Introduction to Aristotle's *Politics*

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1. The *Politics* as a comprehensive guide

Aristotle's *Politics* is a comprehensive guide for political leaders and active citizens. It is not a strongly unified work – not in the manner of Plato's *Republic* (devoted to proving that justice is the greatest good), or *Statesman* (devoted to saying what statesmanship is) or *Laws* (devoted to the constitution and laws of the second-best regime). Instead, it contains a series of independent studies of political matters, unified only in that each component must be considered by students who seek to become experts in the political craft. Its first book portrays the polis as something that naturally arises out of households, as economic conditions improve. It then examines the necessary components of the household – slaves, wealth, women, and children – because these make a difference to the quality of the polis. Book II turns to the question, "What is the best way of organizing the polis?" and examines several proposals for ideally governed cities, as well as several existing cities that are regarded as well-governed. (Significantly, the mixed regime of Sparta is thought worthy of consideration, but democratic Athens is not.) It is here that Aristotle gives his reasons for rejecting Plato's abolition of private property and the traditional family. In Book III, Aristotle investigates the nature of citizenship and distinguishes between three correct and three deviant constitutions. Kingship, aristocracy, and a system called a *politeia* (republic) are correct; tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy are deviant. Books IV through VI add greater detail to the sixfold taxonomy of constitutions proposed in Book III, and investigate the ways in which regimes are preserved or destroyed. One of the major themes of these "middle" books is that an expert in the political craft should know how to take any political system, however deficient, and make it less defective. Finally, in Books VII and VIII, Aristotle offers his own conception of the ideal polis.

In spite of the diversity of these themes and topics, Aristotle consistently shows his interest in evaluative rather than merely descriptive questions. He does not merely study power relations, as would a value-free and purely empirical political scientist; rather, he constantly looks for ways in which power can be put to better use. He examines questions pertaining to the ideally governed regime because he believes that, whether or not such a constitution can be brought into existence, the improvement of existing cities should always be informed by ethical theory – and one task of ethical theory is that of envisaging a political ideal.

In a sense, the work known as the *Politics* of Aristotle is the second volume of a two-volume study of political matters; the first is the *Nicomachean Ethics*. After Aristotle introduces to his audience the question, "What is the highest human good?" in Book I, chapter 1 of the *Ethics*, he argues, in Book I, chapter 2, that it belongs to the study of politics to address this question. In other words, the *Nicomachean Ethics* presents itself as a political and not merely an ethical treatise. The polis is

portrayed, at this early stage in the *Ethics*, as the organization that has authority over all spheres of life. Its task is to reflect on the human good and to assign all subordinate social spheres their proper place in light of the contribution they can make to the human good.

The influence of Plato on Aristotle is unmistakable here, for these are the assumptions that guide Plato in his major political works. Both philosophers provide a striking contrast to the liberal tradition of political thought, which emphasizes the limitations on the authority of the state and is driven by a fear of granting the state complete control over individuals and non-political institutions. In one way or other, the liberal tradition portrays the power of the state as something that is derived from the natural authority each individual has over his own life, and therefore restricted in scope. By contrast, Plato and Aristotle take it for granted that if a political system is good for all of its citizens, that is all the justification it needs. The authority of the state rests on the good it does and need not be derived from some real or hypothetical transfer of power from the individual to the community.

The *Nicomachean Ethics* provides a framework for thinking about politics not only in its opening chapters, but also in its theory of justice (Book V), its theory of friendship (Books VIII and IX), its concluding chapters comparing the philosophical and the political lives (Book X, chapters 7 and 8), and its final remarks on the importance of law, constitutions, and the comparative study of constitutions (Book X, chapter 9). Justice is portrayed in Book V as a matter of lawfulness and equality – ideas that also play an important role in many portions of the *Politics*. And although Aristotle's theory of friendship focuses primarily on the strong bonds of affection that tie together a small group of individuals who are emotionally intimate, he recognizes that there is also a looser kind of friendship that ought to arise between citizens and hold them together. The final lines of the *Ethics* point its audience to "the collected political systems" (that is, to the one hundred fifty-eight constitutional studies carried out by members of Aristotle's Lyceum) and to both the "empirical" and "ideal" topics examined in the *Politics*: the preservation and destruction of the various kinds of constitutions, and the construction of the best political system.

2. Aristotle's political naturalism

The early portions of Book I of the *Politics* are devoted to defending several of Aristotle's most important and best known political ideas: that the polis exists by nature, that human beings are political animals, and that the polis is naturally prior to any individual citizen.[1]

The thesis that the polis exists by nature is one that has both empirical and normative components. It is partly an empirical claim because it is based on the idea that human beings are driven to associate with each other by forces that are present in us from birth or arise in us involuntarily as we age. Sexual urges that lead to procreation are natural in that they occur in nearly everyone at a certain stage of life.

In that sense, the family is a natural institution. Similarly, everyone has a desire to survive – to go on living – and therefore to acquire and make secure such necessities of life as food and shelter. Families are better able to survive if they band together in small villages, and these villages eventually will grow into the more complex community of the polis, with its urban center as well as surrounding farms. A polis, unlike a family, is a stable social structure, in that it has no need to grow into something larger in order to achieve the goal for which it was formed. Once a polis is formed, and the basic necessities of life are secure, a new goal naturally comes into view: people are not satisfied merely to stay alive; now, they want not only to live but to live well, and so the goal of the political community is to make it possible for all citizens and their children to have good lives. The polis, therefore, is natural not merely in that it arises from forces built into our nature, but in that it is better for anyone to live in a political community than in a mere family or village. Human nature is revealed by what we are at our best, and natural things are the ones that allow us to achieve our nature.

