



## Book Review

**Costin Vlad Alamaru**

### **Selective Breeding and the Birth of Philosophy**

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In the book titled *Selective Breeding and the Emergence of Philosophy* by Costin Vlad Alamaru, his expanded and rewritten dissertation, originally defended at Yale University and published in 2023, a compelling argument is made. This argument states that philosophy has its origin in the concept of nature and remains closely connected to it. Furthermore, it claims that the emergence of this idea can be traced back to the observation and understanding of biological phenomena, particularly the inheritance of physical and behavioural traits. This perspective also includes the realisation that moral and legal codes are inherently relative and contingent. However, the book has a number of issues, including a combination of outdated historical research and bold claims, which are explored here.

The book consists of four chapters; (1) “Brief Phenomenology of the Prephilosophical Political Life”, (2) “The Idea of Nature in Pindar”, (3) “Covert Teaching of Tyranny in Platonic Political Philosophy”, and (4) “Nietzsche on the Origin of Philosophy and Tyranny in the Decay of Aristocratic Regimes”.

The first chapter of the book (pp. 14–107) extends the focus to the works of George Frazer as well as to insights from anthropological and historical literature, including references to Homer. In this introduction, the author convincingly argues that selective breeding, whether in the context of sexual selection or the management of marriage and reproduction in different societies, is a central facet of morality, legislation and the art of law-making. This heightened awareness of the role of breeding selection in shaping human societies led to the discovery of the natural order and

subsequently to the birth of philosophy. In ancient times, philosophers were often viewed with suspicion and persecuted by the ancient cities because it was believed that they would raise young minds to be potential tyrants. This suspicion was not unfounded, as the author claims that philosophers did indeed harbour such aspirations.

In the second chapter (pp. 108–148), the author postulates, on the basis of an examination of Pindar, Plato, especially Gorgias, Aristotle and Nietzsche’s works, that philosophy and tyranny have similarities in their perception of nature, which are rooted in a certain kind of declining aristocracy. This aristocracy typically consists of external pastoral conquerors who assume dominion over established agricultural communities. As conquering aristocrats, their interest lies in preserving their own identity vis-à-vis the conquered masses. Furthermore, their pastoral lifestyle fosters an understanding of nature that is heavily centred on animal husbandry. This insight into the interplay between nature and philosophy was, the author argues, historically the privilege of certain aristocratic circles who possessed both the means and the freedom to openly contemplate and explore these notions. The book also explores the intriguing connection between philosophy and tyranny, in particular the philosopher and the tyrant as closely intertwined archetypes that emerged during the decline of aristocratic societies, such as in ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy. This exploration is based on a detailed examination of Nietzsche’s interpretations of antiquity, in particular his reading of Plato and Pindar.

The preservation of the existence of this aristocracy and thus also the continuity of political philosophy and philosophy itself depends on the notion of breeding. In times of threat, this aristocracy produces two interrelated figures – the philosopher and the tyrant. By radicalising the concept of nature, these figures are able to construct a philosophical and political defence for the continued existence of the aristocracy. What is particularly novel

about the book's argument is its idea that the concept of nature and breeding is, when properly examined, is at the heart of Plato's political philosophy.

In the third chapter (pp. 149–207), the author argues that in Plato's *Gorgias*, the Pindarean ethos of aristocratic radicalism finds representation in the character of Callicles, who engages in dialogue with Socrates. While a straightforward reading of the dialogue might suggest Socrates triumphing over Callicles, the author posits that a deeper analysis reveals Plato's alignment with Callicles' perspective more closely than initially apparent. Alamariu asserts that this "esoteric" aspect of Plato's work pertains to the challenges faced by Plato and fellow philosophers in the aftermath of Socrates' persecution. He comes to the conclusion that Plato, like Nietzsche later on, was primarily concerned with preserving philosophy as an understanding of nature that is closely linked to breeding. This preservation was necessary due to the imminent threat posed by urban societies and the moral codes of sedentary populations, as well as the preservation of a higher way of life as opposed to mere existence. This perspective portrays the philosophers and their disciples as outsiders and rebels. The schools of philosophers appear as direct descendants, perhaps even precursors, of the unruly bands of lawless youth. It is therefore not surprising that the ancient cities tried to suppress them.

There are claims that the origins of philosophy go back to the declining aristocratic city-state in which the Dorians exercised rule over the conquered Achaean and Pelasgian peoples. The Dorians created a clear distinction between their existence and that of the conquered peoples, similar to the hierarchical structure of the Hindu caste system. This concept becomes clear when one examines Aristotle's *Politics*, particularly in the context of discussions about slavery. The attempt to ensure that no Greeks are enslaved by replacing legal slavery with the notion of natural slavery is consistent with the central ideas of the book. The Greek term *anthropos*, while typically translated as "man" or "human being", held a distinct meaning for Greek philosophers. The concept of the *zoon politikon*, which was set apart from other animals by its possession of *logos* or language and laws, underscores a differentiation not only from the animal kingdom but also from conquered populations. In this context, slaves are almost equated to animals, and their identity is defined primarily by what they lack, forming a basis of negative comparison. While the book primarily delves into the realms of political philosophy and the philosophy of biology, it also delves into the philosophy of animals

and animal rights by exploring the shared origins of human slavery, autocracy, and animal husbandry.

