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Politics and Ethics in the Wallachian Court ca. 1700

The five Mirrors for Princes of Sevastos Kyminitis to the Prince of Wallachia
Constantin Brankovan
and the influence of Ancient Greek and Byzantine Aretology

Around year 1700 the Pontic scholar Sevastos Kyminitis paraphrased in vernacular Greek five Greek and Byzantine *Mirrors of Princes* for Konstantin Basarab Brankovan, Prince of Wallachia, whose governance has been characterized as an *enlightened absolutism*. The texts: Synesius' *De Regno*, ps.Isocrates' *Ad Demonicum* and *Ad Nicoclem*, ps.Aristoteles' *De virtutibus*, Theophylactus of Ohrid's *Institutio Regia*, Agapetus Deacon's *Scheda Regia*. Through the paraphrases Kyminitis attempted to conjugate the Greek classical and the Byzantine aretology tradition, in total contrast to the Machiavellian theory on the Prince. Kyminitis' view on the Prince, providing his own elements beside the original texts, is based on two essential points:

1. *The Prince as administrator of divine authority*. This idea, deeply rooted in the Eastern civilizations and in imperial Rome –with the exception of the ancient Greeks– had been accepted by Christianity, however with the specification that power as an institution was given by God to the ruler, who is obliged to obey the divine law. The people recognize the right of someone to dominate them, but they do not have to obey, when he breaks the law of God. In the Byzantine world the divine right of kings prevails, but the emperors tried, like the Romans, to impart sanctity to themselves, by means of merging the institutional and the personal. This Byzantine idea appears in Kyminitis in a moderate way: God does not give carte blanche power to the sovereign, but simply trusts him with the power: He assigns him a mission, a ministry, recognizing his mental talents, which of course are gifts of God. Kyminitis goes further: God simply validates the assumption of power by the ruler, which is given to him by a component of power factors.

Kyminitis, without any interest in the form of the government, accepts all three regimes, monarchy, aristocracy, democracy. This is a matter of circumstances and of the people's level. The question is not by how many people power is being exercised but in what way exactly. After all, the political situation in Wallachia was established, while he was writing admonitions about power management addressed to a specific ruler; his aim was not to put forth general opinions on the form of government or to criticize political authority.

The Prince has the power from God with the consensus of the citizens, so he must treat the citizens as a Prince should, but at the same time he is God's slave, like all the citizens. Thus, the ruler must have first the feeling of debt toward God, ruling the citizens according to the law of God, as a father his children. And as he behaves towards them, so the God will treat him. Indeed, for the exercise of power he will give an account to God. The ruler is anointed by God; he is a living mirror-image of God, called to emulate him. In his human nature he is equal to all people, but in the greatness of the kingdom similar to God. As a sovereign he leads the people, but as a man he is in the same position of servitude as everyone else. The ruler is reminiscent of the divine-human nature of Christ, which is called to impersonate as another

messiah. His power depends, however, by popular consensus and state laws, which he must not only observe as a living example, but also enforce them on the citizens. And since the Prince has no other authority over him, he must obey his conscience. So, the Prince is an administrator of divine power with the consensus of God and people.

The *purpose* of the power and the duty of the Prince is to guide the people to the spiritual life –this is the will of God– by regulating the political issues, while the Church deals with the spiritual ones. Ultimately, the mission of the ruler is *theognosia*, the knowledge of God. So, the Prince has to govern by Christian virtue, which he first must possess (sovereign of his passions), providing a model for citizens, so as to be able to help his subjects in the exercise of virtue. In this way the Prince is divinely chosen tool and an extension of divine Providence in political issues. The responsibility of the ruler has ultimately an existential character, and the ruler as animate law must prefigure the charity and goodness of God.

So, in Kyminitis the State retains its metaphysical purpose, unlike the Machiavellian state, which becomes an end in itself and exists as a metaphysical formation. The state is the earthly kingdom of God and its purpose is to provide guidance to the people towards the heavenly kingdom. In this way the possibility of tyrannical oppression of the people is being removed, while a theocratic perception is being imposed.

2. *The virtue as the basis of the power*: Personal virtue is a prerequisite of good governance. Through obedience to the divine commandments, both in relation to himself and in the administration of the state, the Prince fulfills his role. Virtue is the path of the ruler and the subjects to the celestial kingdom. Kyminitis' view on the virtues is clearly and unreservedly Christian.

Kyminitis integrates his aretology into an ontological-anthropological context. Man is a rational being with body, soul and mental forces (Mind, Reason, Spirit), which correspond to the threefold of the Holy Trinity. As a rational soul man has free will by grace, immortality and proairesis, so he can be driven through the *theoria* and the *praxis* to the perfection, the similarity to God. *Theoria* is the virtue of the mind, accompanied by the feeling, the knowledge of divine and human things, while *praxis* is virtue of the body, the work of practical virtues, the basis of which are *prudence*, *fortitude*, *temperance* and *justice*. Depending on the responsibility, the virtue, the management and the corresponding admonition are moral (person), financial (house management), and political (country management). The second contains the first, while the third includes both. Kyminitis writes here basically a political admonition about practical virtue of the Prince, without deleting the *theoria*, which is a prerequisite and precedes the *praxis*, which in its turn is an application of the *theoria*. Moral and economic virtues are not erased, since they precede and are included in political virtue.