Aristotle is fond of saying that human beings are by nature political animals – it is a point that he makes seven times in his writings.[2] Sometimes what he means by this is that human beings are naturally sociable – they would not welcome a life of solitude, and have a desire to engage with other human beings even apart from any benefits such social interaction would bring. This desire to be in the presence of others and to engage in activities with them is not a specifically *political* desire; it could be satisfied by living with one's family or friends. But Aristotle also holds that human nature at its best cannot be fully satisfied in these small associations. It is part of our nature to seek, when conditions are favorable, the sort of life that can be achieved only in a social group that has the size and complexity of a polis. A philosophical life, for example, is not available to people whose material resources are so small that they must devote much of their time to the necessities of life. A fully human life requires leisure, and leisure is available only in a political community. But political communities could not be sustained unless a large portion of humankind had a political nature – a rational and affective nature that equips them to join together with each other in large deliberative bodies.

Perhaps the most provocative component of Aristotle's political naturalism is his claim that the polis is prior by nature to the household and to each of us (I.2 1253a19). That is because when a whole is an arrangement of parts, it is prior to those parts (as the human body is prior to the parts of which it is comprised). This thesis might be interpreted to mean that the state is an individual whose moral status is higher than that of particular human beings. (Similarly, it might be said that those who play for a team are less important than the team itself.) That kind of political philosophy was attractive to such British idealists as T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley. It goes along with a metaphysics that regards individual human beings as fragments of a larger whole, and as therefore having a lower degree of reality than the whole. But the evidence that Aristotle had this picture in mind is weak. He consistently evaluates the correctness and success of political regimes by asking how the individual citizens who live in them are faring. The aim of the political

community, he says, is to serve the common good – and by "common good" he simply means the good of all citizens (not some good apart from the good of those individuals). So, it is best to take his thesis that the polis is prior to each household and each of us to mean something quite simple and obvious: no single household is more important than the rest of the households that make up the polis, and no single citizen is more valuable than all of the others. The soldier on the battlefield must accept the risk that he may be killed, because the goal he serves – the well-being of his fellow citizens – takes priority over his own.

Another feature of Book I of the *Politics* of great interest is Aristotle's attempt to show that under certain conditions slavery is a defensible social institution. The crucial premise in his argument is the one in which he asserts that some human beings have a natural and therefore unchangeable cognitive deficiency: they lack the capacity to engage in a certain form of practical reasoning. These "natural slaves" can engage in instrumental reasoning; so they can be taught simple craft skills. But they can never become proficient in the higher forms of practical reasoning that involve assessing the value of goals and making judgments about the right occasions for achieving them. Just as Plato thinks that large portions of humanity would naturally be ruled by their non-rational propensities if they lacked the guidance of others (these are members of the economic class of the ideal city portrayed in the *Republic*), so Aristotle too believes that slaves can be benefited by the supervision of masters, and that it will not harm them to be owned by those supervisors. It is not part of his argument that in fact everyone who does own slaves gives them the kind of supervision that benefits them. He does not try to show that by and large Greek slave-holders do not mistreat their slaves – in fact, he can be criticized for ignoring this issue. The larger failure of his theory of slavery, however, is the absence of any skepticism on his part that a large portion of humankind has the kind of cognitive defect that makes them ill suited for citizenship. The same sort of failure is evident in his dogmatic assumption that women suffer from a similar limitation. In this respect, Plato should be recognized as the deeper thinker. But to Aristotle's credit, he sees that slavery needs a justification, and he tries to give one. Plato made no such attempt.

3. Aristotle's critique of Plato's ideal city

Some of the most important tenets of Aristotle's practical philosophy emerge in Book II of the *Politics*, which is a preliminary treatment of the question, "What is the best kind of political community?" He approaches this question in his usual manner, by first examining and criticizing the way in which others have answered it. (Why do so many books of the *Politics* intervene between this preliminary discussion and Aristotle's own depiction of an ideal community in Book VII? The editor who chose to arrange the eight books of the *Politics* in this order presumably thought that a study of less than ideal regimes – a matter most fully investigated in Books IV through VI – ought to come before a depiction of the best polis. And Book III is an essential introduction to the study of the ways in which good and bad political systems differ.) Five the of twelve chapters of Book II critically examine

Plato's utopian proposals, and they focus especially on the thesis of the *Republic* that the traditional family and the institution of private ownership should be abolished. (Plato makes it clear that these radical innovations do not apply to the economic class; it is odd that Aristotle does not recognize this.)

Plato's abolition of the family in the *Republic* is meant to serve a eugenic purpose. Marriages and procreation are to be arranged by the rulers so that the most talented males will breed with the most talented females, thus producing offspring whose philosophical and administrative capabilities will allow them best to serve the community. Plato thinks that a certain amount of duplicity or concealment will be needed to make this system work, and one of Aristotle's objections is that the citizens will see through these fabrications. But the largest part of Aristotle's critique is directed at a second reason Plato offers for abolishing the traditional family: Plato thinks that what makes a city good is unity, and that the traditional family creates conflicting loyalties. His idea is that each citizen must feel a tight bond of friendship with every other, and that this civic tie must be their strongest affiliation. Here Plato is reacting against the common conception of justice, briefly discussed in Book I of the *Republic*, according to which a just person is someone who helps his friends (*philoi*) and harms his enemies. (It must be kept in mind that one's family is included within the category of *philoi*.) In order to insure that the philosophical rulers will not misuse their great power for the benefit of their blood relations, they are not to know who their blood relations are. Their love of others will spread out equally to all members of the community. The best community is a conflict-free federation of friends. (An analogue of this idea in modern moral philosophy can be found in utilitarianism: it allows one to pay special attention to the good of friends and family members only if, in doing so, one maximizes the good of all.)