As the author states, the main argument of the book is "to offer an explanation for why the ancient city perceived philosophers as dangerous and as associated with tyrants – to argue that there was something to the ancient prejudice that philosophy was associated with tyranny" (p. 260). Be that as it may, simple "Weberian" liberal stance could have led us to a similar conclusion more straightforwardly. The author thus seems unable to firmly establish this conclusion as either an empirical assertion, given the lack of concrete evidence, or a purely logical claim, considering the numerous other variables at play in the model. Consequently, this conclusion remains somewhat suspended in a precarious middle ground, introduced with much fanfare but never quite receiving concrete validation. The book, thus, has several issues, a result of the combination of outdated historical research and bold claims. For instance, consider the opening statement, "The sexual market is the pinnacle of every other market" (p. 14), which resembles a Bataille assertion implying that life is a prerequisite for any market to exist. A notable absence in this book is that of Adam Smith and his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, a work that can shed light on much of our social world with minimal reference to procreation. Furthermore, some of the claims regarding Heidegger and his philosophical project have been simplified, including his criticism of Nietzsche (pp. 61–63, 242). Another bold statement made early in the book to be considered is the following:

"Who wins in the sexual market as it is formed in a particular society, who gets to breed, is closely related, nearly identical to the question of how the next generation in that society is to be constituted." (P. 17.)

This assertion seems bold, as it overlooks the substantial impact of socialisation, which is often distinct from the roles individuals may assume as "procreators". For the most talented individuals, procreation may be an inefficient means of influencing the broader future of the world. Notably, intermediary institutions are absent from the book's narrative, setting the stage for a perspective that assigns a greater role to nature than is warranted. Furthermore, the book's sprawling nature makes it difficult to follow the core argument.

In the fourth and final chapter (pp. 208–262) the book covers the works of Nietzsche, Strauss and the analysis of declining political systems, Pindar and ancient Greek civilisation, with George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* also making an appearance. What is admirable

about the book is its willingness to delve into diverse subjects; what I find lacking, however, is the limited space devoted to questions of ethics and morality, or the acknowledgement that significant progress continues to be made in the world, underpinned by a shared intersubjective understanding that certain states of affairs are superior to others. The truly disquieting aspect would be to argue that nature is inherently prone to violence, that humanity cannot free itself from this nature, and thus to flirt with the vulgar Darwinist, vulgar Nietzschean notion that human violence must be considered acceptable. In such a view, all moral frameworks become mere appendages of the procreative instinct. Some may argue that they come from a Straussian perspective, but I would have no qualms with a more direct engagement, especially given the book's overall ambitious and provocative theme. I agree with the author's perspective on Nietzsche's potential sympathy for Christianity, which stands out as one of the book's strongest sections. The expositions and interpretations of Nietzsche are probably the most compelling aspects of the book.

In terms of the historical context of the book, references to archaeological literature and Gimbutas are minimal, with Gimbutas appearing primarily in the context of an interpretation of Homer's *Odyssey*. Animal husbandry originated in the Neolithic Levant and continued as a practised tradition throughout Neolithic Europe for countless generations. The author's main argument is that animal husbandry goes beyond a mere fascination with breeding as a cultural phenomenon and extends its influence to a wide range of consequences for our understanding of nature and society. The author cites sources such as *Human domestication reconsidered* (Helen Leach, 2003), which acknowledges that domestication began in the late Pleistocene. This suggests that the author is aware of this historical fact.

It's worth noting that the author's perspective on Mycenaeans "invading Greece" seems to draw from earlier ideas, akin to Robert Drews' theory (p. 51). This is an older theory suggesting that Mycenaean speakers entered Greece around 1200 BCE. However, research since at least 1980 has indicated that the Mycenaean Late Helladic period began as early as 1700 BCE or potentially even earlier (Knodell, Alex, *Societies in Transition in Early Greece. An Archaeological History*, University of California Press, Oakland, 2021, p. 7; Bury, J. B. and Meiggs, Russell, *A History of Greece* MacMillan Press, London, 1975, p. 5). Furthermore, evidence of steppe ancestry has been found in Greece as early as 2200 BCE within smaller Helladic communities (Bury &

Meiggs, 1975, p. 6) The notion that this culture was a warlike society characterized by horse riders infiltrating Europe is a misconception that had persisted in the past century and even as far back as the 19th century when the term "Indo-German" was in use. However, this idea has been abandoned in light of archaeological, linguistic, and genetic discoveries, most of which are over a decade old. The author essentially builds his arguments on a thesis that has already been partially historically discredited. Furthermore, a broader knowledge framework emerges from archaeological genetic studies, particularly those postdating 2014–2015 (Haak, W. *et al.* "Massive migration from the steppe was a source for Indo-European languages in Europe", *Nature* 522 (2015), 207–211), examining the autosomal DNA of ancient samples; Contrary to expectations, aristocratic Mycenaean's foundational lineages do not trace back to the steppe, indicating pre-existing admixture before reaching Greece.

