

B A T T L E S T A R
GALACTICA
— AND PHILOSOPHY —

KNOWLEDGE HERE BEGINS OUT THERE

EDITED BY JASON T. EBERL

 **Blackwell**
Publishing

3

“What a Strange Little Man”: Baltar the Tyrant?

J. Robert Loftis

Lord Baltar spent most of the original *Battlestar Galactica* series commanding a Cylon basestar from a huge chair atop a 20-foot pedestal in an otherwise empty, circular room. He was lit from below—indeed, he seems to have kept a floodlight between his knees. In “Gun on Ice Planet Zero,” when his subordinate Lucifer enters, he’s facing the blank back wall and turns his chair slowly around. The set is preposterous: How does he command a military operation from up there? What if someone needed to show him a map? What does he do on that perch when not addressing his henchmen? Does he spend his days pressing the fingertips of his two hands together and laughing maniacally?

Actually, these questions are misguided. The original *BSG* employed the late character actor John Colicos to play a classic melodramatic villain, a type he’d played with great brio before on countless TV shows like *Star Trek* and *Mission Impossible*. Melodramatic villains don’t need to make too much sense: their purpose is to thrill the audience with their image of power and freedom from petty conventional morality—think Ming the Merciless from *Flash Gordon*. And this image of power and freedom can actually lead the audience to identify more with the villain than with the story’s putative hero.

Now consider Gaius Baltar in the reimaged *BSG* episode “Final Cut.” Although he’s been given the first name of the infamous Roman emperor more commonly known as Caligula, this Baltar doesn’t look like he should be issuing cruel commands from a high throne. He’s dawdling in a corridor of the *Galactica* hoping to be noticed by

J. Robert Loftis

reporter D’Anna Biers, who’s just finished interviewing Anastasia “Dee” Dualla for a documentary about life on *Galactica*:

Baltar: I’m the Vice President. She’s supposed to be interviewing me, isn’t she?

Six: Well, of course she should. Your title alone commands respect.

Baltar: Of course it does. It’s a rare commodity around here. I mean, I’m the Vice President. I’m not going to beg. I’ll tell you that much

...

Six: Now, Gaius, you may have to beg . . . Politics may not be your strong suit, but it serves us in the moment.

When Biers finally approaches him about an interview, Baltar acts like he doesn’t know her and says he has to talk to his aides—what aides?—to check his schedule to find “a small window” because he’s “snowed under.” After he parts awkwardly from the scene, D’Anna remarks to Dee, “What a strange little man.” This Baltar won’t impress audiences with his dark power. Instead, he’s a great Judas figure—cowardly, vain, easily manipulated, and a prisoner of his passions.

The change in Baltar’s portrayal isn’t just a clever bit of television. It represents a deep philosophical difference in the way evil is conceived. Western philosophy has always been particularly concerned with the ethical question: Why should I do the morally right thing? After all, don’t nice guys finish last? Western religions try to answer this question by holding out the promise of heavenly reward, but even then the annoying tendency of nice guys to finish last *in this life* poses a problem: Why would an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God allow the unjust to prosper and the good to suffer at all?

One answer is that the lives of evil people are only superficially desirable. Such people accrue the trappings of power, but have weak souls, pinched by misery. You may think that the bad guy is the old Baltar, an imposing figure who swivels his chair to the camera to deliver his pitiless orders; but really he’s the new Baltar, a sniveling coward who would prostrate himself in prayer before a strange god just to appease the image of an old girlfriend. Two thinkers who pursue this tactic of reimagining the villain as less enviable are the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (427–347 BCE) and the Roman philosopher Boethius (c.480–c.524 CE). For Plato, this point is crucial to justify being moral; for Boethius, it’s necessary to explain God’s ways to humanity. Both particularly focus on the image of the *tyrant*:

“*What a Strange Little Man*”: Baltar the Tyrant?

a powerful person who gets what he wants, and who wants a lot. Both want us to see that the tyrant isn’t someone we want to be, and in fact, the more apparent power he has, the less we should envy him.