Aristotle has several objections to these ideas. First, he claims that maximal unity among citizens is not an appropriate goal for the polis to seek; a city is by its nature a complex whole, composed of different kinds of parts. Second, the abolition of the family would not increase the strength of the emotional bond citizens feel towards each other, because it is not possible to have a deep affective relationship with a large group of people. The relationship among citizens in Plato's ideal state would be "watery." Third, children would be neglected in Plato's ideal city, because their well-being would not be the responsibility of anyone in particular.

Aristotle is not insensitive to the social problems that lead Plato to want to find a replacement for the traditional family. In Book VIII chapter 1 of the *Politics*, he argues that the children of all citizens should receive a common education, because it is the responsibility of the whole community to prepare the next generation so that it will live well. In his ideal community, differences in wealth and parentage do not create a society in which a lucky few receive an elite education and many others receive at most a purely vocational or minimal level of training.

Plato's abolition of private property among his guardians, like his abolition of the family, is designed to insure that they will serve the community and not abuse their great power. Since they cannot own precious metals, they cannot become rich; and so they will never be tempted to make political decisions for the sake of material gain. Aristotle assumes, in his discussion of Plato's proposal, that the state need not go to this extreme to guard against political corruption. If those who govern have received a proper moral education, they will not seek or use political power for their own enrichment. His reply to Plato makes use of an idea that also played a role in his defense of the traditional family: just as he thinks that the care of a child must be an individual rather than a collective responsibility, so too he thinks that material resources will be better cared for if they are privately rather than collectively owned. He is not opposed to the idea that some land should be publicly owned; rather, he favors a system in which some land is owned collectively, but in which each citizen also has his own allotment of land and possessions.

But his argument is not cast entirely in terms of the economic advantages that accrue to the community when it safeguards some degree of private ownership. He also believes that the virtue of generosity – a quality that is good not only for those who receive generous treatment, but also for those who are generous – requires private ownership. Generosity, as he understands it, is a virtue that requires an individual to make his own decisions about how to use his resources both for his own good and that of others. Were all beneficence the responsibility of the political community, the opportunities for an individual to excel in his social relations would diminish. These ideas lead Aristotle to the conclusion that land should be owned individually, but its produce should be made available to all members of the community who are in need. Sparta, he believes, approximates this ideal: here citizens have their own lots, but they use each other's possessions (when they need them) as though they were their own (II.5 1263a30-40).

4. Good citizenship and the common good

Book III takes up the fundamental question, "What is a polis?" It is a whole made up of parts, and the parts are citizens; so Aristotle then asks, "What is a citizen?" His answer is that the citizen of a polis is someone who has the right (*exousia*) to hold the office of legislator or juror in that polis (III.1 1275b18-19). This is somewhat awkward, for it implies that in a city that has only one political officer –an all-powerful king – there is only one citizen. But Aristotle seems not to be concerned about this consequence. Although he believes that under certain conditions it is just for a king to rule, he is much more interested in other kinds of political systems. The time when Greece was divided into kingships has long past, and Aristotle is particularly interested in studying contemporary political systems – democracies, oligarchies, mixed regimes, and the like. His conception of citizenship applies unproblematically to these sorts of constitutions.

Having addressed the question, "What is a citizen?" Aristotle next asks, "What is a good citizen?" One of the most striking features of his answer is his insistence

that what makes someone a good citizen is different from what makes someone a good man. That, he says, is because what makes someone a good citizen varies from one regime to another; the role of the citizen is to preserve the constitution under which he lives, and the qualities this requires will vary from one constitution to another. By contrast, he holds, the qualities that make someone a good man do not vary from one political environment to another; a just person will be a just person in any circumstances.

It is tempting to take this to mean that a good citizen of a bad political system will be a bad man – will act unjustly, kill without justification, commit crimes, and so on. But there is nothing in the *Politics* that would support this interpretation. It is better to take Aristotle to be thinking of good citizenship as a standard of behavior and motivation that approximates that of true moral excellence. A fully virtuous person is someone who meets the exacting standards that Aristotle spells out in his ethical writings: he must have practical wisdom, which consists in an understanding of the highest goals of human life as well as the ability to hit the mean in every circumstance; and his emotions must be trained to respond in the way that reason requires. Good citizenship does not require nearly so much: it consists in understanding what must be done in one's city in order to preserve its constitution. That will require lawful behavior and an understanding of what preserves and destroys regimes (or at any rate what preserves and destroys the constitution that prevails in one's city). A good citizen, in other words, should have some knowledge of the topics that Aristotle discusses in Books IV through VI of the *Politics*. By contrast, a good person must also have knowledge of the topics Aristotle discusses in his ethical writings.

