



Philosophy and  
Politics in Aristotle's  
*Politics*

*Curtis N. Johnson*



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For Sophia, Alexis and Loretta



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## PREFACE

I owe the title of this book to reflections upon Aristotle's target audience for the *Politics*. He intended it, of course, mainly for students in his school, the Lyceum in 4th century BCE Athens. The school was large for its time. Aristotle's successor as headmaster, Theophrastus, could count about 2,000 students enrolled (Grayeff, 1975, 39–41)—about the size of many liberal arts colleges in the United States today. The range of subjects was also vast by comparison with the other schools of that time. Cicero reports that young men at the Lyceum were studying and preparing for all walks of professional life—oratory, history, mathematics, music, and all of the known sciences. After graduation, students went out from the Lyceum to put their acquired knowledge to useful work around the Greek world and beyond.

The *Politics*, one can surmise, would have had special appeal to only a subset of those students, namely aspiring philosophers (*philosophoi*) and statesmen (*politikoi*). That it was written for would-be statesmen is generally conceded (e.g., *NE* I. ii 1294a26–28; I. iii 1295a1–14; Kraut, 2002, 386–96). One way of reading the book is to recognize that it contains a great deal of “advice” for future leaders. This purpose is evident, for example, in Aristotle's counsel about how to preserve constitutions, how to improve constitutions and citizens, who should be admitted into citizenship, how to prevent revolutionary change, and more generally how to be a successful leader. Leaders need skill, vision, and wisdom in practical affairs to achieve the aims of virtuous statescraft, and Aristotle wants to help these people (*Pol.* 1253a2–4; cf. 1324a28–29; *NE* 1177b19–28; Hansen, 2013, 27; Rosler, 2005, chapter 4). The questions above are for men who had their sights on political careers.

It may be less clear that the book was written also for philosophers. Their interest in politics is at best indirect. One way of putting this, as Aristotle did himself (*NE* III. iii 1112b12–16), is that “statesmen” (*politikoi*) are interested only in actions that are in their control, or with the means for achieving desired ends; they do not, *qua* statesmen,

deliberate about “ends.” To do so is the business of the philosopher, not the actor. “The mind achieves the truth in different ways,” Aristotle claims, one of these being “*prudence*” (*phronesis*), the province of the statesman, another being “*wisdom*” (*sophia*), the province of the philosopher (*NE* VI. iii 1139b15–18; VI. v 1140b31–1141a3; VI. vii 1141a16–27). Philosophers are not drawn to the political arena from a desire to participate in the hurly-burly of practical affairs. They may, it is true, have had an interest in *advising* leaders about proper courses of action, as Aristotle himself evidently did, but they would be just as happy, or even happier, staying away from ordinary political activity altogether and instead engaging in private conversations with individuals, as Socrates did, or even absorbing themselves in “pure contemplation.” Can the *Politics* be read as intended for this group of men also?

It seems to me it can and should be. In fact, seeing two different audiences for the book helps to make sense of the structure and logic of the entire treatise, both of which have long been regarded as puzzling, to say the least, among Aristotle scholars. It helps us to see some parts as addressed specifically to future politicians, but other parts do not make much sense for that audience. The latter are much more abstract and philosophical than of any immediate practical value and so must have been written for a different group of students.

The book that follows tries to clarify the distinction. As a preliminary, however, one might test the hypothesis by considering the questions of central concern to this study, all stemming in one way or another from our primary question: what is the essential nature of the state (*politeia*)? Why, for example, would a politician have any interest in the definition or essential nature of the polis? Why should he care that the constitution is *defined as* “the organization of the state with respect to its political offices”? Why should he even care to know what a “definition” in its proper sense is? While it might matter to a statesman—and we hope it would!—to know that states come in “right” and “deviant” forms and to have some idea about the difference between them, why should the further refinements of constitutional taxonomy, e.g., that oligarchies and democracies come in four different varieties each, that there are three forms of tyranny, or that constitutions are to be classified by using multiple differentiae simultaneously, be of much immediate practical use to the person of public affairs? Even Aristotle’s discussion of the question “what is justice and what are its varieties?” could well go beyond the immediate interests of many statesmen. Perhaps in a general way such questions may be of practical value, but the great detail and high-level

abstractions that Aristotle brings forward would seem to be less so. Unless Aristotle believes the statesman, even the virtuous statesman, is something akin to Plato's philosopher-rulers, it is hard to imagine that many of them, if any, would care about such matters. And yet these are some of the most important questions that occupy Aristotle's attention in the *Politics*.

Unfortunately, the *Politics* is not explicitly divided into two named parts: "For the Philosopher" and "For the Statesman." One thus must make guesses both that two audiences are intended and which parts are intended for which audience. It is also perhaps unfortunate that the two parts are often thoroughly intermingled. Book I, for example, seems to have both theoretical value (e.g., Aristotle's reflections about the nature of "nature") and practical value (e.g., what is the proper role of masters, husbands, women, and slaves in the household). But with a little imagination and educated guesswork one may try to disentangle the "politics" from the "philosophy" in the *Politics*.

I do not mean to exaggerate. Some questions raised in the *Politics* no doubt are of interest to philosophers and statesmen alike. Not everything in the text is black or white. Nor shall I try to engage in much detail regarding another question that would help us work through the distinctions I am making: Is the treatise to be read as a *normative* work, mainly giving prescriptions to would-be actors, or mainly as a *descriptive* or an *empirical* study, only setting out in factual language the shape and structure of the political universe, an approach that would probably be of greater interest to philosophers than actors? Many parts of the work might be read either way. I should observe, however, as my small contribution to this controversy, that even when Aristotle seems to be at his most "prescriptive," he has a habit of casting many of his statements, in effect, as hypotheticals: *if* the statesman wants to achieve "x" (e.g., to create a more moderate state, or to reduce the probability of revolutionary change, or to provide conditions for the promotion of virtue among the citizens), *then* these are the steps that he or she should take (Johnson, 2008). Such hypotheticals are easily read as choices Aristotle himself would make were he in a position to do so, and they are often read this way today. But, strictly speaking, they are descriptive, not prescriptive statements.

I shall confine myself mainly to identifying and analyzing what I regard as "philosophical" issues in the *Politics*, ones that on any account would be hard to read as prescriptions. Only in the final two chapters do I take on what seem to me to be eminently "practical" questions, questions for future statesmen: what is the best *attainable* constitution (treated mainly in parts of Books III and IV)? And

what is the absolutely *ideal* constitution, the one we should “pray for” (treated mainly in Books VII and VIII)? Both questions may be read, I think, as giving advice to rulers: “if you want one of these two forms of constitution, these are the things you should know and the things you should do.” Implicit in this “advice” is the supposition that good—i.e., virtuous—statesmen would *want* to achieve one of these goals.

This book thus presents one way of reading the *Politics*. It is not exactly an “introduction” to the *Politics*, but I have written it in a way that I hope makes the *Politics*—a difficult book by any account—more accessible than it otherwise might be to students and teachers who have an interest in Aristotle’s political philosophy but who are not necessarily Aristotle scholars. I thus have written it with minimal use of Attic Greek phrases and expressions—no familiarity with the ancient Greek language is necessary—and with no footnotes. Abundant references to ancient texts and modern scholarship may be found in the in-text citations for students who wish to explore specific questions more fully.

A final point: my approach to the *Politics* is admittedly concerned with a different set of questions than those one normally encounters in modern studies. I am not particularly concerned with what today would be called Aristotle’s political philosophy: was he a democrat, a liberal, a totalitarian, a monarchist, an aristocrat, a republican, or what have you? Nor am I interested in what type of freedom he favored (several candidates have been proposed). I do not address what is the proper way to understand his assertion that the citizen is a “part” of the polis in the same way that the hand is a “part” of the body, or that a person living outside the polis is either a beast or a god. Some scholars ask how Aristotle could have been so wrong about “natural slaves” (i.e., that they exist), or about women and wives (i.e., that they lack the deliberative capacity that would make them eligible to participate in politics). But those, and many others, are not my questions.

I do not mean to diminish the interest or importance of these questions. They are simply questions with which I am not especially concerned in this book. My interest is to clarify the distinction between the theory and the practice of politics in Aristotle’s *Politics*. Again, I have tried to supply ample and current references to the best recent scholarship addressing these questions in the in-text citations and bibliography for those who are interested.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have many debts. The first I wish to acknowledge are to the many current Aristotelian scholars whose works have brought Aristotle to the forefront of modern studies. A partial list must include Jonathan Barnes, J. M. Cooper, Eugene Garver, M. H. Hansen, David Keyt, Richard Kraut, Fred Miller, Jr., Josh Ober, Andres Rosler, N. D. Smith, among many others. Their scholarship has made clear, yet again, how important Aristotle studies have been to audiences through the ages, a truism that perhaps is even more pertinent today. Aristotle remains after all these centuries the preeminent philosopher of politics. In fact, he has been uniquely known through the ages simply as “The Philosopher.” It is hard to dispute that title. His works repay close study.

More directly, I need to thank the many scholars who have read and commented on parts of the current work: Nicholas Smith, Ron Polanski, John Bussanich, Thomas Brickhouse, Mark McPherran, Thomas Lindsay, and others. Their critical comments have led to improvements in the argument of this book. I must emphasize that any remaining defects are solely my responsibility.

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I am grateful to the following editors for granting permission to reproduce parts of my articles that were published in their journals:

“Who Is Aristotle’s Citizen.” *Phronesis* 29 (1984): 73–90, 1984.

“The Hobbesian Conception of Sovereignty and Aristotle’s *Politics*.”  
*Journal of the History of Ideas*, 46 (1985): 327–347, 1985.

“Aristotle’s Polity: Mixed or Middle Constitution,—” *History of Political Thought* 9 (1988): 189–204.

Several book reviews, *Ancient Philosophy*, 2010–2013.

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My greatest debts are to my wife Loretta and daughters Sophia and Alexis. I cannot thank them enough for their help in ways impossible to enumerate. I dedicate this work to them.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following are abbreviations to Aristotle's works as used in this volume:

<i>Pol.</i>	<i>Politics</i>
<i>NE</i>	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
<i>EE</i>	<i>Eudemian Ethics</i>
<i>MM</i>	<i>Magna Moralia</i>
<i>HA</i>	<i>History of Animals</i>
<i>PA</i>	<i>Parts of Animals</i>
<i>GA</i>	<i>Generation of Animals</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>Motion of Animals</i>
<i>Phys.</i>	<i>Physics</i>
<i>Metaph.</i>	<i>Metaphysics</i>
<i>Ath. Pol.</i>	<i>Constitution of Athens</i>



## A NOTE ON ARISTOTLE'S TEXT AND TRANSLATIONS

I have adopted the text edited by W. D. Ross, *Aristotelis Politica* (Oxford, 1957). This is the Oxford Classical Text. I have also consulted the texts of A. Dreizehnter (Munich, 1970) and of J. Aubonnet (Paris, 1960, 1973).

I have referred to cited passages by the standard book and chapter numbers as found, say, in Barker or Lord. I have adopted the conventional manuscript order of the books of the *Politics*. I have also used the Bekker numbers (e.g., 1279 b32ff.) for every passage cited, as they are found in Rackham (in the Loeb Library series). Since Rackham's lines are not as long as Bekker's, occasionally instances of the number found in Bekker do not match perfectly those employed by Rackham. I hope the easier availability of the Rackham edition to most English readers justifies the procedure.

I have consulted the translations of Barker (1946), Reeve (1998), Lord (2013, second edition), Sinclair (revised by Saunders, 1982), and Rackham (reprinted 1972). Occasionally, for consistency, I have used my own translations, indicated as such in the text.

## INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS IN ARISTOTLE'S *POLITICS*

Anyone who has spent much time with Aristotle's *Politics* knows that it is a particularly difficult work to understand in political philosophy. A "proper" interpretation on most points of interest is usually contested territory among Aristotle scholars. The challenges may be even greater for students (teachers and students alike), whether they are encountering the *Politics* for the first time or they have read it before. They may still be left with questions about a proper understanding: What is the thesis of the book? For whom is it written? What purposes did Aristotle hope to accomplish in writing it? and many others.

My aim here is to offer an interpretation of the *Politics* that centers on what I take to be the central philosophical issue raised in the work, specifically Aristotle's understanding of the nature or essence of the state. My central argument is that Aristotle's discussion of this question gives the book an inner logic that holds the many parts of the *Politics* together, however imperfectly. The question itself is not an easy one; the doctrine of the state that emerges from Aristotle's discussion of it is complicated and involved. My aim is to elucidate it. Perhaps in doing so some of the disputes about a proper interpretation of the text will be found to be less intractable as well.

One may well ask, "what Greek word am I translating here as 'state'?" Usually state is a term chosen by translators to render the Greek word *polis*, and it is often translated as "city-state." This work will engage questions about the *polis*, so in one sense this work examines Aristotle's understanding of the essence of the *polis*. But this work is really more about *politeia*, a term often rendered in English as "constitution" or "regime." I have generally tried to avoid those translations at the beginning of this work because of unintended connotations those terms may convey to a modern English-speaking audience. But, as the analysis proceeds, and we become clearer about what *politeia* meant to Aristotle, my usage will shift to "constitution" or "regime," accordingly (Hansen, 2013, chapter 3, discusses the

translations of and relationships among *politeia*, *politeuma*, and *polis* in Aristotle).

