπερθρυμνος in ancient political works, see for example Plato, Laws (3, 691c; 6, 761e; 9, 875b) and Aristotle, Politics (2, 1272a; 4, 1292a, 1292b, 1295a). Two uses in Plutarch are worth pointing out, because of their importance from the perspective of political thought. In De unius (826E), he uses ἀνυπερθρυμνος in order to describe the Persian regime; in Fab. 3.7, this adjective characterises the Roman dictatorship.


3 On the contextualisation of these authors, cf. Stadter and Van Der Stockt (2002); Whitmarsh (2001a); Swain (1996); Swain (2000); Hidalgo De La Vega (1998) 1015–1058; Salmeri (2000) 60–63; Aalders (1982); Desideri (1978); Ziegler (1965); Von Arnim (1898); cf. Desideri (2000) 93: ‘Dio of Prusa was, together with Plutarch, the first author, and one of the most important ones, of the so-called Greek Renaissance in the time of the High Roman Empire’.

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idea concrete, in order to show to what extent the princeps could use his power without becoming a tyrant.

Two concepts need to be especially highlighted in terms of their political connotations, with a view to analysing how Plutarch and Dio deal with the limits of absolute power through the image of the sun: namely, space and time as they appear in the metaphor in question.⁴ In the treatise To An Uneducated Ruler and in the Third Discourse, Plutarch and Dio Chrysostom, respectively, summarise the problem, albeit in different ways: the former rhetorically asks himself Τίς οὖν ἀρξεῖ τοῦ ἀρχοντος; (‘Who, then, shall rule the ruler?’, 780C),⁵ the latter highlights that, in an absolutist regime, the νόμος corresponds to the βασιλέως δόγμα (3.43).⁶ Both pose the same question: the core of their analysis deals with the issue of limits. Where there are no institutional means capable of allowing men to choose their rulers, to remove a princeps become tyrant or to compel him to pursue the common good, it is essential to establish whether other limits to his power might exist and, therefore, what these limits are. Plutarch and Dio suggest managing the problem through education to and in virtue, which are considered as an effective means to reach the target of the common good.⁷ Their main difference lies in the emphasis exclusively laid by Dio on the princeps, whereas Plutarch’s view seems related to other figures as well.⁸

The Roman transition to monocratic power changed the way through which philosophers could perceive themselves within the political arena. Preceptors and princeps’ mentors started to take a remarkable position in the political game, where they sometimes became eminent actors.⁹ Although they easily solved the problem of finding who would be able to train the princeps with a view to making him a virtuous ruler and how, two questions were still far from being answered. What kind of virtue were they talking about? And, given that the purpose was to teach this virtue, how was it possible to apply something that was theoretical by nature? Since both in Plutarch’s and in Dio’s conception the model of this virtue was Zeus,¹⁰ how could it be possible to make

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⁴ On the political metaphor, see Euchner et al. (1993); Rigotti (1989).
⁵ From this point forward, all the Plutarchan excerpts and their translations that I mention in this contribution come from the Loeb; about this Plutarchan work see Tirelli (2005); Whitmarsh (2001a) 186.
⁶ From this point forward, all the Dionian excerpts and their translations that I mention in this essay come from the Loeb.
⁷ Roskam (2002) 181: ‘it is the task of a ruler to take care of his subjects, and the best way to do this consists in leading them towards moral virtue’.
⁸ In Plutarch’s To An Uneducated Ruler, for example, we find a mention of both kings and the rulers (779F) and a reference to the ruler ἐν πόλεσι (780F), from which we might deduce that he is not exclusively speaking about the princeps.
that example clear to the princeps? In other words, if kingship ‘is a high duty, even a
service of divinity, of whom the (perfect) king is an image’,\(^{11}\) how could this idea be shifted
from the metaphysical sphere to the physical one?

In To An Uneducated Ruler and in the Third Discourse, Plutarch and Dio choose to
use the sun metaphor with a view to illustrating the idea of Zeus as the best model of the
virtuous princeps.\(^{12}\) Unfortunately, the mere comparison between the king and the sun
was not enough to highlight the idea of limited power. What was also needed was to
make concrete what was theoretically difficult to be demonstrated. That is why the con-
cepts of space and time that these authors employ, albeit to a different degree, seem
worth stressing: in political terms they suggest that the princeps’ power has some lim-
its—in spite of its absolute nature—and illustrate what these limits are. Plutarch’s
and Dio’s ultimate objective is the common good (To An Uneducated Ruler, 780D–E;
Third Discourse, 73). The metaphysical model is the father of the gods (780D; 3.82)
and its physical translation is the image of the sun (780F and 781F; 3.73–81). The
sun’s elevation from the earth finds its parallel in the notion of vertical power, while
the sun’s course points to the unremitting duration of the princeps’ virtuous activity (me-
taphorically, from his rise to power to his sunset). The sun’s force, finally, suggests that
absolute power can both give life and kill. According to Plutarch and Dio, the sum of all
these elements—verticality, duration and authority over life and death, or, in other words,
space, time and purpose—should make clear to the ruler or the rulers how carefully they
have to manage their power.\(^{13}\) There are evident differences in detail: Dio’s description
appears richer than Plutarch’s. Some of the divergences concern spatial and temporal
dimensions. But the two authors share a crucial conceptual analogy which is about
the purposes of political power: the sun’s existence and role are linked to a political
model whose roots go back to the Homeric poems:\(^{14}\) rulers have to take care of the com-
mon good; their power is strictly linked to their subjects, since it exists only in their pre-