The remaining chapters of Book III divide constitutions into kinds, using a scheme that Plato proposes in the *Statesman*: power can be held by one person, a small number, or many; and it can be exercised in a correct and an incorrect manner. That yields six arrangements: correct rule by one (kingship), several (aristocracy), or many (*politeia*); incorrect rule by one (tyranny), several (oligarchy), or many (democracy). What makes rule correct is that it aims at and achieves the common good (rather than merely the good of those in power); incorrect rule is exercised solely for the sake of the rulers. Aristotle's contrast between oligarchies and democracies is not merely numerical. He takes the difference between them to be a matter of which economic class has more power: in democracies, legislative and judicial decisions reflect the greater power of those who have fewer resources (and thus have to work for a living); the opposite power imbalance obtains in oligarchies.

Most regimes in the fourth century were either democratic or oligarchic, so Aristotle's taxonomy is an expression of his belief that nearly all existing regimes are defective either because the rich mistreat the poor or because the poor mistreat the rich. A *politeia* would be achieved if the dominant class, rich or poor, were to seek the good of all citizens equally. But Aristotle holds that the effect of riches or poverty on most people is such that fair and equal treatment of those who belong to other economic classes is rare or impossible. If a city is divided into rich and poor, it will

almost certainly be a city in which one class mistreats another. In Book IV, chapter 11, he therefore proposes that the most secure path to *politeia* is by way of a large middle class. In such a city, the moral deficiencies that arise in conditions of poverty or wealth will be absent from most people, and the common good can be achieved. When a city is a *politeia*, most of its citizens can be expected to be good citizens, even if they do not fully meet Aristotle's criteria for moral excellence. In democracies, by contrast, a large number of citizens are neither good people nor even good citizens. The rulers of oligarchies (who must be wealthy, in order to qualify as citizens) also tend to be defective both as citizens and as people.

Aristotle's richest and most detailed study of regimes is found in Books IV through VI: these constitute a practical handbook for political leaders, in that they examine the ways in which any regime, no matter how defective, can be improved at least somewhat. One of the most important points that Aristotle makes is that there are many kinds of democracies, oligarchies, and even tyrannies – they differ in the degree to which they exhibit their defining characteristics, and the less they do so, the less defective they are. A good political leader in a democracy or an oligarchy is therefore a possibility: he would be someone who knows how to preserve a democracy or oligarchy by moving it closer to being a mixture of these two regimes and thereby moving it away from being an extreme democracy or oligarchy. Here Aristotle is assuming that extreme democracies (which value equality and freedom so much that the rule of law is abandoned) and extreme oligarchies (where the love of wealth overpowers the rule of law) are the least stable varieties. A good democrat (or oligarch), in other words, counts as a good citizen because he knows how to make his democratic (or oligarchic) city long-lasting. It will be destructive of democracy if freedom and equality are the only principles that are valued, and destructive of oligarchies if wealth alone is treasured. Implicit in Aristotle's discussion is the assumption that all political systems are improved when ethical excellence (the goal of aristocracy) is also valued.

It has been assumed here that the traditional way of ordering the books of the *Politics* is defensible – with Books IV through VI immediately following Book III. But it can be said, against this, that the last sentence of Book III directs the reader to move next to Aristotle's treatment of the ideal constitution – in other words, to Books VII and VIII. Some editors therefore place what are traditionally numbered as Books VII and VIII immediately after Book III. But we may conjecture that at some point an editor prepared an abbreviated version of the *Politics* – one that omits Books IV through VI – and wrote the final sentence of Book III as a bridge to the discussion of the ideal constitution. There is of course no way to prove or disprove this hypothesis. But the fact that it is a possibility can be used to justify retaining the traditional ordering of the books. It is evident that the material in Books IV through VI develop smoothly out of the distinctions made in Book III.

5. Is Aristotle a critic of democracy?

Since we live in a democratic age, we naturally take a special interest in those parts of the *Politics* in which Aristotle presents his ideas about this form of rule. He is an excellent guide to the ideology and institutions of Greek democracy, and his remarks about the defects of democracy also deserve our attention. In a sense, he is an unequivocal critic of rule by the *dêmos*. He defines *dêmokratia* as a regime in which power is exercised by the *dêmos*; he assumes that the *dêmos* are deficient in material resources and have to work to survive; and be believes that this makes them hostile to the rich, so much so that when they have power they rule in their own interest rather than for the common good. Extreme democracies are extreme in their bias, moderate democracies less so, but every democracy is, to a greater or lesser extent, a defective form of rule.

But we have already seen that Aristotle has a more complex attitude towards what we call democracy than this. He is not opposed to rule by the *many*; a *politeia*, after all, is a constitutional form in which power is shared by many, and it is one of the three kinds of regimes that Aristotle takes to be correctly governed. Rule by many (what *we* call "democracy") is not inherently defective; rather it takes two forms, depending on whether the many rule in the interest of all citizens or only in their own interest. If they rule in the interest of all, Aristotle calls their political system a *politeia*; if they rule in the interest of the many, he calls it a *dêmokratia*. So it can be said that although Aristotle is a critic of *dêmokratia*, he is not a critic of democracy. A better way of putting this point is to say that for Aristotle a political community can, under the right conditions, give power to the whole body of citizens and still be well ruled. When circumstances are right – when all citizens are willing and able to make decisions for the common good – then all of them should share in governance. Where Aristotle departs from many contemporary defenders of democracy lies precisely here. These modern democrats believe that every citizen has an equal right to political power (and to an equal amount of power); and that this right should not be denied, infringed, or abridged simply because that citizen is unwilling or unable to look to the common good. Aristotle, by contrast, approves of rule by the many *only* when the many is well suited to share in governance.