In the *theoria* we should incorporate the Platonic idea restated by Kyminitis; philosophy is the basis of power. The concern and appeal for the attainment of wisdom precedes the *theoria*, the knowledge of beings. Based on the Christian and the Jewish point of view, "the principal of wisdom is the fear of the Lord." This means that wisdom is acquired when one observes the commandments and exercises virtue. The *theoria*, the knowledge, the wisdom, are not just a mental process, but they increase with the progress in virtue. In Christian gnosiology the criterion is faith in God, while in the Greek one the criterion is human reason. The Christian concept uses reason before and after the faith, while the Greek thought is influenced by the

irrational, except perhaps in the case of Aristotle. Thus, both the Greek and patristic gnosiology, in different quantity and quality, are based both on reason and on mystery.

According to the above framework of virtues, the Prince must be constantly vigilant and examine carefully and accurately the state affairs, since the slightest mistake can affect deeply the macro-administration of the citizens. The wisdom of the Prince, which comes from the fear/respect of God and the exercise of virtues will provide to him the greatest of the virtues, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. He must be beneficial, merciful, magnanimous, forgiving, but he must also govern with justice and impartiality. As result, the Prince has a providential, educational, spiritual and existential role.

The *practical instructions* are minimal, as Kyminitis is interested in the theoretical background of power, and has no solutions for immediate problems of governance. Power means responsibility, and the ruler must be a vigilant guard, go forward, as the shepherd of the sheep, and give as first the good example. This of course cannot be achieved without consultants. Thus, in the paraphrases a lot of emphasis is given on the careful selection of colleagues and the avoidance the flatterers.

Aretology. Kyminites used the ps.Aristotelian *De virtutibus* so as to offer a manual of the basic virtues. The virtue system developed by the Greeks was indeed admirable, but virtue and philosophy could not exceed the necessity (*tyche*). Aristotle did not equate virtue with the compliance to an abstract complex of normative provisions imposed from outside or above, so as not to support the absolute objectivity of virtue, or better, of the right decision in a specific case. On the contrary, on the basis of *mesotes* he proposes an *apophatic ethic* founded on rationality, but also on the diversity of personal human relationships. This leads to uncertainty and relativism of morality, meaning, of course, not agnosticism, but the different individual rational choice in any society.

The Christian patristic teaching professed almost the same system of virtues, but with a different ontological content: the triune God as the source of life and the purpose of virtue. Thus, the Christian ontology brings love to a central position, which is the character of God, the *agathon*. Thus, the exercise of virtue becomes a tangible goal, and an imitation of Christ, that is of a specific person, and is based on Christian love. Patristic theology ultimately keeps the terms of Greek aretology, but it changes their meaning and places them in another context. Kyminitis attempted only an external coupling of classical Greek and Christian virtue –an organic/structural coupling is not possible–, so that he ultimately integrated Greek ethics into Christian ontology.

Conclusion. Regarding the normative ethic knowledge, Greek philosophers and the Church Fathers avoided creating a closed system of virtues. This does not mean that there is chaotic relativism type in the theories on virtue. On the contrary, there is a relative agreement, like in gnosiology. The disagreement lies in the purpose of virtues, in the ontology. Greek thought elaborated on ontology and aretology on an amazing level of cognitive analysis and psychological lived experience, but had a big lack in certainty, which in the end depends on the personal freedom of each man and can be established over time. The Christian viewpoint took the ontology to an end, but with the prerequisite of faith, which is a personal matter of freedom. Virtue cannot be a normative knowledge, and should take into account the specificities of

each man (*analogy*) in space and time, but more so because there is no agreement on the ontology, on which it depends. However, while morality cannot be regulated, it could be included in a general framework with some regularity.

Kyminitis used classical Greek and Byzantine viewpoints, reinforced with some original thoughts of his own, but he did not proceed to compose a modern, original *Mirror of Princes*, tailored to the realistic requirements of the time. Thus, the paraphrases move in a theoretical, ideal level, without answering tough dilemmas that contemporary rulers faced. Kyminitis' paraphrases, based on Greek and patristic philosophy, exude a deep humanism, but the political and socio-economic data of the time could not be changed directly, nor Brankovan seems to have had such an intention. In his era the constancy of the state organization and of the institutions in Wallachia remained intact, without an opening to collectivity, while the Balkan feudal society generated profound inequalities.

As to the purpose of the society, Brankovan, instead of spiritual guidance and beneficence for citizens, supported the ecclesiastical power and ideology of the Orthodox patriarchates. The governance of Brankovan, who does not seem interested in a radical reconfiguration of the country, mainly used political, religious and cultural power factors, without being substantially affected by the exhortations of Kyminitis on the exercise of power. The beheading of Brankovan in Istanbul denotes the response of the opposition forces, actively by men of the power, passively by the people. Nevertheless, Brankovan's attempts towards an *enlightened absolutism* were continued by the Phanariots, particularly in the person of Prince Nikolaos Mavrokordatos.