The two words, *polis* and *politeia*, are obviously related etymologically. But they are also substantively related, so much so that it is difficult to speak of *politeia* without also speaking about the *polis*. As Aristotle says, the *politeia* is the “form” of the *polis*. *Poleis* (Greek plural for *polis*) share some common features, but what differentiates poleis from one another are their respective *politeiai*. So, for this work, while both *polis* and *politeia* are central concerns, the focus will be more on the latter than the former.

I aim to advance understanding on a number of fronts. In doing so I will perform two major tasks. The first is to help those who are relatively new to Aristotelian studies attain a better comprehension of what the controversies are, especially those that have emerged in the 25 years since my *Aristotle's Theory of the State* was published (Macmillan, 1990). New studies of Aristotle's *Politics* have proliferated in that period. I will not attempt to review and comment on all the arguments, even the most important ones, in any detail, but only to indicate the general lines along which modern controversies have moved. The bibliography will give some indication of the recent contributions.

The second aim is to advance my own interpretation of the work. This will be similar in some ways to my earlier studies, but also departs from them in important ways. I hope to offer an interpretation that will be accessible both to students who are relatively new to Aristotle studies and also to more seasoned scholars who have devoted time and thought to sorting through the difficulties the text presents. I thus understand from the outset that I am aiming at two somewhat different audiences, in terms of level of experience and familiarity with Aristotle. Yet I hope to do so in a way such that both groups will find something of value in what follows.

## I. MODERN CONTROVERSIES

### A. The Text

Let me begin with a few very brief preliminaries about the text itself. I shall pass over the tangled history of how the text descended through the ages to modern times or related controversies about whether the text we have today is the precise text that circulated in the Lyceum. Scholars, mainly of an earlier generation, spent a good deal of effort working through these matters, but they seem largely to have passed

now from being contemporary concerns (see, for example, Hansen, 2013, and Grayeff, 1975, for introductions to some of these issues).

As to the text we have, it can seem at first to look like a total mess (cf. R. Robinson, 1962, pp. viii–ix; Frede, 2005, 168). Does it cohere as a single work? Did Aristotle even write it himself? Many scholars have assumed that it is not and was not intended by Aristotle to be an integrated treatise, but rather is a compilation of notes jotted down by students during Aristotle’s lectures and then loosely assembled into a single book by a later editor. Others doubt that the eight books comprising the treatise are ordered properly. For example, some would place Books VII–VIII just after Book II or perhaps Book III, and then place Books IV–VI at the end of the treatise. In other words, the *logic* of the treatise is sometimes called into question on the basis of how the eight books have been arranged (see Kraut, 2002, chapter 6, for a recent review of the controversies).

Then we have the old controversy about whether the book is intended mainly as a treatise about “the best state absolutely” or mainly as a treatise about “deviant” regimes. The first person to push home this question with special vigor was the great Aristotle scholar Werner Jaeger (1923, translated into English in 1934) and it continues to find adherents today. This question is often referred to as the “idealism vs. realism (or empiricism)” question or the “developmental” question, on the grounds that Jaeger argued the complex structure of the *Politics* could best be understood as reflecting different stages in Aristotle’s intellectual development. This, he claimed, is what gives the work its disjointed appearance, and it is one factor that prompted Jaeger to decide the conventional ordering of the books is incorrect and needs to be changed more clearly to separate out the various stages of his development. Most scholars today have abandoned the Jaegerian approach.

### **B. Was Aristotle a “Communitarian” or a “Liberal” Thinker?**

The attributions “liberal” and “communitarian” may seem to point more to modern debates in political theory than to ancient ones, but recently they have been recruited for construing Aristotle’s thought. The issue is about whether Aristotle was a proto-“liberal” thinker. Those supporting this view hold that, without going as far as Hobbes or Locke down the “liberal” way, Aristotle still finds room for a doctrine of “natural rights” in his theory and thus an obligation on the part of the state to protect these rights for all citizens or even all inhabitants in the *polis*. One recent study has called this interpretation

a theory of “moderate individualism” (Miller, 1995, 200 ff.; cf. Reeve, 1998, lviii–lix; and Swanson, 1992, 1–30), not the extreme liberalism of someone like John Locke but a theory that nevertheless sees in the state a role for protecting the “natural just rights” of every citizen. The state is to protect these rights not collectively (as in “all citizens *simpliciter*,” for that would open up space for the state to sacrifice the rights of some for the sake of protecting the rights of others), but for all citizens individually.

This opinion is ventured in opposition to a doctrine sometimes called “holism,” the view, in its extreme form, that the individual is subordinate to the community to which he or she belongs and exists only to satisfy the natural ends of the community, even if that means sacrificing his or her own private interests. A less extreme and perhaps more common version of holism is that the individual also benefits by belonging to a community, but that the community is necessary to individual flourishing (e.g., Yack, 1993; for criticisms, see Miller, 1995, 194–98; Reeve, 1998, lxix; Rosler, *passim* 2005). In modern political philosophy, the question between these two schools of thought is sometimes cast as a question between “is the right prior to the good” (the liberal position), and “is the good prior to the right” (the holistic or communitarian position, or to some of its opponents, the totalitarian position, e.g., Garver, 2011)?

If the doctrine of the *Politics* really is a doctrine of “moderate individualism,” what does this mean? How is the life of a moderate individualist properly defined? Does it mean: (1) that no individual has a right to harm or otherwise infringe on the rights of any other citizen? (2) Or does it mean that the state has a “duty” to respect and protect the natural just rights of every citizen? If that is so, how can the state justify the practice of ostracism of even good men, perhaps even the best men (e.g., Reeve, 1998, lxx–lxxi)? (3) Or does it mean that citizens share a joint obligation to treat each other with mutual respect and promote mutual deference and cooperation among themselves (Miller’s position)? (4) Or does it mean that the polis by nature is the one place where citizens can gather and unite in the common aim of achieving their full potential as ethical beings (Garver’s position)?

Finally, on this point, what does it mean to have a “right” to something? How, on the “moderate individualism” reading, are “rights” defined? Does having a right to something impose *duties* on other people to respect that right? If we say that a just right is something that someone “justly deserves,” I do not see that we have advanced the answer very far. What do people “deserve”? Do all people “deserve” the same things, or do “superior people” (in some sense)

deserve more than inferior people? What entitles people who deserve things to the things they deserve? Do people deserve “what is their own”? If so, how do we determine what “their own” is, and what makes it “their own”? Socrates in Book I of *Republic*, for example, suggests that someone who is in his right mind and loans another person his weapon, but then goes insane, no longer “deserves” to get the weapon back. What was once his own is no longer justly his own. Justice may well be giving to each what he or she deserves, but it is not always an easy matter to determine what people justly deserve.

Richard Kraut (2002), among others, disputes the “moderate liberalism” view of Miller, but he is reluctant to attribute to Aristotle a view that would entirely subordinate the citizen of the polis to the demands of the state. The latter is unacceptable because it may well lead to the abandonment of the entire aim of politics, which is to secure “the common good,” meaning not the good of one or another ruling class but the good of every citizen, perhaps even every resident of the polis. He thus offers an alternative both to “moderate individualism” and “holism.” He characterizes his understanding of the political philosophy of Aristotle’s ideal state as “communitarian,” but with the important caveat that this term is not taken to be the same as “holism,” but rather connotes a “community of people equal in moral understanding and virtue who share in the common goal of seeking the good of the whole.” The individual, on this view, is just as important as the community. Indeed, without the well-being of each member there can be no well-being of the whole. In any case, Kraut does not find the “liberal” acknowledgment of individual rights in Aristotle that Miller and Reeve find (Kraut, 2002, chapters 2, 6, 9, 11).

Eugene Garver (2011) advances an even stronger defense of the position held by Kraut. Both liberalism and holism—what he sometimes calls totalitarianism—completely miss the point for Aristotle. Aristotle, in his view, tries to find a “middle way” between a “liberal” interpretation and a “communitarian” one. The former he regards as “slavish” politics because it privileges the individual and his/her “just rights.” This is “slavish” because individual rights tends to mean allowing individuals to pursue their own “good” in their own way, and this tends to foster greater care for private and, especially, material well-being than for a common good. Communitarianism, by contrast, is totalitarian in character—think, for example, of the *kallipolis* in Plato’s *Republic*. In other words, Garver finds Aristotle attempting to preserve both the good of the individual and the good of the community without sacrificing either one to the other. Aristotelian politics for

Garver is the attempt to find the conditions under which all individuals in the community can “live well and live together” in peace and mutual respect and support.

A related line of questioning centers on whether one finds a doctrine of “political authority and obligation” in the *Politics*. If so, Aristotle should be found to be addressing questions of the proper extent of government authority over citizens, the rightful obligations of citizens to obey, and the limits of obligation—that is, at what point, if any, may citizens disobey, and what forms may their disobedience rightly take? This is a variant of the question raised above about whether one finds a doctrine of “political rights” in Aristotle. This time, however, the question is raised with a specific focus on the rights of citizens to disobey the government, the extent of those rights, and the duties of governments to respect and preserve those rights. Rosler, 2005, offers an argument that this doctrine, though somewhat concealed, is present in the *Politics*; a critique of his argument is Johnson, *Ancient Philosophy*, 2008.

### C. Was Aristotle a Totalitarian or an Anarchist?

A totalitarian holds that the state is everything, the individual, nothing. On this view the state may require of the citizens anything it desires. Its powers are in effect unlimited (e.g., Barnes, in Kraut and Skultety, 2005, 185–202). This view is different from communitarianism, as usually conceived, in several ways. It is true that the communitarian sees in the state more than just the protector of individual rights. Many communitarians, in fact, dispense with the very idea of natural rights, as do totalitarians. But, as a matter of political theory: (1) communitarians place supreme value on individual liberty, in the sense of freedom to participate in the common life of the community through speech and decision-making; the totalitarian does not. Thus (2) communitarians tend to support universal suffrage and, ideally, universal access to political offices; totalitarians are comfortable with power being tightly and permanently held by one person or at most a small cadre. (3) Communitarians believe the proper foundation of the political association is “virtue”; for totalitarians it is force or fear. (4) Communitarians place no restrictions on the scope of state authority—the state may command its citizens to do whatever it pleases (in this way it resembles totalitarianism), but the communitarian requirement that all participate in decision-making will help to ensure that decisions are generally acceptable to the citizens; the totalitarian has no such requirement.

The case that Aristotle had totalitarian tendencies is based on the admitted fact that he seems to place no restrictions on the *scope* of state authority. It is rightly noted that Aristotle leaves the scope open-ended except for the very general injunction that the state should strive to promote “fulfillment” (*eudaimonia*) and excellence (*arete*) among the citizens. Moreover, where he does address specific functions carried out by the state he allows, even encourages, the state to “supervise” and “control” various aspects of civic life that we today would find objectionable: supervision over women, over how children are to be raised, over what education children should receive, over the marketplace, and others. Against this view may be urged the consideration that a “virtuous” ruling class would presumably rule virtuously, and, because the rulers are “sovereign over everything” (*kurias panton*), there is no necessity that they must regard Aristotle’s particular opinions about what the state should do as definitive for all time. What the state controls may be emended with the progress of time and knowledge.

At an opposite extreme is the view, recently championed by David Keyt (in Kraut and Skultety, eds., 203–22), that Aristotle was an “anarchist,” not in the colloquial sense of a wild-eyed fanatic who lives to throw bombs at all governmental institutions, but in the literal sense of one who favors “no government” as an ideal. Keyt defends this thesis by means of a syllogism that goes something like this: (a) most if not all existing constitutions are “deviant”; (b) by definition, deviant constitutions are “rule by force” by one “economic class” (e.g., the “poor”) over and against the interests of another economic class (in this example, “the rich”); (c) by supposition, the rich would not willingly submit to their interests being attacked by the poor; (d) therefore the rule of the poor must be based upon force; (e) Aristotle opposes the use of force as a proper or “right” foundation for any government (hence his use of the terms “deviant” and “against nature” to describe such constitutions); (f) constitutions that are “according to nature” must therefore not rely upon force; (g) but if force is removed from the polis (as it would be in an ideal constitution), a role for government in the usual sense is also removed; a society without government is, strictly speaking, an anarchy. (h) Aristotle is thus an anarchist. QED.

One hesitates to endorse this argument for at least one reason: it relies upon the assumption that “rule” that does not employ force is no “rule” at all. Is it not possible that rule over “willing” subjects is still rightly regarded as “rule?” I understand the issue is more complicated than that, but my aim has been only to give a taste of the dispute.

### D. Was Aristotle a Democrat or an Elitist?

Almost everyone agrees that Aristotle's "best state absolutely" in Books VII–VIII is an aristocracy, so in this sense he must be counted an elitist, since by definition "the best" (*aristoi*) are invariably the few. It is true that this group does not sit permanently in political office but rather its members "rule by turns." That may at first seem like a democratic ideal (e.g., Kraut, 2002, chapter 12), but when one considers that the great majority of the population (women, slaves, even farmers and other occupational groups) in the ideal state is permanently shut out of the political arena, the idea that the state is democratic quickly fades. If Aristotle was a champion of democracy, the evidence must come from somewhere else in the oeuvre.