“I Don’t Have to Listen. I’m the President”

In his sprawling masterpiece, *The Republic*, Plato develops an answer to the question: Why be just?¹ The crux of his answer is that the soul of an unjust person is out of balance. His soul is ruled by its crudest desires, and stifles any part of itself that’s capable of perceiving what’s best in the world. The culmination of Plato’s argument is his description of the tyrannical person, whose soul is like a city governed by a mad dictator. At first, Plato is only talking about a man whose soul, internally, is like a tyrannized city. But he then imagines the disaster that would ensue if a person with a tyrannized soul actually became the tyrant of a city, externalizing the injustice in his breast. The picture Plato paints resembles a great deal Gaius Baltar and his presidency.

If you asked an average *BSG* fan why Baltar is the bad guy, they’d probably say because he betrayed his people to genocidal machines. Plato would have you look at Baltar’s soul. Plato begins by asking us to think of the part of ourselves that comes out when we sleep, the part that makes us have dreams of doing things that appall us when we wake up and remember them. This part of us, Plato says, “doesn’t shrink from trying to have sex with a mother, as it supposes, or with anyone else at all, whether man, god or beast. It will commit any foul murder, and there is no food it refuses to eat. In short it omits no act of folly or shamelessness” (571d). When you’re asleep, this part of your mind gets its way, with horrifying results. Now imagine someone who lets this part of her mind rule her waking life—perhaps you don’t have to imagine too hard. When you first meet this person, you might think she’s a free spirit, because she does what she wants when she wants; but really she’s enslaved, because every other aspect of herself has been subordinated to the task of satisfying whatever desire has currently bubbled to the surface.

But a person doesn’t become completely tyrannized, according the Plato, until one of these bubbling desires is appointed the tyrant over

J. Robert Loftis

all the others: *lust*. At first this seems like a weird choice. The soul is full of desires that can get us in trouble: desires for money, fame, power, drugs, even food. Like lust, these aren't bad in themselves, but are ruinous if you let them run your life. Plato scholar Julia Annas suggests that Plato chooses lust because "it is the archetypal motivation that is wholly fixed on getting its object and is in itself indifferent to the other factors in the soul and their interdependent satisfactions."² Plato may also pick on lust because he's not a fan of the body and its biological functions, and lust is very much a bodily sin—unlike, say, the desire for fame—and makes a better candidate for the ruin of tyrants than the other cardinal sin of the body: gluttony.

Odd though it is, Plato's choice of lust as the tyrant of the tyrannical person's soul fits Baltar all too well. After all, Baltar's sexual exploits are the root of most of his problems, beginning with selling out the human race to the hypersexual Cylon Caprica Six. From then on, he's played like a fiddle by a mysterious image of Six that only he can see. She wears preposterously revealing outfits, leans on his shoulder, whispers in his ear—does various other unmentionable things—and gets him to advance the Cylon agenda. But it's not just Caprica Six—in both her virtual and corporeal forms—who keeps Baltar under her spell. We've seen him enjoying sexual escapades with at least seven other women over the course of the series.³

According to Plato, once the tyrannical person's soul comes to be dominated by lust, all sorts of other vices follow, and lo and behold we see these in Baltar as well. Lust isn't alone in his soul; it rules over a swarm of other desires, all of which must be sated at great cost. Thus, a person with a tyrannized soul becomes a liar and a thief to satisfy all these wants. Baltar, to appease his inner Six, lies and says that he needs a nuclear warhead to make a Cylon detection device ("Bastille Day"). Later, after he falls under the spell of another Six he'd rescued from torture, he has the nuclear warhead smuggled to her ("Epiphanies"); she later detonates it, destroying *Cloud Nine* and signaling the humans' location on New Caprica to the Cylons ("Lay Down Your Burdens, Part 2").

But most importantly, Plato says a person with a tyrannized soul will become a traitor. If he's an ordinary person with no one else to betray, he'll betray his parents: "He'd sacrifice his long loved and irreplaceable mother for a recently acquired girlfriend he can do

“What a Strange Little Man”: Baltar the Tyrant?

without . . . for the sake of a replaceable boyfriend in the bloom of youth, he’d strike his aged and irreplaceable father, his oldest friend” (574b). If the person has more power, he’ll betray his city: “He’ll now chastise his fatherland, if he can, by bringing in new friends and making the fatherland, and his dear old motherland . . . their slaves” (575d). And, we can add, if he’s a scientist in charge of the interplanetary defense mainframe, he’ll let genocidal space robots annihilate his species.