6. The feast to which all contribute

Aristotle's most important contribution to democratic theory is contained in in Book III chapter 11 of the *Politics*, where he critically examines an argument which purports to show that "the many" (*plêthos*) can, "when they have come together", be better than the few best (1281a40-b2).[3] The argument, he says, involves a difficulty, but it also seems to contain some truth. He proposes an analogy: just as a feast to which many hands contribute can be better than one that is arranged by just one individual, so too political power might be more wisely used when a large number of people come together to exercise it than when just one person makes a decision on his own. Consider a different analogy: a large number of people of modest means might, by pooling their financial resources, control a larger sum of money than does one wealthy individual. Money can be aggregated; many

hands can contribute to an excellent meal; and in the same way the political wisdom of a collective body might be greater than the wisdom of just one individual.

Aristotle adds that the argument is not intended to show that *any* multitude will be wiser than a single wise individual. If it were construed in that way, he notes, then it could be argued with equal justification that a large number of animals (provided they had some intelligence) would be more intelligent than a single human being. Some people, it might be said, are in effect hardly more intelligent than animals. So, the argument for democracy must be taken to mean that *some* multitudes are wiser than (that is, make better decisions than) any single wise person deciding on his own. Which multitudes? Aristotle holds that certain forms of economic labor foster defects of character and intellect. Unskilled workers and even skilled craftsman whose labor is routinized and mechanical, he thinks, are unsuitable citizens.[4] By contrast, he holds that shepherds and those who own and (with the help of a few slaves) work on their own plots of land develop an independence of mind and intelligence that makes them, at least potentially, good citizens. These people, he believes, are the principal constituents of the *dêmos* of the least bad democracy,[5] and it is likely that he has them in mind when he develops and evaluates the argument for the collective wisdom of the many in *Politics* III.11. In his defense of that argument, he mentions that in some political systems citizenship is granted only to those who have a small amount of property (1282a28,39). We know from his discussion of democracy in Books IV and VI that he approves of that restriction (1291b39-40, 1318b27-38). His assumption, presumably, is that a low property qualification will screen out unskilled workers and routinized craftsmen but not the owners of small plots of farmland.

To support this argument for democracy, Aristotle notes that the many are better judges of music and poetry than is one individual (1281b8-9). Each member of the multitude makes a judgment about a different portion of the music or poem being evaluated, and in this way they form an astute collective judgment of the quality of the whole. Aristotle is presumably thinking of the fact that in Athens prizes for the best plays were awarded by panels chosen by lot from among the general citizenry. Perhaps his idea is that dramatic works touch on many different topics about which no single individual can be an expert; a number of different people who are familiar with different areas can therefore make a better assessment of the quality of the work than can any single judge. In any case, it is noteworthy that the argument under consideration does not assert that the larger the number of people who believe a proposition, the more credible the proposition is. Rather, the basic idea is that when different people (all of whom have some level of competence) make different contributions to the assessment of something, and when it would be difficult or impossible for any one individual to do the same, then the decision made by the group is more likely to be correct than that of the individual. This is the idea that is also conveyed by the image of the feast to which all contribute. A feast is a meal with many different kinds of food and drink, and it is difficult for one cook to excel in preparing all of them. When different individuals

specialize in making this or that part of the meal, the result will be better than any feast made by just one person.

The argument might be used to show that the ideal constitution is one in which all or the most important political decisions are made by an assembly of all citizens. That is, it might be used to show that a *politeia* is a better form of government than a kingship or aristocracy. But there is good evidence that Aristotle does not intend to use the argument in this way. First, by the end of Book III he has come to the conclusion that the best of the three correct kinds of constitution – kingship, aristocracy, and *politeia* – will be the one in which the best people govern. That is, it will be one in which the most important decisions are made by one individual or a small number of them: a kingship or aristocracy (III.18). So, although a *politeia* is well-governed, it is not the best political system, and presumably the reason why it is downgraded is that in a *politeia* an assembly of all citizens has considerable power – more power than is ideal. It is not only in the *Politics* that Aristotle ranks kingship and aristocracy above *politeia*; he does the same in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (VIII.10 1160a31-6, although here the word he uses to name this political system is “timocracy”).

Second, there is a passage in Book IV chapter 14 of the *Politics* that provides excellent evidence that, in Aristotle’s opinion, the assembly of all citizens should play a limited role and should not be the place where the most important political decisions are made. (This passage is also summarized and discussed in the author’s introductory essay to these volumes.) It begins with this remark: “For all to deliberate about all things is democratic, for this is the equality the *dêmos* seeks” (IV.14 1298a10). It then distinguishes several arrangements that fall short of this extreme but still can be classified as democratic. First, a democracy can divide itself into a number of tribes, each of which makes the major decisions for a limited period of time, after which that role rotates to another tribe. In a sense, all deliberate about all things; but at any given time, only a portion of the citizenry deliberates about major matters. Second, a democracy can create an assembly of all citizens that has strictly limited powers: the power to adopt or reject laws of general scope, to declare war, and to hear charges of bribery or official misconduct. All other important decisions are made by a smaller body, whose members are chosen by election or by a lot. Third comes a democracy that is similar to the second, except that nearly all of the important magistracies are filled by lot. Fourth is a democracy in which the assembly of all citizens has complete decision-making power over the city; the board of magistrates has only the subordinate role of making preliminary presentations to the assembly.