cence.\(^{15}\)

In To An Uneducated Ruler the aim of the ruler’s activities is spelled out:

\[\text{peror not to overreach mortal boundaries ... Divinity ... in the }\text{Kingships functions as a transcendent}
\]

signifier of kingship’.

\(^{11}\) Aalders (1982) 34.


\(^{13}\) On the spatial metaphors of politics and on the correspondences between natural order of uni-

verse and the hierarchical structure of societies, see Rigotti (1989) 85–102.

\(^{14}\) Cf. for example Hom., Il. 2.204–206; on the significance of this model in Dio’s thought, cf. Whit-

marsh (2001a) 212 and 244–245.

\(^{15}\) Cf. Aalders (1982) 34: ‘[The king] shall devote himself fully to his subjects’.
The sun has an enormous and essential power: it has to put God’s gift in order, that is, to take care of the common good. Accordingly, ‘the ruler should ... have correct opinions about his task: he should know that a true ruler serves God for the care and preservation of men, and that he should either distribute or safeguard the beautiful and good things which God gives to men ...’, thus functioning in a sense as an intermediary between the divine and the human world.¹⁶

In the Third Discourse of Dio (3.73–83) we find a very elaborate comparison between the sun and the ruler. It is worth discussing it, since it clarifies the point of the common good, suggests something remarkable about the theme of time and introduces the question of unremitting work that will be taken into account later.

Through a detailed description of the role of the sun in the universe and, particularly, of its influence on seasonal changes, Dio shows the importance of the princeps’ temperance in handling his absolute power (3.74–80). He lays great emphasis on space and time as limits in these sections: if the sun were not careful in spreading its force in accordance with the processes indispensable for creating and growing natural creatures, the universe would fall into disorder, and would be completely unfit for life. Furthermore, as it will be shown in the next pages, the sun is not allowed to stop doing so even for a moment. Because of this strong and paradoxical dichotomy between this absolute power and the virtuous behaviour requested of its holder, Dio compares the sun’s tasks to slavery (3.75).

According to both authors, the best example of how to take care of one’s subjects is offered by Zeus’ government of the universe. But in Dio’s Third Discourse, the emphasis is on the spatial and temporal aspects of the sun which serve to stress the limits of power. Whereas Plutarch simply says that the sun creates order in all things (κοσμεῖ δ’ ἡλιος ἀπαντα, 780E), Dio lays more emphasis on the nature of this task. Since, as shown above, the sun is a symbol of absolute power, the metaphor

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makes it evident that this force is not to be used outside certain boundaries. Within the Third Discourse, this is articulated by stressing the spatial dimension:

The sun’s course becomes a powerful metaphor for the spatial and temporal limits/unlimits of the princeps’ absolute power.

Although Plutarch’s metaphor is less detailed than Dio’s, he stresses the same theme in To An Uneducated Ruler:

Common to both authors is the idea that the common good depends on a careful ruler’s government that has to be continuously adjusted so as not to allow absolute power to escape its boundaries and weaken the ruled. Furthermore, both Plutarch and Dio stress the existence of a superior equilibrium whose observance makes the princeps’ power not completely absolute. Moreover, the possession of political power is linked to a responsibility towards a higher power:

The warning in Political Precepts 813E, ‘You who rule are a subject, ruling a State controlled by proconsuls, the agents of Caesar’ (ἀρχόμενος ἀρχεις, ὑποτεταγμένης πόλεως ἀνθυπάτοις, ἐπιτρόπως Καίσαρος), can be considered as a clear example of the ruler’s limited power. Obviously Plutarch is writing here about a local political situation and he is clearly not speaking about an absolute princeps. However, the idea of controlling and being controlled applies to all men who are in power, whether we consider it in its astronomic or human dimensions. The princeps has nothing similar to Roman proconsuls in terms of his power’s limits, but shares with them a more powerful bond: he has to guarantee his subjects the common good through a careful handling of his absolute power. If the fragile balance between the princeps’ absolute power and the need to keep it within clear-cut boundaries were to be upset,
the principatus would run the risk of becoming a tyrannical regime. Plutarch effectively summarizes the issue as follows: ‘There is indeed great danger that he who can do what he wishes may wish what he ought not to do’ (μέγας οὖν ὁ κίνδυνος βούλεσθαι ἃ μὴ δεῖ τὸν ἃ βούλεται ποιεῖν δυνάμενον, 782C).