The person with a tyrannized soul is also a coward: “What about fear? Aren’t the tyrannical city and man full of it?” (178a). Baltar lies to Boomer about the results of her Cylon test out of simple fear of what she’ll do if he tells her the truth. Six teases him:

Congratulations, Doctor. You’ve just uncovered your very first Cylon. Now, here’s an interesting moment in the life of Gaius Baltar. What will he do? . . . The question is, what will she do if you expose her? Thank you or kill you? . . . I’m guessing her Cylon side will take over and break your neck before you can give away her secret. Let’s find out. (“Flesh and Bone”)

And every lie Baltar tells gives him a new reason for fear. He has a standing fear that Laura Roslin will discover that he’s betrayed the human race—so much so that he even “repents” to the Cylon god to prevent Dr. Amarak from surviving to tell Roslin about him (“33”). As soon as he’s president, he orders Admiral Adama to stop the investigation into the destruction of *Cloud Nine*, because he knows it’ll lead back to him. Strikingly, Baltar’s cowardice is very much driven by his self-centeredness. When he realizes he’s let the Cylons infiltrate the Colonial defense mainframe, his first response is to be afraid for himself:

Baltar: I had nothing to do with this. You know I had nothing to do with this.
Six: You have an amazing capacity for self-deception. How do you do that?
Baltar: How many people know about me, specifically? That I’m involved?
Six: And even now, as the fate of your entire world hangs in the balance all you can think about is how this affects you.
Baltar: Do you have any idea what they will do to me if they find out? (“Miniseries”)

J. Robert Loftis

One of the saddest facts about a person with a tyrannized soul is that he never has any friends, only allies or enemies. As Plato says,

If he happens to need anything from other people, isn't he willing to fawn on them and make every gesture of friendship, as if he were dealing with his own family? But once he gets what he wants, don't they become strangers again? . . . someone with a tyrannical nature lives his whole life without being friends with anyone, always master to one man or a slave to another. (575e)

Baltar certainly lives this way. The only person he has a relationship with is his internal image of Six, and even she's really his master. Felix Gaeta is probably the closest Baltar has ever had to a friend in the series, but even he's kept at arm's length and ends up stabbing Baltar in the neck after his betrayal on New Caprica ("Taking a Break from All Your Worries"), and later perjures himself at Baltar's trial to get him convicted ("Crossroads, Part 2"). Baltar clearly has a lonely existence.

Simply put, Baltar isn't empowered by his perfidy. We think that life would be easier if we could just lie to people, rather than tell them the ugly truth that they're a murderous toaster; but really each lie makes our own lives worse. Baltar should have followed the wisdom attributed to Mark Twain: "Always tell the truth, that way you don't have to remember anything." Baltar isn't made happy for pursuing his desires, either. He simply spends his energy and is left wanting more. Thus, Plato says, "The tyrant soul also must of necessity always be poor and unsatisfiable" (578a).

But there are worse things that can happen to a person than for him simply to act badly. He can act badly *and get away with it*. "I do not think we have reached the extreme of wretchedness," Plato says after describing the person with a tyrannized soul. More wretched still is "the one who is tyrannical, but doesn't live a private life, because some misfortune provides him with the opportunity to become an actual tyrant" (578c). If a person with a tyrannized soul succeeds in remaking the world after his own inner darkness, there's nothing to hold back his misery. If there's no social order, the tyrant will be so afraid of being killed by his own slaves that he'll pander to them constantly. The tyrant may have thought he was acquiring power by ascending to the top of the social heap, but once there, he finds his only option in life is to work to stay there.

“What a Strange Little Man”: Baltar the Tyrant?

Similarly, Baltar thinks he gets power when he becomes president. In “Lay Down Your Burdens, Part 2,” when Adama tells him he isn’t listening to the evidence of an internal threat that led to the destruction of *Cloud Nine*, he replies, “I don’t have to listen. I’m the President.” But by the next season, we find that Baltar has to listen to everyone. He must pander constantly to the Cylons, and if he didn’t fear an assassination attempt from his assistant, Gaeta, he should have, because Gaeta tried and later tried again. And like Plato’s tyrant, Baltar can’t go out in public like a normal person—for instance, to the graduation ceremonies for the New Caprica Police—for fear of being attacked. Baltar’s success is entirely illusory. Thus, as Plato says, “the real tyrant is really a slave, compelled to engage in the worst kind of fawning, slavery and pandering to the worst kind of people” (579e).