Aristotle makes it clear that he takes this fourth arrangement to be the worst, and it is reasonable to infer that they are presented in order of increasing defectiveness. That is, he thinks that major decisions should not be made by all citizens, because that is too large a body for this purpose. But if there is to be an assembly of all citizens, then its powers should be strictly limited, and important decision-making responsibilities must be assigned to a smaller body. What the

assembly of all citizens may properly do, when it meets, is select (either by election or the drawing of lots) that smaller and more important body. Election of those decision-makers is a better way of constituting that smaller body than is the lot. (That is why the second kind of democracy is less defective than the third kind.) And the reason why election is better than the lot, we may conjecture, is that an election allows the citizens to use their knowledge of each other's character and skills as decision-makers, whereas the lot is indifferent between better and worse individuals.

It should be clear that this passage in IV.14 has some relevance to the argument for the rule of the many that Aristotle rehearses (and, in a limited way, endorses) in III.11. He is not using the argument to reach the conclusion that there should be an assembly of all citizens that has the power to make all political decisions. But he believes that a useful purpose is served by bringing together a large group of citizens to make certain kinds of political decisions: they can discuss with each other which citizens should hold the highest offices, and they can consider accusations of misconduct that have been made against those high officials. Aristotle's analogy between this political procedure and the feast to which all contribute is apt. When one cook prepares a food that he is familiar with, and another cook prepares a different food that he is familiar with, and so on, the meal that results can be better than one in which many different kinds of food are prepared by a single cook. Just so, when a public official is to be chosen, one citizen can reveal to others what he knows of a certain candidate for office from his dealings with him, another citizen can evaluate that candidate from his perspective, and so on. The group can pool its information about the character and decision-making skills of fellow citizens, and that will result in a far better outcome than would occur if the lot were used to fill the highest offices.

Aristotle gives a clear indication in III.11 that this is the way in which he means to use the argument for the wisdom of the many. He is taking for granted, in this argument, that for the most part the multitude is constituted by individuals who, evaluated one by one, are not of the highest order of ethical and intellectual excellence. They are decent enough people, capable of aiming collectively at the common good, but not exemplars of virtue. He remarks that it would be dangerous and ill advised for such people to become enemies of the established order – something that might easily happen, if they are barred from making any political decisions. What they can do well enough, he believes, is to elect those citizens who will be making the most important political decisions and to stand in judgment of them when they are accused of wrongdoing. In fact, they might collectively play those roles better than any single person could do, even if that single individual is wise and virtuous. Implicit in Aristotle's argument is the assumption that when many people know a candidate for office or someone who has filled an office, their experience of him is often more reliable than is the experience of just one person, even if that one person is wise and a better judge of character than any other. The point should be obvious: if an official has been charged with misconduct, it is better to get the testimony of a large group of people who have had dealings with him than

merely to get the testimony of the best single judge among that group. The same point applies to the election of officials.

Towards the end of III.11, Aristotle turns to and replies to a series of objections to his argument for the collective wisdom of the many. These objections sound like the sorts of complaints that Plato or his followers would make, for they rely, as Plato often does, on the idea that just as experts alone should be relied upon in other areas of life, so too they alone should be relied upon in politics. Quite often, we think that decision-making in a certain sphere should be left to the small number of people who have acquired an expert's knowledge of that area. Medical decisions should be made exclusively by doctors, not by ordinary people who lack medical expertise. Similarly, if one needs to select a geometer to solve a problem, only those who have a knowledge of geometry will be able to recognize which individual should be chosen. Aristotle responds to these examples with those of a different kind. One does not need to be skilled at making a house in order to be capable of judging whether a house is well made – the individuals living in it can also make that judgment. Similarly, a captain is capable of deciding whether a rudder is well made – in fact he is better equipped to make this judgment than is the carpenter who made it. And a guest who eats a meal is as good or better as a judge of a feast than the cook who concocted it.

These counter-arguments show that that it is not universally true that in all areas of life ordinary people who have not been trained to acquire a specialized skill are incompetent to judge the products created by experts. But the arguments do not purport to prove that citizens who lack *political* expertise can play an important decision-making role in the city. Nor do any of the analogies Aristotle uses in III.11 (for example, the analogy with the feast to which all contribute) establish that conclusion. These analogies help us understand what Aristotle's thesis is, but do not support it. His argument for the collective wisdom of the many depends entirely on its use of a familiar fact: when a large group of people is not so corrupt that they are unable to make objective judgments, they can size up the character and evaluate the actions of people with whom they are familiar, and their assessment of these matters is more likely to be correct than the like judgment of any single person. The analogies Aristotle uses help us see that this political phenomenon is part of a more general feature of human life, for it not only in politics that a group can be more effective in achieving certain results than a single individual.

It should be emphasized that Aristotle does not take the argument for the collective wisdom of the many to show that a well-governed city ought to have an assembly of all citizens, still less that this should be the most important decision making-body of a city. It leaves open the possibility that there may be a person so extraordinary in insight and experience that his political and ethical skills are greater than those of any group. (Similarly, there may be a small group of extraordinary people whose combined skills outmatch those of the lesser skills of a larger number of people.) But in addition, it leaves open the question of what sorts of political institutions a city should have when no such extraordinary individuals

are available, and when it is therefore best governed by a multitude of people whose ethical and political skills are decent but not outstanding. Should the most authoritative legislative body of such a city be one that contains a large number of citizens but nonetheless a small percentage of the whole citizenry? Should the courts be comprised of hundreds of citizens, or many thousands? If there is a council that sets the agenda for the assembly of all citizens, what powers should these two groups have, and which should be more powerful? Aristotle's argument is not meant to address these questions. It makes only a modest comparative claim: it is better, under certain conditions, for a large group to have the responsibility for making certain decisions than for that responsibility to be assigned to a single individual, even if that single individual is superior in ability when he is compared one by one with each individual who composes the group. That is perhaps a more modest conclusion than we would have liked Aristotle to have defended. But it is nonetheless an important insight.