Some scholars maintain that such evidence may be found especially in Book III, chapters ix–xii, of the *Politics*. Perhaps the strongest proponent of this opinion is David Keyt (in Keyt and Miller, eds., 1991, 238–78), but he has been followed by others (e.g., Kraut, 2002, 461–64, who finds "radical democratic" implications even in Books VII–VIII). The argument from Book III is that, while Aristotle admittedly classes democracies as "deviant constitutions," he brings forward arguments that purport to show that in some circumstances democracies are better than that and may be even superior to other ideal forms described in the *Politics*. Perhaps the most important of these is that, while the "many" may be individually inferior (in political wisdom) to the wise few, nevertheless *collectively* they may in certain circumstances possess even greater wisdom than the elite few. When these conditions are available, distributive justice (on Aristotle's own definition of the word) requires that the many should rule the state. Sometimes, in Aristotle's view, this would be the best political arrangement.

To develop a counterargument would take us too far afield. But, for openers, one notes that even when conditions for a democracy are suitable, Aristotle does not give "complete" authority to the many, but authority over only some offices and functions. Others he reserves, for perhaps practical reasons, to "the few." It also works against the democratic argument that Aristotle apparently regards the attainment of "complete virtue" to be beyond the reach of "the many," even in theory. It is hard to see how a ruling class that consists of a multitude of less than fully virtuous people would be superior to one that consists only of those with perfect virtue.

The proper interpretation of Aristotle's political philosophy in the recent scholarship is thus a matter of dispute. The questions raised

above are all of some importance. We should want to know where Aristotle would stand if he were exposed to modern controversies about human rights, choosing and attaining the good life, moral autonomy, the proper extent of state authority, and others discussed. I am unable here to enter deeply into these disputes, except to say they are lively and illuminating. For further discussion I refer the reader to texts cited directly above and to the bibliography.

## II. INTERNAL CONSISTENCY

In addition to those issues, another line of questioning has beset the *Politics* over the years, namely whether the *Politics*, even if it is a single treatise, was intended by Aristotle to be a single, connected treatise, written by Aristotle himself, and arranged in the order Aristotle wanted to arrange it; i.e., is it *internally consistent*? This criticism has taken several forms. (a) Aristotle claims the polis is “by nature.” But he also claims that the polis requires human art to bring it into being. Yet, from *Physics II* 192b8 (cf. *Metaphysics* D4 1014b16ff.), we know that things that exist by nature do not require human art to bring them to completion because the source of motion is *within themselves*, and this source of motion ensures that the natural entity will reach its completion (*telos*) without external resources or special assistance (e.g., Keyt, 1991, 259). How can Aristotle consistently have it both ways?

This subject will be examined in fuller detail later. The same reasoning applies to individual human beings (e.g., N. D. Smith, in Keyt and Miller, eds., 1991, 149). “Man is by nature a political animal.” This would seem to mean that humans are drawn to the political association by an inner natural impulse that ensures that by nature they will achieve their natural ends without external assistance, even from other humans. Yet we know from the *Nicomachean Ethics* that humans cannot achieve a life of complete virtue—that is, achieve their natural end—without instruction and habituation—things that can only be supplied by other human beings (*NE* 1103b20–25; 1104b10–13). In other words, the human good cannot be achieved by nature only but requires an assist by human art as well. But these would seem to be two different, possibly contradictory accounts.

Aristotle claims that natural things achieve their natures (e.g., acorns become oak trees, fish eggs become fully grown fish, etc.) “always or for the most part” (*Physics II* 198b35–6; *GA II*, 6, 333b4–7). In other words, nature usually succeeds in fulfilling her natural purposes or goals. Indeed, the aim of science (*episteme*) is to discover the nature

of each thing it studies, and this means, above all (although not exclusively) discovering what the purpose of each thing is. If nature did not always or usually fulfill her goals, science would seem to be all but impossible.

Two problems seem to stand in the way of this conclusion. The first is that while nature always *intends* to fulfill her goals, she does not always succeed. In fact, there are evidently times when nature does not even “usually” succeed. This point comes out, for example, in Aristotle’s discussion of slavery in *Politics* Book I. Aristotle notices a dispute between those who argue that slavery is “by nature” (that is, that some slaves are intended by nature to be slaves), and those who argue that slavery is “against nature” but exists only “by convention.” In the latter case people who are enslaved are unjustly enslaved, enslaved only, for example, because they have been the unfortunate losers in a war between two peoples who are equal in virtue or nobility. The losers might then be enslaved “by force” and “contrary to nature” by the victors. This is against nature because nature assigns the same natural purpose to all who are alike and equal. Aristotle understands and accepts this line of reasoning.

In adjudicating this dispute, Aristotle takes his stand ultimately on the side of those who think that at least *some* people are slaves by nature (Smith, in Keyt and Miller, eds., 1991, 142–55; Kraut, 2002, chapter 8). But in doing so he confesses that some of those who should be slaves (i.e., natural slaves) are not slaves and, more troublesome, many who should *not* be slaves have been made slaves unjustly, or against nature. But if nature “always or usually” fulfills her natural purposes, these latter two cases would seem anomalous. How often do these “unnatural” results come about among natural entities (in this case human beings)? Aristotle’s answer is this:

There is a possibility that wars may be unjust in their origin, and one would by no means admit that a man who does not deserve slavery can really be a slave [by nature]—otherwise we shall have an absurd result. . . . For [people who argue this way] that just as a man springs from a man and from brutes a brute, so also from good parents comes a good son [and from natural slaves other natural slaves] but as a matter of fact nature *frequently* while intending this is unable to bring it about (*Pol.* 1255a25–1255b5, emphasis added).

Apparently nature not only occasionally but frequently falls short of her purposes, at least in the case of who does and does not become a slave “by nature.” It would seem to follow that nature might similarly

err *frequently* in her other intentions as well. In fact, generally, in the case of human beings and the polis, nature evidently almost *never* succeeds in fulfilling the natural goals of bringing about her intention that humans and polises (*poleis*) become fully virtuous and “right” (*orthos*). On the contrary, the vast majority of states with which Aristotle was familiar were “deviant,” *against* nature—even when they were fully developed—and “the many” are apparently not capable of complete virtue. How are we to explain the spectacular failure of the vast majority of people and states to achieve their natural purposes of achieving virtue? This subject will be taken up more fully in a later section of the present work. But for now, one should take Aristotle’s dictum, that nature “always or for the most part fulfills her natural purposes,” with a grain of salt.

The other problem that stands in the way of Aristotle’s assertion that nature usually or always fulfills her natural intentions is less intractable. It comes up in the context of Aristotle’s discussion of the “four causes” in *Physics* Book II, chapters 3–5. After asserting that “the point of our investigations of knowing anything is understanding *why* things are as they are—in other words, grasping their primary causes” (*Physics* II 194b18–20), Aristotle identifies four causes that, together, explain or give an understanding of nearly everything. (I shall discuss the four causes more fully in a different context later.)

But then Aristotle immediately adds a qualifier: some things apparently cannot be understood by reference to the four causes because they seem to come about “by chance,” and “chance” events by definition do not have causes. Moreover, it turns out that the number of events or things that occur by chance is “indeterminate” or might even be “infinite” in number (*Physics* II, chapter 5 196b27–9). But, if the number of “chance” events and things is infinite, whereas science to be possible requires a finite world in which things occur “always or usually,” what becomes of the entire scientific enterprise? On closer inspection, however, Aristotle here is really only raising a red herring. Chance is just a “hypothesis,” accepted by some people, but is in fact false. Aristotle now argues that often what is assigned “chance” as a cause is really only what he calls a “coincidence.” To use one of his own examples, the “causes” of a house are the house builder (efficient or moving cause); the materials used in construction (the material cause); the form of the house (formal cause); and the purpose for which the house was built (final cause). But the builder, to use that cause (the efficient or moving cause) as an example, may be pale, or may be a flute player on the side. It is then not strictly incorrect to say that a “pale person” or a “flute player” built the house, but his

paleness or flute playing would be only a coincidence. Or again, mice may live in the house, but that is not the purpose of the house, only a coincidence. The final cause (purpose) of the house is for people to live in it, not mice. So, the efficient cause is the house builder *qua* house builder, not *qua* pale person or flute player, and the final cause is to enable human habitation, not mice habitation, and so forth. Houses, of course, are artifacts, and so not, strictly speaking, “natural” things, but the same reasoning applies to natural as well as artificial things. A nose that smells well has achieved its natural purpose, even if it coincidentally is used to support one’s eyeglasses.

### III. PURPOSES AND INTENTIONS

The aims of a good (“right”) polis may be defined in two different ways: (1) a polis is good to the extent that the rulers rule for the “common good,” as opposed to ruling for their own personal interests at the expense of the common good; (2) a polis is good (“right”) when those who rule are those with “virtue,” and the greater their virtue, the better the polis is. (Virtue, as we shall see, is not an “either/or” quality but a range of qualities, each of which permits varying degrees of attainment and each of which varies somewhat from person to person (*Pol.* 1260a2–14). General precepts about virtue do exist, common to everyone, but these are general precepts, not precise prescriptions for each individual. To use an analogy drawn from Aristotle, the “right” amount of food for an Olympic champion is probably not the right amount of food for a non-athlete. Both need food (general precept), but they are different in terms of the proper amount (specific application). Virtue is not “one size fits all.”

There is, however, a special virtue that goes with good rulership, called “practical knowledge” (*phronesis*), and people with this virtue to the fullest degree possible are the best rulers.

Our questions here are: What if the virtuous (those with political virtue, or *phronesis*) do not rule for the common good but for the good of the virtuous only, or for the citizens only? Is that still a good polis (Cooper, 1999; Morrison, 1999)? What if nonvirtuous rulers manage to rule for the common interest? Is that still a good polis? (For attempts to answer these two questions, see Fortenbaugh, in Keyt and Miller, eds., 1991, 236.) What is the “common good”—the good of the majority (even at the expense of some minority), or the good of every single individual in the polis (cf. Reeve, 1998, lxvii; Kraut, 2002, 210–14)? Who decides what the “common good” is? What if opinions differ on this? Whose view is authoritative (*kurios*)? Assuming the polis

exists to fulfill the common good, and the common good is defined as “the good of the citizens,” what do we say about a regime in which only one person is a citizen (i.e., the one who rules), even if that ruler is a virtuous person? In that case, the common good boils down to the ruler (citizen) ruling in his own interest. How is that any different from tyranny (defined as “rule by one person—the ruler—ruling in his own interest”)?

This last question has caused some scholars to find a notion of “second-class citizens” (Cooper, 1990; Keyt, 2005) or “degrees of citizenship” (Morrison) in the *Politics*. On this view, ruling in the common interest means ruling in the interest not only of citizens (i.e., those who share in ruling) but also in the interest of non-ruler residents—women, children, the elderly, even perhaps metics and slaves. The problem with the idea of “second-class citizens” is it is ventured without textual warrant. It may be a comforting idea, but one should probably stick to what Aristotle actually said/wrote. Besides, one should not forget Aristotle’s other stipulation about “good one-man rule”: it must be over “willing subjects” and thus must not use “force” to gain compliance to his orders (*Pol.* 1295a 17–23; Rosler, 2008, 246).

On a related note, do proper citizens in the strict sense (i.e., people who share in ruling well) even exist in the deviant regimes of oligarchy (rule by the few) and tyranny (rule by one)? What is Aristotle’s “best regime absolutely”? Is it “kingship,” when the king is vastly superior to everyone else in the qualities of character that make good kings (Book III, 1279a33–41)? Or is it the aristocracy that Aristotle describes in detail in Books VII–VIII? Or is it something altogether different from either of these, say the “middle” constitution of Book IV, chapter 11, or, as Keyt and Kraut would have it, a democracy, when the conditions for a good democracy are present (Keyt, 1991, 271, 274; Kraut, 460–61)?

A very important related question: what is the best *life* for individual humans to live—a life of engaged political deliberation and activity that employs the virtue of *phronesis* (political understanding) in ruling well; or the life of pure contemplation (*theoria*), free of all political activity and employing the virtue of “wisdom” (*sophia*) apart from the active political affairs of the polis?

What are properly considered the “parts” of the polis. The question may be difficult, yet Aristotle insists that the “proper method” to investigate any subject is to “analyze the compounded whole down to its uncompounded elements” (for these are the smallest parts of the whole). “So too with the state (polis); by examining the elements of

which it is composed we shall better discern in relation to these different kinds of rulers what is the difference between them, and whether it is possible to obtain any technical knowledge (*techne*) in regard to the various statements made above" (*Pol.* Book I 1252a18–23).

But what *are* the "parts," of the polis? Aristotle gives different answers in different places so it is not always easy to understand whom he means when he refers to parts. Perhaps he means only "those who are citizens (*polites*) under the constitution, or the citizen body (the *politeuma*)." But that account would exclude women, children, slaves, metics, and other non-citizens as "parts." If these people are not "parts," then what are they, or what are they to be called? On the other hand, parts may be defined differently: (1) "parts in the fullest sense" are the "wealthy and poor," is one such answer. (2) Another is, "anyone who contributes to the necessary functions of the polis." This would rule in just about everyone. Still another account of parts is that they are those who hold various occupations: farmers are parts in many regimes, as are shipbuilders, priests, soldiers, petty craftsmen, fishermen, builders of houses, and so forth. This latter account may exclude *some* people—i.e., those who perform no necessary functions, but it would rule in most people, even women and slaves, for these people too perform necessary functions, even if not the most important functions or the functions most conducive to producing political virtue—those of public deliberation and ruling. The subject is investigated in greater detail in a later chapter of this work.