There’s one aspect of Baltar that doesn’t fit Plato’s image of the tyrant, and that’s his *durability*, a trait noted by those who know him best. The first thing Baltar’s inner Six says to him is, “You know what I love about you, Gaius? You’re a survivor” (“Miniseries”). The fact that they’re on a Raptor fleeing the recently nuked Caprica is a testament to the truth of her statement. In “Torn,” Gaeta explains his take-home lesson from working as Baltar’s underling: “If there was one thing I learned about Baltar, it was his extraordinary capacity for self-preservation.” Gaeta predicts that Baltar had been plotting a path to Earth to save his own hide, and lo and behold, he was.

Plato doesn’t mention the idea of the tyrant as survivor, but I think this is a point where the *BSG* characterization is richer than Plato’s. Annas complains that the tyrant Plato portrays isn’t particularly realistic, because there’s no way such a madman could stay in power very long (304). The fact is, though, that such people do manage to seize and hold power. Baltar’s namesake, Gaius “Caligula” Caesar, is a classic example. Some reports out of North Korea make Kim Jong-Il fit this model. Baltar’s character at least gives us some hints about how this may be possible. Baltar’s fearful and self-obsessed nature means he always has an escape plan.

“Are You Alive?”

This is the first line spoken in the reimagined *BSG*. It’s asked by a machine—a Six—to a human being—a Colonial officer on the

J. Robert Loftis

Armistice Station. Clearly if anyone isn't alive here, it's the machine, right? This scene is mirrored in "You Can't Go Home Again" when Starbuck, marooned on a planet without oxygen, finds a crashed Cylon Raider. Opening a hatch, she finds living tissue underneath. Realizing that the spacecraft has no pilot, but is itself a machine, Starbuck whispers with wonder, "Are you alive?"

Cylons and humans have difficulty recognizing each other as alive. This brings out another important theme in Western philosophy, the question of what it means to be a person. This issue touches on both ethics and metaphysics—the study of the nature of reality. When humans and Cylons fail to recognize each other as persons, they're making an ethical decision, because they're saying they don't have ethical duties to the other side. When Roslin challenges Starbuck's torture of Leoben, she responds, "It's a machine, sir. There's no limit to the tactics I can use" ("Flesh and Bone"). It's also a metaphysical decision, because they're putting limits around a category of reality. Reality contains persons, but it also contains other things that aren't persons: rocks, trees, Dradis consoles. According to the Colonials, looking like a person isn't enough to *be* a person if one is a machine.⁴

One philosopher who took seriously the connection between ethics and metaphysics in understanding the idea of a person was Boethius. Boethius was a senator, and proud of his Greco-Roman heritage. But he was also a Christian, a monotheist who believed the world was the product of an all-loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing God. A major project for him was reconciling the wisdom of Greek philosophers like Plato with Christian teachings. Boethius also was in a position to think seriously about the nature of a tyrant. The Roman Empire had essentially collapsed and broken in half. The Western half, where he lived, was ruled by a barbarian, the Ostrogoth Theodoric. Theodoric persecuted Boethius, believing him to be a traitor. At the time Boethius wrote his greatest book, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, he was under house arrest, waiting to be executed.⁵ The opening problem in that work is this: How could a just God allow this to happen? Why do I suffer while a tyrant like Theodoric prospers? Boethius' answer looks to his Greek heritage, to Plato and his treatment of the tyrant. Boethius accepts Plato's psychological vision and raises it to a metaphysical level. The evil person, for Boethius, is not only enslaved, he isn't even really human. In fact, he hardly exists at all. Thus, an explanation of God's ways to humanity: the tyrant

“What a Strange Little Man”: Baltar the Tyrant?

doesn't really prosper. In fact, at the moment that Theodoric's thugs break into Boethius' house and club him to death, Boethius is better off than Theodoric.