7. Condorcet's Jury Theorem

In 1785, the Marquis de Condorcet published an "Essay on the Application of Analysis to the Probability of Majority Decision," in which he argued that if certain conditions are met, the opinion of a group of voters is more likely to be correct than the opinion of a single individual; further, the larger the group is, the greater is the likelihood that it is correct. Those conditions are that each individual has a better than even chance of being correct, each makes an independent decision, and the matter about which the decision is being made has an objectively correct answer. The theorem is intuitively obvious. One single voter has a merely better than even chance of voting correctly; but if each of one hundred voters has a better than even chance of being correct, and they converge on the same choice independently of each other, then it would be extremely unlikely that they would all be wrong.[6]

Notice that if voters are such that each is more likely than not to be *wrong*, then an option favored by a large number is much more likely to be the wrong choice than an option favored by just one individual. In effect, in these circumstances the fact that an option is favored by a voter is a counter-indicator of its correctness. An option favored by one voter may be only somewhat unlikely to be the correct one, but an option to which there are many independent counter-indicators is for that reason much more likely to be incorrect.

There are some interesting similarities and differences between Condorcet's "Jury Theorem," as it is known, and Aristotle's argument for the collective wisdom of the many. Both are arguments not for assigning decision-making to a large group, but rather for assigning decision making to a large group composed of certain kinds of individuals. The Jury Theorem holds only for groups of individuals each of whom is more likely than not to be correct, just as Aristotle's argument applies only to individuals who are morally decent and well-informed. Both arguments make the assumption that the members of the large group are not merely replicating or imitating the attitudes of some portion of the group; that is, the judgments each

individual makes are held independently of the judgments of others. (Aristotle does not make that point explicitly, but it can be taken as one of his tacit assumptions.) Aristotle's argument, unlike Condorcet's, claims that even if one individual is superior in judgment to each member of the large group when they are compared one by one, the many can collectively be wiser than the one. Both of them aim to show that rule by the many has instrumental value: decisions are more likely to be correct when they are made democratically than when they are made by one individual.[7]

But perhaps the most important difference is that, as we have seen, Aristotle's argument and hence his conclusion contain many restrictions and limitations. He means to show that in a certain domain – the domain of evaluating candidates for office or evaluating accusations made against them – a group of people who are familiar with the facts and share them can make a better decision (are more likely to be correct) than can an individual who is a better judge than they, when pairwise comparisons are made. Or, to put the point more precisely: one should not infer from the superiority of one individual that he, rather than a group of inferior individuals, ought to be making certain decisions. That inference is faulty because the knowledge available to the group, when combined, may be greater than the knowledge available to the individual. Knowledge of a certain sort can be aggregated, just as the combined wealth of a group can be greater than the wealth of a single person. Aristotle's recognition that the knowledge of decent individuals can be combined in this way to produce better decisions is a keen insight and an important contribution to democratic theory. Perhaps the same can be said of Condorcet's Jury Theorem, but if so, it is a different insight. It is a consequence of a law governing probabilities, and has nothing to do with what happens when people share their experience and knowledge with each other.

8. Is it best to rely on crowds?

The idea that one is more likely to solve certain cognitive problems by aggregating the opinions (or guesses) of many people than by consulting a few experts has been expressed in an entertaining and popular form by *The New Yorker* columnist James Surowiecki in *The Wisdom of Crowds*. Surowiecki introduces the basic idea of his book by describing an experiment conducted by Francis Galton near the beginning of the twentieth century. He observed a competition at a Plymouth local fair in which a crowd bet on the accuracy with which they could guess the weight of an ox that had been selected for display. The crowd was diverse, containing not only butchers and farmers, who had considerable experience estimating the weight of farm animals, but also many others who lacked such expertise. Galton was aware of the similarity between the diversity of such a crowd and the diversity of an electorate in a democracy. As reported by Surowiecki, Galton wrote: "the average competitor was probably as well fitted for making a just estimate of the dressed weight of the ox, as an average voter is of judging the merits of most political issues on which he votes" (xii). In a sense, then, the local fair was conceived as a test of the instrumental value of democracy.

After the contest was over and the winners received their prizes, Galton obtained all 787 tickets that had been purchased, and on which the estimates of the weight of the ox were recorded, and he calculated the mean estimate. It was 1,197 pounds – just one pound short of the true weight of the ox (after it had been slaughtered and dressed). Galton wrote (as reported by Surowiecki): "The result seems more creditable to the trustworthiness of a democratic judgment than might have been expected" (xiii).

American sociologists and psychologists took a keen interest in this phenomenon and achieved results similar to Galton's. As Surowiecki notes: "A classic demonstration of group intelligence is the jelly-beans-in-the-jar experiment, in which invariably the group's estimate is superior to the vast majority of the individual guesses. When finance professor Jack Treynor ran the experiment with a jar that held 850 beans, the group estimate was 871. Only one of the fifty-six people in the class made a better guess" (5).