#### IV. ETHICAL CONCERNS

Is Aristotle serious when he claims that some people are "born by nature to be slaves" to slave-masters? (Cf. N. D. Smith, in Keyt and Miller, eds., 1991, chapter 6; Kraut, 2002, chapter 8; Swanson, 1992, chapter 2.) Is Aristotle intellectually blind when he claims that women lack the full deliberative capacity of men, even potentially, that would enable them to participate in political activity and public discourse? (Cf. Reeve, 1998, lx–lxv; Kraut, 2002, chapter 9; Collins, 2006; Smith, 1983; Okin, 1979; Frede, 2005; Swanson, 1992, chapter 3; Elshtain, 1981; Saxonhouse, 1986; Nichols, 1992, 30–35.)

Doesn't Aristotle commit a serious blunder when he condemns tyranny as the "worst form" of government, so much so that he says it is not really a "constitution" at all, and yet at the same time brings forward advice to actual tyrants about how to become even more tyrannical than they already are? (Cf. Pellegrin, 2012, 579–584; Nichols, 1992, 100–10.)

## V. RULING AND BEING RULED: POLITICAL RIGHTS

Does everyone in a polis have a right to participate in public deliberation and ruling? If only some people have this right, why do they have it while others lack it? If “ruling and being ruled in turn” is an equal right of all who are “equal and similar,” what is the proper ruling arrangement when some people are not equal and similar to others? Does every difference among people bear on the question of who rules, or only some differences? If the latter, what differences are relevant and what makes them relevant? For example, why should “having red hair” not count as a relevant factor in deciding that red-haired people have an exclusive right to rule (or are exclusively shut out from ruling)? Aristotle himself considers (and rejects) cases of just this sort at *Politics* 1282b30 (cf. Keyt, in Keyt and Miller, eds., 247–48).

Is Aristotle’s doctrine about who should rule in any particular polis a *normative thesis* (i.e., these are the people who *should* rule in this polis, even if they do not, in which case Aristotle may seem guilty of violating the Humean precept that you cannot derive an “ought” from an “is” [Keyt, 1991, 269]); or a *descriptive thesis* (i.e., these are the people who actually *do* rule in this polis, whether or not they *should* rule [cf. A. Rosler, 2005; Johnson, 2008; Reeve, 1998, lx–lxi; Kraut, chapter 7])?

What is the proper *function* (*ergon*) of political rule? For example, the *ergon* of a hammer is to drive nails into wood and other substances. In politics, is the *ergon* to aim at the “best regime absolutely,” or, more modestly, to attempt to nudge deviant regimes in a direction that would make them less deviant? What sort of knowledge is relevant to achieving these goals and how is such knowledge acquired? This involves Aristotle’s so-called “functional” argument and will be discussed later.

## VI. RELATION OF *POLITICS* TO OTHER ARISTOTELIAN TEXTS

The Aristotelian corpus is huge. The most recent comprehensive collection of Aristotle’s writings, edited by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, 1984), includes approximately 35 separate works and runs to nearly 2,500 pages of closely packed text. An earlier authoritative edition (W. D. Ross, ed.), published by Oxford University Press (1921–1959), comprises 14 large volumes. Even selected collections are generally big, fat texts. And here I am counting only texts written by Aristotle that have come down to us from antiquity. Apparently an

equally voluminous oeuvre written by Aristotle did not survive the passage of the ages and has been lost to posterity.

In the course of his writing the *Politics* Aristotle often referred to things he had written in other works. Among the most important of these are the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Physics*, and the *Metaphysics*, but many other sources are also brought in, and this is not even to mention frequent references Aristotle makes to the works of other writers. To do full justice to any of Aristotle's works would require taking account of what he says in other works he wrote. (For a recent attempt at an integrated treatment and analysis of Aristotle's amazing variety of interests and contributions, see J. Barnes, ed., 1995, *passim*, and his bibliography.)

I shall not attempt to do that. For one thing, it would make a book such as this necessarily more complicated and difficult than it already is. I do not mean to dismiss the importance of these other works; each of them deserves its own independent study. But cross-references to other works, while often illuminating, are also sometimes perplexing and can seem at cross-purposes with the argument of the *Politics*. They also usually involve problems of their own in terms of a proper interpretation and understanding. It would be a much different book to examine all the arguments related to the *Politics* in other treatises that are referred to by Aristotle in the *Politics* itself.

One exception to this general precept stands out: the *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*). There is some evidence that Aristotle regarded this work as a companion piece to the *Politics*, even that he regarded the two works as a single work, one (*NE*) focused on individual ethical theory and practice, the other (*Politics*) focused on a proper ethics for the state (cf. Kraut, 2002, chapter 1). For example, to mention only the most famous one, the last sentences of the *NE* have this to say:

As, then, the question of legislation (*nomothetas*) has been left uninvestigated by other thinkers, it will perhaps be better if we consider it for ourselves together with the whole question of the constitution of the state. We will begin then by attempting any pronouncements of value contributed by our predecessors in this or that branch of the subject. We will consider what institutions are preservative and what are destructive of states in general, and of the different forms of constitutions in particular, and what are the reasons that cause some states to be well governed and others the contrary. For after studying these questions we will perhaps be in a better position to discern what is the best constitution absolutely, and what are the best regulations, laws, and customs for any given form of constitution. Let us, then, begin our discussion (*NE* Book X, 1181b12 ff.).

As is often been observed, this paragraph sounds like a segue to another book, and that other book must unquestionably be the *Politics*. In addition, this paragraph almost exactly duplicates the agenda for the *Politics* set out by Aristotle in Book II (“pronouncements of value contributed by our predecessors”) and the beginning of Book IV. (This consideration, in fact, is why some commentators want to move *Politics* IV up to precede *Politics* III or even *Politics* II.) The passage also lends a strong impression that Aristotle wrote the *NE* first and the *Politics* sometime later.

But these conclusions are only guesses. For example, Aristotle may have added the last paragraph to the *NE* after he wrote the *Politics* just to lend the appearance of continuity. Or perhaps he had completed Books I–III and VII–VIII before he wrote the last paragraph of the *NE*, then composed Books IV–VI of the *Politics* at a later date (Jaeger’s view). It is even possible that someone other than Aristotle added the last paragraph to the *NE* just to make the two works look more integrated than they actually are. Imagination alone can limit and define the number of possibilities, simply because Aristotle does not tell us himself why the last paragraph of the *NE* appears where it does and says what it says. (Detailed discussion of the various arguments is in Kraut, 2002, chapter 1.)

That aside, however, the *Politics* and the *Ethics* do belong together, not because of the last paragraph of the *NE* but for a different reason. Both are fundamentally concerned with human ethics—understanding ethics and understanding how to become ethical individuals. But they do this by adopting different foci and strategies. The *NE* informs us that Aristotle does not only want people to understand ethics but to *become ethical people* (*NE* 1103a30–35). One becomes just, for example, not in the intellectualistic way that Socrates understood it—first to *learn* what justice is and then instantiating it in one’s own life and teaching it to others (cf. *Gorgias* 460b1–15). One becomes just (or more generally virtuous) by doing just and virtuous deeds: “The purpose of the present study is not, as in other inquiries, the attainment of theoretical knowledge: we are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, or else there would be no advantage in studying it” (*NE* 1103b26–29; cf. 1095a4–7; 1098a10–18; 1098b34–1099a1–7).

Virtue does require proper education and habituation into the proper modes of behavior that virtuous people display. It is difficult work. It takes a lot of practice. But it takes *doing* virtue more than *understanding* virtue. This is not to say that understanding is not important for Aristotle’s ethical person. It is probably safe to say

that understanding is a necessary condition of becoming virtuous (*NE* 1099b15–18; 1102a15–18). One does not become virtuous by taking blind stabs at it and then hoping one has made correct choices (*NE* 1099b20–25). But understanding is *not* a sufficient condition for virtue (Miller, 1991, 296). To be virtuous requires doing virtuous deeds, and that is a matter of training and habituation, and eventually of developing proper human character. A person with all the knowledge in the world about what virtue *is* is not necessarily a virtuous person. On the other hand, a virtuous person must have a pretty decent understanding of what virtue is to guide him in choosing virtuous actions. But the doing, not the knowing, is the important thing for being a virtuous person.

The *Politics* takes a different approach to virtue. It is still concerned with virtue and with cultivating virtue among states and citizens as much as possible. But here we come to the crux of my argument. The purpose of politics involves more than just getting individuals to “do virtuous deeds,” as was true of the *Ethics*. It involves *understanding* political virtue first, and then attempting to *implement* it into the various states as far as possible.

## CHAPTER 1



### ARISTOTLE'S AUDIENCES

Of the three broad branches of human endeavor and their respective sciences identified by Aristotle (theoretical, practical, and productive) “politics” is, of course, assigned by Aristotle to the “practical” sciences. Since the aim of the practical sciences is explicitly to improve human action (praxis) rather than to attain knowledge for its own sake, it would appear to follow that his political treatise must be addressed to the active, not the theoretical man. Yet the matter is more complex than this. Human action is distinctive, to be sure, insofar as it deliberately acts upon things in the world; this is why politics is a “practical science.” But human political activity, at least when it is practiced as it should be, involves knowledge that depends upon, if not actually includes, the “prior” knowledge of the philosopher.

We are permitted then, I believe, to discern two audiences for the *Politics*, those who value the active life and take a leading role in it (the statesman, or *politikos*) and those for whom knowledge for its own sake is the highest good (the philosopher, or *philosophos*). (The “citizen” constitutes yet another political group in the *politeia*, posing its own separate problems, to be discussed more fully in subsequent chapters. Suffice it to say here that in many if not all deviant regimes it is hard to imagine that Aristotle had citizens in mind as his audience. This fact may give rise to some confusion as one makes one’s way through the text.)

To complicate matters, we must note that Aristotle also distinguishes (although not explicitly) between two sorts of political actors. The first he calls “lawgivers” (*nomothetai*), the second “politicians,” or “statesmen” (*politikoi*). Both are, ideally, *phronimoi*—people of sound practical judgment about political affairs, but they perform essentially

different tasks. The lawgivers—men like Solon, Phaleas, Hippodamus, Lycurgus, and several others mentioned in Book II—are men who lay down the basic framework of government, or as we might say today, are the “founders” of their respective constitutions. They may actually resemble philosophers more than statesmen (cf., for example, *Pol.* 1266a31–33). They need not have actually established a constitution, but if they have imagined one (as Plato did in *Republic* and *Laws*), they still count as *nomothetai*. They set up a framework (constitution) for legislation and other political activities and offices but do not necessarily play a large role in participating in them, at least not for very long. A good *nomothetes* is one who establishes political institutions that are able to continue to survive and flourish even after he has passed away or departed for other reasons (Keyt, in Keyt and Miller, eds., 1991, 240).

“Statesmen,” by contrast, are what we might today call “political leaders,” not ordinary politicians or citizens but men who have the vision and knowledge to chart a course for the state (once it is established) and to guide it to its destination. They occupy the highest magistracies and ideally they possess *phronesis* (e.g., *Pol.* III, iv, 1277a13ff.; *NE*, I xiii 1102a5–22). One thinks, for example, of the distinction between Socrates (a member for a year of the council) and Pericles; the former, even while in office, would have been regarded as a citizen, the latter a statesman. In what follows, when referring to *politikoi*, I will be concerned only with statesmen, not framers of constitutions except when the two are the same. Needless to say, these statesmen today are women too.

One way of thinking about how statesmen differ from political philosophers is to consider how the two groups of men go about their functions. Aristotle takes the philosophical study of the state to be a careful study, an exact study (as exact, at any rate, as the subject permits). He contrasts his investigation of the state and allied phenomena with “political and hasty” understandings (III. viii 1279 b21ff.). The latter have more to do with statesmen and political practice (*pros ten chresin*: 1275 b23, or *pros ten prattain*: III. viii 1279 b13) than with political theory; their concern is with immediate and pressing business. Theorists do not ignore these concerns, but they aim at seeing them more exactly, more comprehensively. The superficial view is discarded for the more penetrating one (III. iii 1276 a16ff.), even if the “political” understanding is sometimes useful for limited purposes (III. iii 1276a 32–33). The theoretical understanding is larger and deeper than the political one; by grasping things “in the absolute sense” (*haplos*) it succeeds, where the hasty one does not, in overcoming disagreements and disputes (III. i 1275 2–22).

Second, when he addresses the statesman, Aristotle aims to help him become *phronimos*, skilled in the conduct of affairs according to prevailing circumstances (Bodéüs, in Lord and O'Connor, eds., 1991, chapter 9; Bodéüs, 1982, 118ff.). When he addresses the philosophical student of politics, Aristotle's aim is to help him grasp the natural political order in its full sweep, without regard to any particular set of conditions. Obviously the two groups are interested in the same subjects. But they are interested in these subjects in different ways. The philosopher values the knowledge he acquires primarily for its own sake (although, as we shall see, this statement will need to be qualified as we move along), the statesman for the further purpose of serving existing states, either in the way of changing their constitutions or of amending them through legislation.

These are two different tasks, and they fall to two different sets of people. The first task is that of political theory (*theoria*). The philosopher is not a political actor *per se*, but he certainly is available to share his wisdom (*sophia*) with those who are political actors. His political wisdom, in fact, may be expected to help immensely those who perform actual political activities—the *phronimos*—in countless and invaluable ways (cf. Reeve, trans., 1998, xli).