Boethius begins this remarkable argument by agreeing with Plato that a villain like Baltar or Theodoric has no real power, even when they hold an office like President of the Twelve Colonies or King of the Goths and Italy. Boethius' focus is on *happiness*. He argues that the goal of life for all people is to be happy. Why does Baltar sleep with every woman he can? Because he thinks it'll make him happy. But happiness is identical with *goodness*. Things that seem to bring you happiness—like wealth, power, fame, or pleasure—will only hurt you in the end without goodness, for all of the reasons we saw with Plato's tyrant. Baltar's lusts only bring him misery, because he pursues them so dishonestly. They also demean him, as Six chides him for being jealous of Apollo after Starbuck calls out his name while Baltar is having sex with her:

Baltar [to Apollo]: You can't compete with me. I always win . . .

Six: Never seen you like this, Gaius. It's disappointing somehow.
Common.

Baltar: So sorry to disappoint you.
("Kobol's Last Gleaming, Part 1")

True pleasure, and thus true happiness, can be obtained only in honest relationships, the sort of friendships Plato shows the tyrant can never have. But power is the ability to get what you want. People want to be happy, and people like Baltar are simply not happy. Therefore, they have no real power. Thus, Boethius writes, "They fail in their quest for the supreme crown of reality, for the wretched creatures do not succeed in attaining the outcome for which alone they struggle day and night" (75).

Boethius goes further. The evil person isn't even really *human*. The Colonial officer on the Armistice Station may be right to say he's alive. A Cylon Raider may be alive in the way a horse or a dog is alive. But Baltar isn't really alive, not in the sense of being a living person and not as long as he continues his path of deception. How could this be? Human nature, according to Boethius, is to be good. We were all meant to be reunited with God. But evil people fail to realize this nature: "What follows from this is that you cannot regard as a man one who is disfigured by vices" (78).

J. Robert Loftis

In fact, Boethius contends, evil people cease to exist altogether, because they lose their *nature*. Think of a Viper that gets blown apart by a Cylon missile. After the explosion, something still exists: wreckage is flying everywhere. But *the Viper* doesn't exist anymore, because no one can use it to do what a Viper does: fly around and shoot things. The Viper, in being blown apart, has lost its nature. But a person who's fallen into injustice has also lost her nature. She's no longer achieving the purpose of a person, just as the wreckage of a Viper no longer serves the purpose of a Viper. Thus, evil people cease to exist: "You could say a corpse is a dead man, but you would not call it a man pure and simple; in the same way, I grant that corrupt men are wicked, but I refuse to admit that they exist in an absolute sense" (76). And thus we have a justification of God's ways to humanity: God didn't create a world where unjust tyrants rule while good people suffer. Quite the opposite. God created a world where the unjust fade away to nothingness while the just achieve their true nature.

It's pretty clear that Plato's conception of the tyrant is present in the characterization of Baltar, but can we go further and say that Boethius' radical claims are also present? Evil, in the world of the reimagined *BSG*, isn't a simple, dark force opposed to the noble warriors of goodness—there's no Count Iblis facing off against the Ship of Lights. Evil people like Baltar are clearly weak and pitiable, and the nature of humanity itself is questioned. Who's alive: the humans or the Cylons? A lot of questions remain unanswered in the series, but I think we'll find in Season Four that humans and Cylons prove they're alive by acting *justly*. How does Six ask the Colonial officer to prove he's alive? She gives him a kiss, a slow, open-mouth kiss while two Centurions look on. If Boethius is right, it's through *love*—as Six is constantly reminding Baltar—that we show that we're alive. "The gods shall lift those who lift each other."

NOTES

- 1 Plato, *The Republic*, in *The Complete Works*, ed. J. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). Further references will be given in the text.
- 2 Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 303. Further references will be given in the text.

“What a Strange Little Man”: Baltar the Tyrant?

- 3 For those who haven't followed Baltar's lascivious exploits as carefully as others have, the women include Starbuck, two “hot and cold running interns” on New Caprica, Number Three, the version of Six known as “Gina,” Playa Palacios (reporter for the *Picon Star Tribune*), and an unnamed woman just before the first Cylon attack.
- 4 For further discussion of Cylon personhood, see Robert Arp and Tracie Mahaffey's chapter in this volume.
- 5 Boethius, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Further references will be given in the text.