Surowiecki points out that in both Galton's experiment and others (like Treynor's) patterned on them, the estimates of individuals were made in isolation of each other. There was no discussion or sharing of hunches. In that respect, these experiments resemble Condorcet's Jury Theorem but not Aristotle's argument for the greater wisdom of the many, for it seems reasonable to take Aristotle to be assuming that in assemblies and courts there is some exchange of information and sharing of opinions. Furthermore, as Surowiecki observes, in experiments like Treynor's, there are often a few people whose estimates are closer to the truth than is the mean estimate. That is insignificant, according to Surowiecki, because "there is no evidence in these studies that certain people consistently outperform the group" (5). His idea is that the aggregated estimate of the group is always to be relied upon, because there is no way to select someone who will regularly outperform the group. In a sense these experiments neither confirm or disconfirm anything that Aristotle says. His thesis is neither that the group will always outperform any single expert nor that any single will always outperform the group. It is rather that we should not infer from the presence of someone who has greater expertise than any other individual that the decision of that one individual will be superior to that of the group.

Surowiecki's book is a defense of the general thesis that as a general policy it is better to rely on a crowd (that is, a large group that includes a few experts but many non-experts) rather than on any small group of experts. It is a highly paradoxical idea, because it seem obvious that if one knows who the experts are in a given area, it will be better to follow their advice, if they achieve a consensus, than it would be to abide by some alternative piece of advice that is a mechanical result of combining the views of those same experts with the views of a large number of non-experts. In the examples just cited – Galton's country fair and Treynor's jar of jelly beans – getting the correct answer involves a lot of guess-work. No one knows in advance of measurement or counting the weight of the ox or the number of beans in

the jar. The distinction between expert and non-expert either fails entirely (as in the case of the beans) or is not hard and fast (in the case of the ox). Where the notion of expertise is applicable, surely following the consensus of experts (when there are some) is more likely to lead to the truth than is following a recommendation that results from the aggregation of those experts' views and the views of many people who are far less knowledgeable. Nothing in Aristotle's discussion of the wisdom of the many or in Condorcet's Jury Theorem suggests otherwise.

In his final chapter, Surowiecki returns to democratic theory and more specifically to the idea, endorsed by some members of the academic world, that the opinions of voters need to be better informed and more thoughtful, and that they should participate in face-to-face discussions both with experts and with other ordinary people who have conflicting views. The term "deliberative democracy" is sometimes used as a label for the idea that polling and voting should be the outcome of a sound, collective deliberative procedure rather than the expression of a mere preference or a purely self-interested desire to shape the public will.[8]

Surowiecki, however, rejects these ideas, because he believes that representative democracies already do a good enough job of finding solutions to political problems. "The point of a representative democracy is that it allows the same kind of cognitive division of labor that operates in the rest of society. Politicians can specialize and acquire the knowledge they need to make informed decisions, and citizens can monitor them to see how those decisions turn out. … Competition makes it more likely that politicians will make good decisions by making it more likely that they will be punished when they don't" (266). That is rather close to what Aristotle is saying, for as we have seen, when he argues that the many can be wiser than a single individual, he is defending the idea that citizens should select and stand in judgment of those who fill the most important offices. At this point in his book, Surowiecki seems to be abandoning the idea that we should rely on the crowd (a few experts and many non-experts) rather than the experts. In its place, he is proposing that in the civic realm the politicians are the experts, and the role of the non-expert voter is not to deliberate or become better informed but merely to select among the experts.

Aristotle would be entirely in favor of at least one tenet endorsed by "deliberative democrats." He holds that in a well-governed city the citizens must be educated about public matters and that their political decisions should not be dictated by their narrow, material interests. He prescribes an equal and publicly funded education for all citizens of his ideal city (VIII.1), and this is one respect in which all cities should and can resemble the ideal. He think of ethics and politics as subjects in which there are better and worse solutions to problems, just as there are better and worse answers to questions about health or any other practical matter. Democracies as he knew them were political systems in which only a few citizens were well educated; most of the citizens participated in politics not because their education gave them an understanding of the common good, but only because there were financial incentives for volunteering to be a jury member or attending

meetings of the assembly. His main contribution to democratic theory is his recognition that when ordinary citizens are not driven entirely by economic incentives, when their resources are sizable enough to allow them to look to the interests of all, they can, by pooling their knowledge, recognize outstanding or corrupt leaders, and thus play a valuable role in a well-governed city.

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Endnotes

[1] The interpretation of the Politics sketched here is more fully defended in Kraut 2002.

[2] *Hist. An.* IO.1 487b33-488a14, *NE* I.7 1097b11, VIII.12 1162a17-18, IX.9 1169b18-19, *EE* VII.10 1242a22-3, *Pol.* I.2 1253a7-8, III.6 1278b19.

[3] For further discussion of Aristotle’s arguments in *Politics* III.11, see Bookman 1992; Bouchard 2011, Kraut 2002, pp. 402-409; Risse 2001, Waldron 1995, Yack 2006.

[4] *Pol*. III.5 1277b33-7, VII.9 1328b33-1329a2, VIII.2 1337b8-15; Kraut 2002, pp. 215-217, 234, 464-5, 475

[5] IV.6 1292b25-28, VI.41318b11-12.

[6] Recent discussions can be found in Austen-Smith & Banks 1996, Estlund 1994, and List & Goodin 2011.

[7] See Estlund 2008 for a recent attempt to show that the legitimacy of democracy rests partly on its tendency to make good decisions. A rather different approach, one that rests the justification of democracy primarily on its embodying an equal advancement of interest, is taken by Christiano 2008.

[8] See Besson & Marti 2006 and Bohman & Rehg 1997 for anthologies of essays on this topic.