Perhaps an exception to this general rule is the rare case of the perfectly just and wise (*phronimos*) statesman legislating for, or ruling over, the perfectly just state. In this case, evidently the knowledge of the statesman is of the *natural* order of political affairs, that is, of the state as it aspires to be by nature. This is, in part at least, the knowledge sought by the philosopher of politics as well. One encounters this conjunction of aims and interests between the two audiences in any extended way only in the final two books of the *Politics*, in which Aristotle the philosopher turns legislator and tries his hand at constructing in words the perfect state. The full knowledge of the philosopher is here the sole guide and final informer to the conduct of the statesman.

The distinction in Aristotle's writing is not always as clear as it might be, but ultimately Aristotle is responsible for entering it into both the *NE* and *Politics*. For example, in *Politics* Book III (1279b11–16), after reviewing in a general way how many constitutions exist and what they are, Aristotle immediately adds, "But the question involves certain difficulties, and it is the special mark of one who studies any topic philosophically, and not solely with regard to its practical aspect, that he does not disregard or overlook any point" (see also *Pol.* III, viii, 1278b; *Eudemian Ethics*, hereafter *EE*, I, I 1214a9–14).

The distinction is sharpened even further especially in *Politics* Books VII–VIII. In the latter, Aristotle debates with himself, "What is

the best kind of life to live—the active life of politics or a life of pure contemplation and political theory?” In his own words:

Two questions need to be investigated, however. First, which life is more choiceworthy, the one that involves taking part in politics with others and participating in the city-state or a life cut off from the political community (*Pol.* 1324a 13–16)?

A little further on he has this to say about his question:

It is evident that the best constitution must be that organization in which anyone might do best and live a blessedly happy life. But the very people who agree that the most choiceworthy life is the life of virtue are the ones who dispute whether it is the political life of action that is worthy of choice or rather the one released from external concerns—a contemplative life, for example, which some say is the only life for a philosopher. . . . All those, past and present, with the greatest love for the honor accorded to virtue, have chosen between these two lives (*Pol.* 1324a 24–29).

Many scholars believe that Aristotle never pronounces firmly and unequivocally on either side of this dispute (Reeve, 1998, xlvi). What is clear is: (1) both types of lives are virtuous, though in different ways, with Aristotle at first giving a “strong hint” that the theoretical life is superior but later becoming “cagey” about the correct answer (Reeve, *ibid.*, xlvi); (2) both types of lives have much to commend them to those who honor virtue above all else; (3) both types of lives require “external equipment and resources” (i.e., some level of material well-being) if they are to be fulfilling and happy lives (*NE* 1101a 14–17); (4) perhaps no final verdict can be passed until the individuals choosing between these two kinds of lives are dead (e.g., *NE* 1177b 24–26).

But what is perhaps more intriguing than any of this is *who* decides the right answer? Aristotle's answer: “it is a task for political thought or theory” (*Pol.* 1324a 21). Apparently it is the philosopher and not the statesman who should make the final call. But who is that person? In the context of the *Politics* itself it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it is Aristotle himself. *He* is the philosopher that he claims is the one who should guide and inform the activities of the *politikos*, the statesman.

If this is true, we are confronted with the following question: what is Aristotle doing in writing the *Politics*? It is pretty clear that his main audience is the *politikos*, the man of practical political activity. This is

especially true in the last five books of the *Politics*. Here we are told what the main questions of political science are: When is it appropriate to attempt to establish a “mixed constitution” from two deviant forms and how does one do this? What constitution is best for most cities and how is it to be achieved? What is the best constitution “under a hypothesis” (i.e., a constitution that already has certain preexistent conceptions of the good), and how is it achieved if it is not already in place? What is the best constitution absolutely? What are the causes of political revolutions (*metabole*) and how may they be prevented? And what is the best way to maintain and preserve and even improve constitutions that are defective?

If Aristotle intends the answers to these questions to have any practical value—and I think he does—we have answered an earlier question: the *Politics* is a normative treatise, not an empirical one, at least as far as the *politikoi* are concerned. Aristotle is not merely describing how the political world is; he is urging people with the right sort of knowledge and ability to improve it in various ways. At least this is the main thrust. There are, admittedly, times when his comments seem more purely descriptive or, perhaps more precisely, abstract. This, by the way, is largely true of what I have been calling “prior” or “first-order” questions. But the *Politics* as a whole has a political agenda: to improve the political world.

I do not mean to suggest that practical and theoretical questions are entirely distinct and separate in the *Politics*. There is considerable overlap and intermingling. It is sometimes difficult to discern the difference between purely political and purely philosophical questions. Sometimes it seems even that both audiences would have a vested interest in Aristotle’s comments and insights. I wish only to maintain that some questions make little sense if intended for statesmen, others if intended for philosophers.

This may appear to some a controversial claim. Aristotle’s language throughout the *Politics* is notoriously free of normative statements, even when he is addressing *politikoi*. He does not say, for example, things like, “the statesman *should* enact certain practical measures in certain circumstances” or “the statesman *should* try to ‘mix’ democracies and oligarchies together in certain ways to make them better constitutions” or “when confronted with internal conflict the statesman *should* take certain measures to try to reduce the severity and extent of the conflict.” Certainly he does not say to the tyrant that he *should* enact measures that would be appropriate to making his regime even more tyrannical—although he does spell out what these steps would be to effect this result.

Instead, he almost always frames his thoughts about practical activity as hypotheticals: *if* the desire is to achieve certain specified results with a constitution, *these* steps would be appropriate; or *if* the statesman desires to mix democracies and oligarchies to achieve the better form of polity, these are the conditions in which this could work and these are the steps to take to bring about the desired result; and so forth. Rosler (2005, chapter 4) is correct, I think, to find normativity in Aristotle's somewhat detached and "scientific" treatment of these practical political issues. His reasoning, while involved and complex, may be simplified by asking, "For what purpose would Aristotle make these observations?" It seems unlikely that he would simply record observations, leaving politicians to make their own choices about what to do with them.

Even more strongly, it seems impossible that Aristotle would wish to advise tyrants to become more tyrannical. After all, the *Nicomachean Ethics* makes it clear that the main reason for studying ethics at all (and recall that politics and ethics are allied disciplines) is to *become* virtuous, not just to acquire knowledge of it. I think, with Rosler, that it is correct to impute the same reason for his writing the *Politics*: not just to acquire knowledge but to improve the world. And since we have fairly good ideas from many passages in the *Politics* about what Aristotle thought a "better world" would be, I think we have strong warrant in seeing his statements to *politikoi* as normative, even if they are cast in the more neutral language of science. This is what I meant when I said the *Politics* has a political agenda, at least as far as *politikoi* are concerned.

On the other hand, many of Aristotle's questions cannot have any practical value to the *philosopher*, at least *qua* philosopher. These questions cannot be of any practical interest to the philosopher because the philosopher cannot put their answers to any practical use. They are questions, as mentioned, for politicians who can use the knowledge acquired by answers to them to effect real and usually desirable changes in the actual world of political affairs. To enable *politikoi* to effect such changes seems to be Aristotle's main motive in writing the *Politics*. This stands to reason because one imagines most of the students attending his lectures on ethics and politics to be just the sort of men he hopes will one day go out and make the political world a better place.

But—and here is an important point—this fact does not render the philosopher useless to the city. If the philosopher were useless to the political life of the cities, it is hard to see why Aristotle the philosopher would have written the treatise in the first place. The philosopher needs

knowledge that can be of use to statesmen. If it were not intended for an audience of practitioners, it would serve no discernable useful purpose at all. The political philosopher would simply be wasting his time on a futile exercise. In fact, the order of means to an end may run in precisely the opposite direction: not that the *philosophos* exists for the sake of the *politikos*, but that the *politikos* exists to make the life of the *philosophos* possible. As Reeve neatly puts it:

Thus, a happy human life needs an adequate supply of external goods to satisfy those [natural human] appetites and desires; it must be choiceworthy and lacking of nothing for a political animal whose happiness depends on that of his parents, wife, children, friends, and fellow citizens (*NE* 1097b8–14); and it must be organized so as to promote and facilitate theoretical activity (*NE* 1177b1–24; 1178b 3–7; *EE* 1249b9–21).

It is the task of practical wisdom (statesmanship) to provide human beings with [the possibility of?] a life of this sort; practical wisdom is thus a “kind of steward of wisdom,” procuring leisure for it and its task (*MM* 1198b17–20). This life is “happiest in a secondary way” (*NE* 1178a9) when compared to the philosophical life because it has to contain a substantial amount of political activity, which is second-class happiness (*NE* 1178 8–10; Reeve, 1998, xlvi–xlvi).

The verdict in favor of which life is superior here seems to be decided in favor of the philosophic life. But in truth the relation between the two sorts of life seems more symbiotic: the philosopher needs the statesman to make a life of philosophy possible; and the statesman needs the philosopher to provide him with the sort of “prior” knowledge that renders the task of ruling and participating in politics intelligible and useful. In the words of Keyt, a “good life for Aristotle includes both philosophy and politics” (1991, in Keyt and Miller, eds., 259).

What, then, is the wisdom that the philosopher imparts to the *politikos*? This is the main focus of the present work. This is principally a work about the knowledge addressed to the philosopher and to the first-order doctrine of the *Politics* only. My interest is mainly to illuminate it, since this is, I believe, the significant dimension in explaining the logical structure of Aristotle’s work. In this respect second-order questions are indeed secondary; they do not play a decisive role in informing the organization of the work. Consider, for example, Aristotle’s treatment of the second-order question, “what is the best state absolutely?” One finds this question addressed in one way or another in Books II, III, IV, V, and VII–VIII. Where, it might be asked, is the

logic here? Specifically, why are not the various accounts more closely joined and the questions addressed all at once? And why have discrepancies among these different accounts not been eliminated? Both questions may be answered (as I show more fully below) by appeal to the first-order doctrine. The stages through which the second-order question passes in its development depend upon the development of the first-order doctrine; the logic of the latter is in this case the decisive logic for the composition of the work.

The *Politics* is not so much about giving specific counsel in immediate, concrete situations (although we find plenty of that sort of advice in it as well), but in providing the *politikos* with *theoretical knowledge* about the nature of the polis, the citizen, and the constitution (*politeia*), the parts of the constitution, the variety of forms of *politeiai* and why they differ, the human function or purpose, and the nature of genuine happiness. These questions I call “first-order questions” or “prior” questions. The *politikos*, in his turn, fulfills daily political tasks but also creates the conditions in the polis that makes the life of the philosopher possible and fulfilling. His questions are “second-order questions,” questions that, as a matter of logic, simply cannot be answered coherently in the absence of an account of answers to the first-order questions. How, for example, can a *politikos* understand how to blend two deviant forms of constitution to form a “polity” unless he first understands something about the differences between democracies and oligarchies and what makes a mix between them sometimes more desirable? Two sorts of study are needed to give a complete answer, and these fall to two sorts of people. The two sorts of people need each other to prosper and reach human happiness.

Thus, I continue to believe the “first-order/second-order” distinction is useful for understanding the logic of the *Politics* as a whole, and I shall retain some of that distinction in the present volume. But I shall refine the distinction in two significant ways, to bring my work more closely into alignment with Aristotle’s terminology and usage. The first I have already alluded to; I now shall argue that the so-called “first-order” questions are written for and directed to philosophers, not statesmen or politicians. After all, one expects future philosophers to be included among his group of students. When properly educated in first-order issues, they will be in a much better position to impart wisdom in ruling to those whose aspirations are to be men active in the public sphere of actual political ruling. But to provide the best kind of help available to these individuals the philosopher must be well-versed in first-order issues. This distinction will be clarified as we move along.

The second major adjustment to the argument of the earlier volume will be to replace “first-order/second-order” by a more familiar Aristotelian distinction: his distinction between “prior” and “posterior.” This distinction has several different meanings to Aristotle and is applied in a wide variety of contexts. It has often been employed in analyses of the *Politics* (e.g., Fortenbaugh, 1991, in Keyt and Miller, eds., chapter 10; Keyt, 1987, 63; Kraut, 2002, 253–76), not to mention in several other works, but not in the way I intend to use it. As a rough preliminary, for the present work we can say that “prior” questions are those I previously called “first-order questions,” and “posterior” questions are those I previously called “second-order questions.” To round things out, I have added yet another dimension that is wholly new in this work: “prior questions” are those addressed to philosophers; “posterior questions” are those addressed to would-be or actual “politicians” or “statesmen.”

The distinction is this: a posterior question cannot *logically* be answered or even necessarily comprehended in the absence of answers to prior questions. An analogy would be something like this: one cannot intelligibly ask, “Is this fruit an orange?” (a posterior question in this context) without first knowing what “fruit” means and what “orange” means. Only armed with theoretical wisdom about what fruits and oranges are can one confidently assert, “this fruit is an orange” (if that is what it happens to be). Another example, furnished by Keyt, suggests that one may usefully discriminate in logic between a “concept,” which is a principle true of all cases that fall under the concept, and a “conception,” in which the *application* of the concept may vary from case to case (Keyt, 1991, 276). Similarly, but in the context of the questions raised in the *Politics*, one cannot confidently assert that “this constitution is a democracy” until one has a grasp of what “constitution” means and what “democracy” means. The latter questions are thus prior, the former posterior. In any case, that is the kind of distinction I will be employing in my analysis of the *Politics*.