As previously outlined, there is another point which is worth highlighting. In order to achieve the objective of the common good, it is sometimes not enough to adopt the behaviour requested to a good king: a ruler has to operate unremittingly in accordance with virtue. According to Plutarch and Dio, the subjection of absolute power to the subjects’ care and pursuit of the common good renders this power dependent on a continual virtuous behaviour on the part of its holder. This emphasis on continuity represents another essential means through which the princeps’ absolute power can be kept under control, in spite of the lack of institutional process capable of ensuring it. Dio’s lengthy development of the sun’s metaphor illustrates this aspect: whoever is in charge has to take care of his subjects perpetually (δι’ αἰώνος, 17.3.73 and 74). The ruler is not allowed to ignore his political duties even for a moment nor to put aside his assignments even for a short period. Due to this, Dio observes that the power relation between ruler and rulers—in metaphorical terms the vertical space between the sun and the earth—seems to be overturned: the king becomes a sort of slave because of his unremitting duties towards his subjects.19

Plutarch, in turn, does not explicitly discuss the theme of the constancy of virtue through the sun metaphor, but uses another image to highlight that those who want to rule other people must previously learn to control themselves according to the precepts of virtue.

δεῖ δέ, ὧσπερ ὁ κανών αὐτός, ἀστραβής γενόμενος καὶ ἀδίαστροφος, οὕτως ἀπευθύνει τὰ λοιπὰ τῇ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἔφαρμογῇ καὶ παραθέσει συνεξομοίων, παραπλησίως τὸν ἄρχοντα πρῶτον αὐτὸν τὴν ἀρχὴν κτισάμενον ἐν ἐαυτῷ καὶ κατευθύναντα τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ καταστημάταν τὸ ἱθος οὕτω συναρμόστειν τὸ ὑπόκοσμον οὕτε γὰρ πίπτων τοξὶ ὀρθοῦν οὕτε διάσκειν ἁγνούντος οὕτε κοσμεῖν ἄκοσμοῦντος ἢ τάττειν ἀτακτοῦντος ἢ ἀρχεῖν μὴ ἀρχομένου.

But just as a rule, if it is made rigid and inflexible, makes other things straight when they are fitted to it and laid alongside it, in like manner the sovereign must first gain command on himself, must regulate his own soul and establish his own character, then make his subjects fit his pattern. For one who is falling cannot hold others up, nor can one who is ignorant teach, nor the uncultivated impart culture, nor the disorderly make order, nor can he rule who is under no rule. (780B–C)20

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17 On the meanings of the expression δι’ αἰώνος, see LSJ s.v.
18 On the vertical space and its significances in the political metaphors, see Rigotti (1989) 93–102.
19 On this topic in Plutarch, see Ad. princ. iner. 779E; cf. Roskam (2002) 184.
20 See Roskam (2002) 182: ‘A virtuous ruler ... can carry his people with him by means of his own example of moral excellence. A ruler must therefore first put his own soul in order, and then model his subjects after his own pattern, just as a rule should first itself be straight and rigid, before it can make other things as straight as itself’.
This idea of both controlling and unremittingly presenting himself as an archetype of virtue is shown both in *Old Men in Public Affairs* 791C and in *Political Precepts* 800B and 800E–F. In *To An Uneducated Ruler*, the temporal dimension of the political office is implicit in the sun’s metaphor (780D–E). Seasons and other atmospheric variations are not clearly mentioned, but it is significant enough that Plutarch, like Dio, highlights the role played by the sun in making the seeds that gods bestow human beings germinate. Albeit in different ways, both authors perceive time as another element capable of limiting the *princeps*’ absolute power. Pauses, stops and hesitations are not allowed: avoiding virtuous behaviour even for a while affects his subjects, whose lives a good ruler has to safeguard carefully.

To sum up: the sun’s metaphor in Plutarch’s *To An Uneducated Ruler* is not as detailed as in Dio, because Plutarch seems mainly focused on the political consequences of imitating Zeus. For this reason, the concepts of time and space—particularly the former, since the latter is expressed as a function of it—have a stronger presence in the *Third Discourse on Kingship* than in the Plutarchan work.21 However, the outcome seems to be very similar: in order to propose a solution to the issue of the limits of the ἀνυπεύθυνος ἀρχή, both authors choose the same metaphor, according to which a ruler’s individual space and time are conceived as being closely linked with those of the ruled people, within the framework of a superior natural order that exists because of Zeus, and the unremitting virtuous behaviour of the good *princeps*.