The book's notion of a "conquering warrior aristocracy" (p. 60) is rooted in the ideas of Gimbutas and Nietzsche, and the author utilizes the Yamnaya and Dorian invasion theory of the time to underpin some of their theories (p. 99). However, the book notably overlooks references to steppe pastoralists and Neolithic Europe. The author equates domestication with systematic animal husbandry as a means of subsistence and economic stability, but it's important to note that such practices did not become prominent in the steppe region until after the Khvalynsk culture (p. 287). In the context of agricultural development and cultural evolution, it's important to recognise that pastoralism, along with selective breeding of plants and animals, originated with Neolithic farmers who practised these techniques continuously. It's worth noting, however, that nomadic lifestyles tend to reduce the propensity for selective breeding, let alone promote the growth of advanced cultures. Pastoralism, which has the potential to lead to such cultural advances, usually requires a transition to a sedentary lifestyle, as in the case of the Botai (Mair, Victor H., and Hickman, Jane, *Reconfiguring the Silk Road. New Research on East–West Exchange in Antiquity*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2017, p. 15). Even then, pastoralism does not inherently lead to a deep interest in 'high culture' or intellectual pursuits. Looking at history, it's worth noting that the Yamnaya culture, which lasted until about 2500 BC, and other steppe cultures in Europe did not have a significant focus on selective breeding. These societies were primarily engaged in sedentary agricultural practices with elements of animal husbandry. The Yamnaya, in particular, evolved

from a lineage of communal hunter-gatherer-fishers and sedentary farmer-pastoralists. Their adoption of pastoralism was largely a response to the difficult agricultural conditions of the steppe. Crucially, from about 3000 BC onwards, all Yamnaya and steppe cultures demonstrated the establishment of sedentary settlements, even during periods of migration. On the other hand, the “Männerbund theory” lacks substantial evidential support and is notably absent in steppe cultures, particularly among nomadic groups (p. 138). It is also worth mentioning the long Arab tradition of selectively breeding horses, a significant facet that seems to be absent from the discussion.

The more nuanced thesis of state-sponsored selective descent and marriage practices for the aristocratic class may indeed reflect a genuine historical phenomenon. However, it seems to diverge significantly from its supposed origins in nomadic cultures. The Dorians, who were nomos-oriented, present an unusual scenario in which culturally different groups skilfully adopt and internalise customs that are alien to them and persist even in the absence of the original cultural sources. This phenomenon undermines arguments pertaining to *φύσις* and inherent nature within the context of the discussed book. The author emphasizes the significance of “conventions” and asserts that all nomadic/steppe cultures exhibit a pronounced nomos orientation for survival. However, the author’s argument is challenged by historical evidence suggesting that the purported freedom-oriented ethics among steppe nomads were more prevalent in sedentary farming cultures, largely devoid of steppe nomad or Yamnaya ancestry. Examples from Assyrians, Minoans, and Egyptians exemplify this trend, further contradicting the book’s premises. Aristocracies akin to those advocated by the author are historically rooted in sedentary cultures rather than being instated by nomadic confederacies, as evidenced by the Huns, Avars, Scythians, and others who failed to establish sophisticated civilizations. Based on Aristotle’s political philosophy, it is plausible to argue that the aristocratic structures he supports predate the Athenian Greeks, thus challenging the narrative of the book. Nomadic cultures tend to assimilate into the more sedentary cultures they conquer, as demonstrated by historical examples such as the Irish Scots, Turkic Magyars and Bulgars.

Returning to Greek political philosophy, the claim that Socrates condemned tyranny is subjected to a Lacanian-continental interpretation, suggesting that Socrates said one thing but meant the opposite. As for the claim that Socrates could be considered a tyrant because he was willing to die for his beliefs, that’s a

bold claim. In a straightforward reading, this act represents the belief in “everyone’s right to free speech against rulers” that underpinned much of the Enlightenment tradition. The idea that Plato wanted to use the trial and execution of Socrates to juxtapose philosophy and tyranny seems rather misguided.

Finally, the book offers a comprehensive exploration of various historical and philosophical aspects. These include the origins of pastoralism and slavery, the origins of Greek aristocracy and the polis, selective breeding, and the impact on cultural development of the shift from a nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle. The concept of selective breeding is undoubtedly intriguing, but it seems to be primarily associated with sedentary farming communities, unrelated to steppe nomads. Steppe nomads, lacking the mechanisms available to farmers since the Neolithic, resorted to mass migration as their primary competitive tactic. However, where they had a significant impact on genetics, there was a marked decline in cultural sophistication and civilisation. It also sheds light on the development of philosophy as a Greek cultural phenomenon and highlights the complex role of pastoralism, conquest, domination and slavery in fostering advanced cultures. However, the lack of solid evidence for the claims made, the overlooking of historical facts, and the overuse and overreliance on outdated historical sources severely hamper the plausibility and our possible understanding of these historical and philosophical narratives.

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