The book thus assumes a framework that looks something like table 1.1.

If this schema is approximately correct, it helps resolve some of the complexities of the text that we encountered at the beginning

**Table 1.1**

Type of Question	Audience for Question	Purpose of Question
1. Prior	Philosophers	To address political theory
2. Posterior	Politicians	To address practical politics

of the current work. On this reading, a sensible way of understanding the structure of the *Politics* is to think of Books I and III (with qualifications to be mentioned as they arise) as devoted primarily to prior questions, the latter five books as devoted mainly to secondary questions. Book II is an anomaly on this view because it is a review of previous thinkers and previously existing states rather than an inquiry into prior or posterior questions. Hansen usefully describes Book II as a *Forschungsberichte* (2013, 22). It is also true that exceptions to the rule may be found: Book III, for example, sometimes takes up posterior questions, whereas Book IV (though not so much V–VIII) sometimes addresses prior questions. These exceptions are easily explained once one sees the questions in context. But overall the rule is a good one for working through the *Politics*.

We must add a final wrinkle to the complex layering of subjects and audiences in the *Politics*, only to be mentioned here but to be explored more thoroughly in a later chapter. The audiences of the *Politics* may well include philosophers and statesmen, some parts directed mainly to one audience, other parts to the other. But the ultimate beneficiaries of the wisdom of both kinds of knowledge are “citizens,” or perhaps more generally the people living in the polis. This is true both of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where the ethical virtue of individual citizens and others is chiefly at stake: how does an individual citizen or any person become virtuous?; and in the *Politics*: how do states as wholes become virtuous, or at least more virtuous than they may already be? Indeed, what *is* a virtuous state and why do so many existing states lack virtue, at least virtue in the proper or complete sense? These questions in turn involve knowing who is properly a citizen in any state, what is the meaning of the state (*politeia*) itself, and how are citizens properly related to the *politeiai* and to other people in the polis in which they happen to live? These are all “prior” questions because answers to questions of practical politics cannot, as a matter of logic, be answered in the absence of answers to these sorts of questions. These are the questions that will be taken up in what follows.

## CHAPTER 2



### *POLITICS* BOOK I

#### I. NATURE

In this work I will not be discussing each of the eight books of the *Politics* in turn. Detailed treatments of most of these exist as separate works already, and readers interested in particular books should consult the bibliography for detailed references. The treatment in the current volume will be more thematic, the first part focusing on “prior” questions, the second part on “posterior” questions. But before taking up Aristotle’s discussion of what I have been calling “prior” questions that appear mainly in Books III and IV, I shall begin with a more general account of Aristotle’s Book I. The issues raised in Book I are “prior” questions, but they are really in some ways *prior* to prior questions, prior in a unique sense. The parts of Book I of interest to me in this volume give a general framework, outlining some of Aristotle’s main presuppositions when he studies any “natural thing.” Since, as he says, “the polis exists by nature,” and that “man is [by nature] a political animal,” a useful starting point will be a brief excursion into what Aristotle thought it meant to say that a thing is “by nature.”

The question is familiar to anyone who has read much of anything by Aristotle, and the answer is not free of difficulty. I wish to avoid lengthy debates on a subject that has already received so much scholarly attention and instead stick as closely as possible to a few key texts, mainly but not only *Politics* Book I, allowing Aristotle to speak for himself as much as possible. The brief discussion of “nature” will be followed by an inspection of several other Aristotelian doctrines that follow from his views about “nature.” Against this background “prior” and “posterior” questions come into sharper focus.

Aristotle is often referred to as a naturalist. Whenever he studies anything—and there were few things he did not study—he nearly always approached the phenomenon in question as a matter of discovering its “nature” (*physis*). Nature seems to be his fundamental starting point of any inquiry and thus occupies an especially important place in all his philosophy; politics is no exception. He captures the political idea in a number of near-immortal phrases: “Man is [by nature] a political animal” is perhaps the most famous, but of equal import are phrases suggesting that the polis exists “by nature”; that “nature makes nothing in vain”; that all natural substances have “natures” that are proper to them; that some people are cut out “by nature” to be natural slaves”; that women by nature, while possessing the deliberative faculty in some degree (a precondition for ruling well) lack this faculty to the extent needed for being good rulers or even full citizens. That there are “natural limits” to the amount of wealth any person may rightly possess, that “nature is an end”; and that all natural entities have natural “purposes.”

Theoretical investigation, broadly speaking, is thus about “nature.” “It is in things whose condition is according to nature (*kata physin*) that one ought particularly to investigate (*skopein*), what is by nature (*physei*). Thus (is) the human being to be studied (*theoreton*)” (*Pol. I. v* 1254 a36–3). But saying even this much raises difficulties. What Aristotle means by “nature” (*physis*) is not always clear, even if one keeps only the *Politics* in view. Often it takes the sense that we encounter in the definition of “nature” in the philosophical lexicon in Book Delta of the *Metaphysics*: “the essence of things which have a source of movement in themselves” (D.4 1014 b16ff.; cf. *Physics* II 192 b8–16). Collingwood notes that two ideas are involved here: nature is process, growth, change (or essences that undergo these kinds of things); and nature is self-change, or things whose source of movement is in themselves. Kraut (2002, 247) draws attention also to Aristotle’s dictum that “nature is an end,” that is, what a thing has become once its growth is completed. Because the political partnership is an association possessing these characteristics, growing as it does out of the primary partnerships of the household and the village from a source of movement within itself and striving to attain its proper end, it is “natural,” and as such comes within the purview of the one who wishes to study political nature (*Pol. I. i* 1252 a24ff.).

But nature is not only growth; it is also the *end* of growth. It is, as Aristotle writes in the *Metaphysics*, “the form or essence, which is the end (*telos*) of the process of becoming.” In the *Politics* he writes simply: “Nature is an end” (*he de physis telos estin*: I. ii 1252 b33). “End”

is here to be understood in a double sense. On the one hand, it means what natural things come to be when their development is complete; in this sense it refers to mature, fully developed entities. On the other hand, “end” refers to the “purpose” for which natural things exist. All natural entities exist for some purpose. “Nature does nothing in vain,” Aristotle wrote in a famous passage (*Pol.* I. ii 1253 a9–10; cf. 1252 b34–36). These two senses are correlative. When objects attain to the complete limit of full self-development, then and only then are their natural purposes fully and adequately revealed.

Beyond that, nature is good; indeed, it is “what is best” (I. ii 1252 b35–36). To say, then, as Aristotle often does, that something is “by nature” (*kata physis*) is to register an attitude of approbation; and conversely, when something is “against nature” (*para physin*), it is “not good,” or “defective” (*diephtharmenos*). “Nature” is just as it should be, at least when it has achieved its “end. It constitutes, potentially if not always actually, what we might call an objectively correct moral order (cf. Kraut, 2002, 36–49, who argues against “subjectivism” in Aristotle’s thought). This is a fundamental assumption that Aristotle makes about all of nature. Nature, in effect, serves Aristotle as a standard medium of evaluation of all inductions. As noted above, when he theorizes about political nature he implicitly makes moral evaluations about what he sees.

Perhaps the chief difficulty one encounters in studying nature is that what is “in nature” is not always “according to nature.” By nature, the soul rules the body (I. v 1254 blff.), but that does not prevent many souls from being ruled by bodies. By nature, all things are supplied with the necessities of subsistence (I. x 1258 a35ff.), yet some things nevertheless lack the necessities. Anything too big or too small is robbed of its nature (VII. iv 1326 a40), yet in nature one encounters many things that are too big or too small. Similar paradoxes are encountered in the moral and political world. Only “right” regimes are “by nature,” yet many “deviations” exist, and these are “against nature.” The end (*telos*) of human nature is the cultivation of the rational faculty (VII. xv 1334 b12ff.), yet many human beings exist whose rational faculty is undernourished.

Certain sophistic philosophers prior to Aristotle had attempted to resolve dilemmas of this kind by introducing a distinction between what is “by nature” (*kata physin*) and what is “by convention” (*kata nomon*). If something in nature was against nature, one might then hypothesize that it existed by convention. For example, if it was believed that “by nature” the strong rule over the weak, then if one discovered in a particular case that the weak were ruling the strong,

one would reason that such inversion of the “natural order” had come about through human conventions, wherein the weak, being more numerous than the strong, would be supposed to have agreed among themselves to allow the weak to rule, even “against nature” (cf. Plato’s use of this distinction to undermine Callicles’ “strong man” philosophy in *Gorgias* 483a–488d; discussions include Guthrie 1969, v. 3; Kerferd, 1981, chapter 10; Johnson, 2005, chapter 6).

Aristotle was not unfamiliar with this method of reasoning, and in fact uses it himself occasionally in the *Politics*, as when, for example, he is attempting to explain how certain slaves have come to be “against nature” (*Pol.* I. vi 1255 a4–10; cf. also *NE* 1094 b14ff.; 1124 b28–37; and N. D. Smith, in Keyt and Miller, eds., 1991, chapter 6; Kraut, 2002, 277–305). But this is not his usual strategy. Unfortunately, many things existed “in nature” but also “against nature” that could not be adequately explained by reference to a convention or agreement—a deformed tree, a nose too long, a drought, or what have you. One might argue that a nose too long is too long only “by convention,” i.e., that standards of beauty and the like are not permanent but only temporary resting places of human agreement. Aristotle, while admitting that some people see things this way (e.g., *NE* I. 3 1094 b15–17), does not do so himself. There are disagreements about what is “by nature,” but there is also Aristotle’s repeated insistence that “the best,” “the right,” and the like do exist apart from these disagreements. Instead, Aristotle relied heavily on three other distinctions: that between the mature (or completed—*teleos*) and the immature (or incomplete—*ateles*); that between the healthy (or right—*orthos*) and the deviant (*parekbasis*) or the degenerate (*diaphtharmenos*) or the bad (*phaulos*: I. v 1254 a36ff.); and that between the essential (*ousia*) or determining (*horos*: e.g., III. ix 1280 a8) and the accidental (*sumbebekos*: III. viii 1279 b34) in nature. (A parallel distinction, that between the “potential” and the “actual,” will be taken up in later parts of this book.)

One guards against mistaking things in nature for things according to nature by paying regard only to mature adult specimens. It is in the adult members of a class of objects that its natural form is most likely to be discovered (I. ii 1252 b28ff.). Since nearly all things in nature go through distinct periods of birth, growth, maturity, decay, and death, it is at least a manageable task to sort out the mature stage from the others and to focus on it. This does not obviate every difficulty—there is still the hazard that some things that are mature are nevertheless contrary to nature, and sometimes there will even be difficulty discriminating the mature from the immature specimen.

But at least the mature specimen, once found, is a suitable starting point for inquiry.

Assuming a mature specimen, Aristotle considers it still necessary to determine whether the specimen in question is “right” or “deviant.” Theorists are interested in specimens of both types; but they also wish to know which is which. This determination requires a criterion of discrimination; a specimen is “right” (and so is “according to nature”) when it fulfills the condition, and is “deviant” when it does not. Concerning states, Aristotle in the *Politics* tells us only *what* the criterion of “rightness” is (viz., that the rulers rule for the common interest, or that the rulers are the virtuous); he does not tell us how he derives it, or how one would go about establishing criteria of rightness and deviance for the things of nature in general. This may be regarded as a serious omission from the *Politics*. (At a later point I attempt to explain Aristotle’s method in this regard, based upon his actual procedure.) But at least we are told as much as we need to know, assuming we possess correct knowledge about the criterion of “rightness,” to be able to recognize which states are “according to nature” and which are not.

Finally, theorists must be able to disentangle essential properties of natural objects from accidental ones. For this one must learn to think in terms of Aristotle’s four causes. The basic question prior to any explanation is: “Why is a thing what it is?” The four causes represent different ways of answering this question. For things produced by human activity, a thing is what it is because: (1) it came into being as the result of the activity of some producer who intended to bring into being a thing of that sort (efficient cause); (2) it possesses the characteristics and qualities appropriate to a thing of that sort (formal cause); (3) it is composed of material parts in a way appropriate to a thing of that sort (material cause); and (4) it aspires to fulfill the purpose or end that things of that sort fulfill (final cause). These are the questions that show the way to the essential nature of any object. To theorize about an object (such as the state) is thus to provide answers to each of these “why” questions.

How, though, can one know what characteristics and properties are essential to a thing’s being (formal cause) unless one already knows how to discover essential properties? How can one know whether a thing fulfills the purpose that it is supposed to fulfill (final cause) unless one already knows what purposes things of that sort are supposed to fulfill? How can one know what material parts are essential to a thing (material cause) unless one is already equipped with a criterion for discriminating essential from nonessential material parts? In short,

how do theorists avoid the obvious pitfalls of *petitio* and circular reasoning when exposing the often-invisible contours of a perfect natural order?

Again, Aristotle relied heavily on experience and observation, the evidence of his senses. One knows about essential properties by looking at things, as many of a given kind as possible. (We shall overlook, as he did in the *Politics*, the problem that to recognize two things as “the same” presupposes that criteria for discriminating among objects are already in hand [cf. A. C. Lloyd, 1962, and W. Charlton, 1972, for discussions of Aristotle’s method of individuation]). It is said that Aristotle had the evidence of 158 city-states before him when writing the *Politics*. But that is not the only evidence he used; he also would consult public opinion, the views of earlier philosophers, and any other relevant material he could find.

