

Parnassus House
October 28, 2025

Great Founders: Plutarch on Lycurgus and the Spartan regime

In *Life of Lycurgus*, Plutarch provides an account of the founding of the Spartan regime. Before becoming ruler, Lycurgus turns down an offer to rule the kingdom by means of infanticide. Instead, he travels to Crete and studies various forms of government, judging the merits of various laws and practices he encounters. There he is impressed with Thales's ability to act as a lawgiver through music, bringing people "together in a common pursuit of what [is] high and noble." He returns to Sparta, which he finds to be in need of "a new and different regimen." In preparation for his bid to gain control of the kingdom, he makes a journey to Delphi to secure divine support. Then he conspires secretly with the chief men and takes the kingdom by force. During his rule, he institutes many reforms—social technologies aimed at smoothing the regime transition, stabilizing the political factions, moderating the peoples' desires, and instantiating a comprehensive and prescriptive way of life. Finally, he leaves Sparta for Delphi once more, commanding that nobody change the orders of the Spartan regime until he returns, then ends his own life in a self-sacrificial bid to make his orders permanent.

1. Lycurgus exhibits at least three strategies in his founding of Sparta: secrecy, persuasion, and force. He is both *prudent* and *agile*. That is, he knows which strategy to use in particular circumstances, and is capable of using both force and generosity.
2. Before seizing rule, Lycurgus obtains divine sanction from the oracle at Delphi. Having the support of the gods, in the eyes of the Spartans, fortifies his authority and legitimacy. In Machiavellian terms, Lycurgus operates as an *armed prophet*.
3. Lycurgus uses his intellect to adapt antecedent social patterns for new purposes. Specifically, he repurposes war training—a necessary element of political life, which often leads to wars of conquest—to instead produce *moderating* effects in Spartan life.
4. The Spartan regime uses *music* to coordinate its total way of life. Music operates at a *sub-rational* level, shaping the soul from a young age to grow attached to its prescriptive forms of order. In that way, musical education has a *stabilizing* effect.
5. Lycurgus forbids putting his own laws into writing. He thinks that it is more conducive to the "prosperity and virtue of the city" if its laws are "implanted in the habits and training of its citizens." If the people *embody the spirit of the laws*, they can act out the regime's orders, even though most have no explicit access to their *inner logic*.
6. Many of the orders Lycurgus introduces cut against the grain of human nature, for the sake of ventilating desires and generating salutary effects. For example, the sexual patterns and diminished role of the family redound to the Spartan conception of the common good—but they would not rise spontaneously without effort.
7. Plutarch shows us how Sparta's orders ultimately devolve. The regime's orders have to be kept alive, and their *inner logic* has to be both *concealed* and *maintained*. Even with new institutions that spring up to manage growing tensions, such as the Ephors, unwitting innovations are introduced, instability rises, and the regime declines.