Nature, too, furnished assistance. For Aristotle the surface of nature was not flat; its essential features protruded, the peaks and valleys were in some measure exposed. One needed only to survey the terrain with the proper care and discernment. Or, to alter the metaphor, there were joints to the body of nature, and the aim of the theorist (as for Plato, too) was to carve at the joints. There is a role—an important role—for intuition here; the zoologist may have different ideas about where and how to carve than the butcher (and I do not pretend to say whose ideas are superior—everything depends on what one wishes to accomplish). Still, when one is convinced that a natural order does exist, that essential properties are real and that these are distinct from accidental properties, such conviction removes many doubts.

When, therefore, Aristotle defines the polis as “an association of families and villages in a perfect and self-sufficing existence . . . consisting in a life of true felicity and goodness” (III. ix 1281 a1ff.), he is drawing attention to what he regarded as the essential elements of the polis, what all *poleis* essentially have in common. Its size, its geographical location, its buildings and markets are all secondary and accidental to its essence. Again, when he finds the essential differentiating property of different *poleis* to be their constitutions, he is asserting a deeper truth than the mere fact that different cities have different forms of government. Rather he is saying that it is *in virtue* of having different constitutions (in the broad meaning of the word) that *poleis* are different. This is because the form of the organization of the polis—its constitution—is that which gives each polis its distinctive character and makes it a polis of *this* sort rather than another. As Aristotle says, “When the form of the constitution (*politeia*) has been altered and is different it would appear to follow that the city (polis) is no longer

the same city . . . we must speak of a city (polis) as being the same city chiefly with regard to its constitution (*politeia*)” (III. iii 1276 a34ff.).

The polis is by nature (I. ii 1252 b31). Nature then is the sole authority for definitions that attempt to capture its essential properties; that is, there is an obligation on the part of the theorist to define according to nature. Aristotle, perhaps needless to say, is no nominalist; his definitions are bound by virtue of his epistemology to the empirical bedrock that they attempt to illuminate. When he says that a constitution is “the ordering of a state with respect to its offices” (III. i 1289 a13ff.), he is (in his view) giving more than his opinion. Nor is he moralizing, saying what he thinks constitutions *should* be. Nor is he inventing a useful terminology to facilitate discourse. Rather, he is explaining what it is that all constitutions in fact are, and not just accidentally, but because it is part of nature’s plan that they are essentially things of this sort and not some other.

Nature is perfect, or at least it aspires to become so. But the things of nature do not emerge from nature in a preexistent perfect form. They must *grow into* their proper natures. A variety of influences may easily interfere with growth, and other factors assist proper growth. Entities by nature aspire to become what they should be, but they sometimes fail. When this happens one concludes not that nature has erred; one concludes rather that what is natural has not come to pass. Nature, though itself immanently perfect, abounds with imperfect specimens. Nature does nothing in vain; but some individual entities vainly aspire to become what they are “by nature.” Such paradoxes are the common fare of Aristotle’s political theory.

## II. FUNCTIONALISM

Aristotle is also known as a “functionalist.” By this is meant that everything in nature exists for a purpose, and its purpose is to be understood as its “function” or “end,” or what it is for. Often this aspect of Aristotle’s philosophy is called “teleology,” from the Greek word *telos*, which, as mentioned earlier, means two things: what a thing is when it is in its fully mature and healthy state and what something is for. The two meanings are correlative; the end is fulfilled (on the occasions when it is) only when the thing in question is mature, fully developed, and healthy. A thing’s purpose is its end in both senses. From this it follows that all natural things have a *telos*, both in the sense of what it is striving to become as it grows and develops, and in the sense of what its purpose is. The activity of a thing striving to fulfill its purpose may not be conscious or deliberate (although in the case of humans it

usually is), but the attainment of a thing's purpose or end is what it is trying to become when it is fully mature and healthy.

Perhaps the easiest way to grasp the point of Aristotle's teleology is to consider the "parts" of a human body: the nose is for smelling, the eyes are for seeing, the tongue is for tasting, and so forth. Does Aristotle really believe that *everything* that is natural has a natural purpose? Some controversy about this exists, but not much. In one passage from *Parts of Animals*, for example, Aristotle claims not to be able to fathom what the purpose of bile is (chapter 2, 676b16–677b10; cf. J. Lennox, ed. Oxford, 2002). He suggests that maybe it is one of those rare natural things that has no purpose, but his more likely and consistent answer would be that it does have a purpose, just that he does not yet know what it is.

More interesting are questions regarding the purposes not of parts of living creatures but of the entire creatures themselves, including human creatures (cf. Kraut, 2002, 82–83). Do plants and animals have purposes, in the same way that the purpose of the nose is to smell? Do human beings have purposes *qua* human beings? Aristotle, here, is not asking, "What is the purpose of a carpenter or a doctor or a political man, but what is the *human* purpose, as such?" What is the human *telos*? His naturalism and functionalism would seem to commit him to having teleological answers to these intriguing questions.

Before we turn to his answers in Book I it will be helpful to note two corollaries to the basic precept that living creatures have natural purposes.

A. The first is that "nature makes nothing in vain" (*Pol.* 1256 b15–21). By this Aristotle presumably means that if nature has made something, or something is "by nature," it not only has a purpose proper to it, but more strongly, that the *reason* nature made it was so that it could fulfill its purpose. If Aristotle believed that nature made things without purposes he would be committing himself to the idea that nature had made those things "in vain," and that is something, he insists, that nature does not often do. But, as we shall see, this rule, like many others in Aristotle, does admit to exceptions.

But the precept has one especially important application, and that is again the case of humans. A thing's purpose may often be discerned by examining what is unique to that thing and what is essential to that thing's existence—what Aristotle often describes as a thing's essence (*ousia*). Each thing has only a single essence, and that is what makes it a thing of that sort rather than of another sort. Essences are thus to be discriminated from "non-essential" features of a thing. For example, the essence of a goose is that it has the form of a goose. It is brought

into being the way geese are usually brought into being; it is made up of parts appropriate to a goose; and it serves the ends of geese (cf. Garver, 2011, 68, who uses the example of a pig to make the same point, with the addition that the example shows, he thinks, that final and formal causes are the same). The goose may be white or brown, but the *color* of the goose is “accidental” because it does not bear on the “essence.” And since each essence is a singular property, belonging only to things of its type and each thing has only one essence (e.g., geese have only one form, one material cause, one efficient cause, and one purpose or final cause), we do not find in nature things that have multiple essences.

Humans, however, seem again to present an exception to this. When we look at human beings, we find two functions/purposes that are both part of a human’s essence. One is, as with all other living creatures, to propagate, to make copies of the human type. (That purpose, in fact, seems to exhaust the natural purposes of all non-human living things—whole things, not parts of things: *Pol.* 1252 a26–34.) But humans are unique, insofar as they possess speech and reason (*logos*, not to be confused with “voice,” a trait shared by other animals as well: *Pol.* 1253a10–11). Since this quality has been given to “man,” it must have a purpose, or else nature would have made something “in vain.” And because it supposedly is given to humans uniquely, its purpose must be sought in the human essence.

What, then, is the purpose of speech/reason? It is given to humans not merely as a means of expressing sensations of pleasure and pain; to do those things is no part of humans’ natural purpose. Some non-human animals do those same things, so there’s nothing distinctive about humans here. Rather, human speech/reason enables humans to exchange ideas about the advantageous and the harmful, and *therefore* about the right and the wrong (or the just and the unjust). This ability (to exchange ideas in speech about the just and unjust) *is* distinctive and unique to humans, according to Aristotle. Thus, to deliberate about these matters in common with other humans must be another human purpose. To quote Aristotle:

For [speech/reason] is the special property of man in distinction from other animals that [allows him alone] to have perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city state (*Pol.* 1253 a11–18; cf. Garver, 2011, 11–12, 17, 140, 222).

B. The second corollary is more difficult to square with the doctrines already discussed; nature is not “stingy” (*Pol.* 1252 b1–5). Nature is

not like one of those Delphic knife makers who create knives that serve two or more distinct purposes, like a Swiss Army knife does. The idea here would seem to be that not only does each natural thing have a purpose, but it has only *one* natural purpose, the purpose appropriate to its nature. To revert to the example of noses, while noses *may* serve more than a single end—e.g., smelling and supporting spectacles—the latter is not the proper or natural end for noses. It is, as Aristotle would say, an *accidental* or an *incidental* purpose. Various natural things may serve more than a single end or have more than a single function, but things would seem always to have only one “natural” or “proper” end.

This “rule” or precept also admits of exceptions, even if they are rare. In the case of biological entities, for example, the purpose of these entities is to reproduce, to create copies of themselves so as to ensure the perpetuation of an eternal perfect order and harmony. If pairs of like creatures were to bring forth creatures totally unlike themselves, the natural order would quickly become chaotic and disharmonious. Indeed, nature would no longer possess order, life would become impossible, and along with it even the possibility of science and understanding. And what is true of the plants and lower animals is also true of humans. Humans mate, like other creatures, although not necessarily consciously, in order to reproduce like copies of themselves—at least sufficiently alike to permit us to group them together into natural orders called species or natural types. Furthermore, this process of reproduction, even among humans, is not deliberate or by design. It is the result of “an innate natural impulse” shared by all biological entities. Humans may mate because they choose to, but they would mate even if they exercised no conscious choice at all.

But the precept that nature is not stingy appears definitely *not* to be true at all in the case of one group of natural entities: human beings. “The polis,” Aristotle famously wrote, “comes into existence for the sake of life [which can be sustained through reproductive activities alone], [but] it *exists* for the sake of the good life.” The passage is important, and I will reproduce it more fully here:

Hence, every city-state exists by nature, inasmuch as the first partnerships so exist; for the city-state is the end of the other partnerships, and nature is an end, since that which each thing is when its growth is completed we speak of as being the nature of each thing [and] this end is its chief good (*Pol.* 1252 b28–1253a2).

Nature, then, appears to have assigned two purposes to humans: reproduction and engaging in speech/reason about the just and the

unjust. Moreover, when a natural entity has achieved its purpose in the proper (natural) way, it is “right” and “good.” It has achieved its end. Natural things as a rule achieve their natural purposes only after they have reached maturity. Nature is thus not what a substance is at its inception (a human baby or a bird’s egg is not “natural” in this sense, although a proper method of science includes studying things “in the process of development, from the beginning” [*Pol.* 1252a24 ff.]). But nature is not to be confused with a substance in its nascence or when it has passed maturity and is on the decline of its life. One studies “nature” in its proper sense when an entity has reached full and healthy maturity (*Pol.* 1252 b28–1253 a8). Thus, when it comes to human associations, families and villages are not by nature, because they are immature and undeveloped forms of what they eventually will become on reaching healthy maturity. Well-functioning *poleis* are by nature when people deliberate about the just and unjust.

### III. NATURAL THINGS AND UNNATURAL THINGS

What distinguishes natural entities from non-natural ones is not entirely clear. In what is perhaps Aristotle’s most lucid and complete statement about natural things he has this to say:

Of things that exist, some exist by nature, some from other causes. By nature the animals and their parts exist, and the plants and the simple bodies (earth, fire, air, water)—for we say that these and the like exist by nature. All the things mentioned plainly differ from things that are *not* constituted by nature. For each of them (i.e., each natural thing) has within itself a principle of stationariness and of motion (in respect of place or of growth and decrease, or by way of alteration). On the other hand, a bed and a coat and anything else of that sort, *qua* receiving these designations—i.e., insofar as they are products of art—have no innate impulse to change [and so are not natural?] (*Physics* Book II, 192 b9–17).

Unfortunately, as many commentators of the *Politics* have pointed out (see especially D. Keyt [in Keyt and Miller, eds., 1991, 119–41]), this passage leaves us with a major problem about the *Politics*, perhaps even a “basic flaw” at the very core of Aristotle’s political theory (Keyt, 1987, 54–79). This is that Aristotle, in *Politics* Book I, says the polis is not only *by nature* but also that it is perfected by human agency, or art. But, according to *Physics* II, as we just saw, things that are brought into existence through human art or agency—beds,

coats, in general artifacts of human creation—are *not* by nature but, as Hobbes has it, by “art.” So, is the polis “by nature” or “not by nature”? It appears to be something of both kinds.

Keyt (*ibid.*) develops several arguments to show that, even by Aristotle’s assumptions, his premise that the polis is a natural entity fails, no matter what strategy Aristotle uses to defend it. (Keyt identifies four key Aristotelian arguments intended to demonstrate the polis is a natural entity, and that, for different reasons, all four fail.) But if the polis is not a natural entity, then conclusions derived from that premise, such as that “man is by nature a political animal” and that any person living outside the polis must not be human, but either a beast or a god, must fail too. Keyt’s general conclusion is that Hobbes’ theory that the commonwealth is a product of “Art,” not “Nature,” is superior to Aristotle’s naturalistic argument and may even be the correct account. In any event, Aristotle’s arguments fail and, therefore, on Keyt’s reading, there is indeed a contradiction at the very core of the *Politics* (Miller, 1989, and Depew, 1989, offer two dissenting views).

Reeve (1998, xlix), while agreeing that Aristotle seems to be making conflicting claims about whether the polis is by nature or by art, brings forth quite a different argument about a proper resolution. He finds a role for art in perfecting or bringing to completion things that are “by nature.” In a nutshell, according to Reeve, potentialities that are part of natural things are or may be further actualized by craft (Reeve, 1998, xlix). It is plausible, I think, to regard this as a more general way in which Aristotle views natural things. To say that they “exist by nature” means that the source of their origin or generation, and subsequent growth and maturation, all proceed from “inner forces and impulses.” But that does not prevent “art,” e.g., human agency, from *assisting* natural things in fulfilling their ends once they have come into being and started the process of growth and development. At that point “art” can lend a helping hand without violating the basic precept about the essential nature of natural things being things whose source of movement, change, even generation is given to them by nature. This, in fact, seems to be just the view that Charles Darwin centuries later adopted about natural variations: they come about by “natural processes” (by which Darwin often meant “randomly” or “by chance”), but once they had appeared “on their own,” or “spontaneously,” as he put it, they could receive “assistance” from external agencies—sun, wind, water, environmental changes—to develop those random variations even further. Such environmentally induced changes might help to explain, for example, the long neck of the giraffe (Johnson, 2014). But such developments induced by

external factors did not turn “natural” things into “unnatural” things, except occasionally. Even nature unassisted could occasionally produce “unnatural” things, such as “monsters” were thought to be.

But perhaps the most common strategy for removing the apparent contradiction is the most traditional one, such as that found in earlier commentators like E. Barker and W. L. Newman. Barker, for example, wrote about Book I, chapter 2 of the *Politics* (where the alleged contradiction first appears):

Aristotle here concedes, and indeed argues, that in saying the state is natural he does not mean that it “grows” naturally, without human volition and action. There is art as well as nature, and art cooperates with nature: the volition and action of human agents “construct” the state in cooperation with a natural immanent impulse (1946, 7, n. 1; cf. A. C. Bradley, in Keyt and Miller, eds., 1991, 26; Miller, 1989, 195–218).

The idea here seems to be that the “nature vs. art” dilemma may just be posing a false dichotomy. Why cannot the two work together—i.e., cooperate—for a common end? Keyt, of course, rejects this idea, and for well-argued reasons, but the idea does have at least a surface plausibility.

#### IV. WHY THINGS EXIST AND THE FOUR CAUSES

One final point to bear in mind about Aristotle’s views about natural things and their ends: the aim of all science is to discover the nature or essence of things (*Physics*, Book II, chapters 3–5). This turns out to be a matter of discovering *why* things that exist do exist. Aristotle discovers four causes for why things exist, and possibly a fifth—chance. I have already alluded to this and will take it up in further detail when we turn to Aristotle’s discussion of “prior questions.” But for now it should be noticed that the answers to Aristotle’s “why” questions almost always involve statements about the various causes for why things exist, with the main answer to the “why” questions usually coming down to the fourth cause, what Aristotle calls the “final cause.” The search for this cause is a search for a thing’s purpose, what it is for.

Now, natural things that have natural purposes usually succeed in fulfilling their purposes, assuming they develop to maturity. But this is not always the case, for two different reasons. Sometimes, try as it might, nature simply fails to achieve the end it reaches for. For

example, when members of the same species unite for the sake of reproduction, they tend to produce offspring just like themselves. But this does not always happen. Something different from the parents is produced—a monstrosity, say—or nothing at all is produced. In such cases we can do no better than to say that while nature *usually* fulfills its purposes, sometimes it fails. The other reason for nature's failures is that the productions are not "by nature," that is attributable to the four causes, but rather come about "by chance," or "spontaneously." Such productions are, by definition, unpredictable, but they are also usually contrary to nature.

Aristotle's distinction between "natural" and "chance" productions is difficult because it appears to equivocate. Immediately following his discussion of the four natural causes Aristotle introduces "chance" or "spontaneity" as a possible fifth cause, chance productions being no part of nature's plan. These two factors—mistakes and chance—explain exhaustively for Aristotle why the natural world is not always exactly as it should be. But, in the course of his discussion of "chance" causes, Aristotle seems to reverse course. Things that are said to exist by chance are really not by chance at all. They only seem to be. I shall quote the two relevant passages from *Physics* and then give a brief summary and analysis:

1. First, then, there are obviously things which *always* happen in the same way, and things which *usually* do. It is evident, that no one says that either of these two classes of events . . . have chance as a cause, or happen by chance. However, since there are also events that are not covered by these descriptions, and since everyone says these events happen by chance, it is evident that there is such a thing as chance and as spontaneity (*Physics* II. 5 196 b10–15).
2. The things that might act as causes of chance events are bound, therefore, to be indeterminate. That is why chance too is taken to be indeterminate and opaque to people and why it does make a kind of sense to think that nothing comes about by chance. All these views are, not surprisingly, correct. There *is* a sense in which things happen by chance: they happen coincidentally, and chance is a coincidental cause. But in an unqualified sense chance causes nothing (*Physics* II. 5 192 a6–14).

Aristotle begins his discussion by allowing an apparent role for events in nature as having been caused by chance. But if that were so, the entire edifice of Aristotle's naturalism would be put in jeopardy. A chance world would seem to lead straightaway to a chaotic and

unharmonious world. It would ruin the otherwise serviceable doctrine of the four causes and would render the entire scientific enterprise—one that depends on an orderly nature—impossible. Aristotle quickly remedies this potentially fatal objection by arguing that by “chance cause” what is really meant is “coincidental cause.” We illustrated the idea earlier with the examples of a house and a nose. The house was not built by “a pale man” except coincidentally; it was built essentially by a builder *qua* builder. A nose does not exist for the purpose of supporting spectacles, except coincidentally; its essential purpose *qua* nose is to smell.

## CHAPTER 3



# ARISTOTLE'S METHOD IN THE *POLITICS*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Having considered Aristotle's general opinions about what nature is, we would now find it necessary to look more deeply into the question concerning his method of carrying out a proper study of it. By "method" I refer to Aristotle's procedure when he identifies and classifies objects; in effect, method refers to the principles that underlie and guide these two processes. Thus understood, "method" is in part descriptive and in part explanatory. It is descriptive insofar as it results in an enumeration of the variety of political entities (constitutions) and suggests an order among them; it is explanatory insofar as it attempts to give a reasoned account of why these entities are as they are and why they exhibit the order they do. This chapter takes up only the former of these two concerns; I examine the latter in Chapter 5.

"Method" is thus not so much a "first-order" question as way of showing how Aristotle dealt with first-order questions. Like Book I of the *Politics*, it is more a prolegomena to first-order issues than a first-order issue in itself (cf. Aristotle's account of his method of ordering animals in *De Partibus Animalium* Book I, but it is controversial whether or not he employs the same method in the *Politics*; discussions include D. M. Balme, 1972, 99–119; P. Pellegrin, 1982; and F. Solmsen, 1978, 456–84).

The matter is complicated in certain respects. Aristotle offers little in the *Politics* that can be regarded as an explicit discussion of methodological principles. We must therefore study his method largely by studying its application in a relatively large number of actual instances. Beyond that it is not obvious that Aristotle always employed a single

method—a point urged by some scholars as evidence for a “developmentalist” interpretation of the *Politics*. Not only the method but the results of its application also seem to vary, yielding at some times one set of identifications of constitutions, at other times another (Hansen, 2013, 12–17). Indeed, the picture presented by the taxonomic sections of the *Politics* appears often less a single systematic schema than several schemata more or less loosely joined to one another. One rightly wonders, therefore, whether there is here a unity of method.

There is, finally, the additional complication, alluded to earlier, that Aristotle's whole manner of “seeing” nature is unusual and foreign to modern ideas. Whatever his method, it cannot be called rigorously scientific in any modern sense. What observation meant to Aristotle was different from what it means to students of politics today. In particular his observations were colored by certain prejudices about what nature contains. It contains, in Aristotle's view, a proper order; natural objects have natural ends; goods and objects are hierarchically arranged according to standards whose existence must be confirmed intuitively, not empirically; deviant and unfulfilled specimens abound. Within the limits of his prejudices, Aristotle was an unsurpassed observer. But to appreciate fully his method one must keep his prejudices in mind.

## II. THE RULES GOVERNING CLASSIFICATION

It is not quite correct to say that Aristotle nowhere describes his method of classification in the *Politics*. There is one short passage in Book IV (1290 b21ff.) that gives a highly compressed summary of how to classify states, by means of a well-known analogy taken from zoological classification (cf. Pellegrin, 2012, 576–82 for a compressed discussion).

Therefore just as, in case we intended to obtain a classification of animals, we should first define those parts necessarily belonging to every animal (for instance some of the sense organs, and the machinery for masticating and for receiving food, such as a mouth and a stomach, and in addition to these the locomotive organs of the various species), and if there were only so many necessary parts, but there were different varieties of these (I mean for instance certain various kinds of mouth and stomach and sensory organs, and also of the locomotive parts as well), the number of possible combinations of these variations will necessarily produce a variety of kinds of animals . . . so that when all the possible combinations of these are taken they will produce animal species, and

there will be as many species of the animal as there are combinations of the necessary parts: so in the same way also we shall classify the varieties of constitutions that have been mentioned.

We learn perhaps relatively little about method from this statement, but we do learn something. First, it is evident that Aristotle's aim is to classify states according to their natural and proper divisions. He wants to "carve at the joints." There is, too, a large role marked out for observation—an empirical core to this science. To know the necessary parts and their varieties one must first have seen them. Classification, moreover, must be according to the parts of the objects in question (material cause) rather than some other aspect or cause; and it must be according to necessary parts; non-necessary and accidental parts play no role here. Finally, division is, as many others have argued, a deductive or logical process. Once the parts and their varieties have been identified, one simply "takes the possible combinations of these" to determine the variety of kinds of states (cf. Robinson, 1962, 81; G. E. R. Lloyd, 1961; Schütrumpf, 1980, 90ff. for different perspectives; Robinson, for example, seems to deny any role at all for induction in Aristotle's method).

On the other hand, what we do not learn from the explicit testimony about method is troublesome. We do not learn, first of all, how to identify what we should be looking at. We are told neither how states may be discriminated from the rest of the universe of natural objects (or more generally, how any class of objects may be discriminated from any other class), nor how essential parts are to be discriminated from non-essential parts within the relevant class. We are not told, further, about the relative importance in classification of the necessary parts. If all necessary parts are not equal in significance, how then is one to discriminate those that are more fundamental from those less so?

Answers to these questions must be sought in Aristotle's application of the method to concrete instances. Leaving aside for the moment as a special case the famous sixfold classification of Book III, chapter vii, one counts nine separate classifications in the *Politics* (III. vii 1279 a6–1279 b10; III. xiv 1284 b42ff.; IV. iii–iv 1290 a13ff.; IV. iv 1291 b31ff.; IV. v 1292 a39ff.; IV. vi 1292 b22ff.; IV. vii 1293 a35ff.; IV. xii 1296 b17ff.; and IV. xiv 1298 a11ff.). Some of them have been worked out with painstaking care; others seem to have been produced more hastily. Yet all of them proceed according to certain fixed rules of method.

Typically classification occurs in three stages. The first is the delimitation by general definition of the class of objects to be classified, in

this case “constitution” (*politeia*). Several definitions of constitution are offered in the course of Books III–VI. As a rule they stand in close juxtaposition to the classifications, usually immediately preceding them. (The main definitions of *politeia* are given at: III. i 1274 b38–39; III. vi 1278 b9–10; IV. i 1289 a15–17; IV. iii 1290 a8–10; IV. xi 1295 a41–b1; and VII. viii 1328 a35–37.)

The second stage follows directly from the first. Since “constitution” is itself a complex object, consisting of different “parts” (*morai* or *mere*) arranged in different ways, it is necessary, before one is able to classify, to enumerate the “parts” of which “constitution” is composed. One finds, accordingly, many lists of “parts” in the *Politics*, and these too typically appear directly before the classifications. (The lists of parts occur at: III. i 1274 b40–41 [where “citizens” are said to be the “parts”]; IV. iii 1289 b27ff.; IV. iv 1290 b8ff.; IV. iv 1290 b37ff.; IV. iv 1291 b5–12; IV. iv 1291 b18ff.; IV. vi 1292 b25ff.; IV. xi 1295 b1ff.; IV. xii 1296 b13ff.; IV. xiv 1297 b35ff.; V. iii 1303 a1ff.; V. xi 1315 a31–32; VI. iii 1318 a31–32; VI. vii 1321 a5–8; VII. viii 1328 a22ff.; cf. Hansen, 2013, chapter 2, for a different account of “parts,” one that, he thinks, creates an ambiguity at the heart of Aristotle’s definition of polis.)

The final stage is the demonstration that the type of constitution depends upon the particular ordering of the “parts” in any given case. Classification is just the ordering of states whose identities have been determined in this way. This identification of types based upon arrangement of parts yields every classificatory scheme of the *Politics*. A good illustration of these principles of classification is found in the first comprehensive taxonomy produced in Book IV, that which orders democracies and oligarchies. In that sequence (IV. i 1289 a8ff.), Aristotle begins by observing the importance to the student of politics of knowing “how many kinds of constitution there are” (IV. i 1289 a9), and disputing the common opinion that there is only one kind of democracy and one kind of oligarchy (*ibid.*). He then defines constitution: “A constitution is the regulation of the offices of the city in regard to the mode of their distribution and to the question what is the sovereign power (*to kurion tes politeia*) and what is the object (i.e., purpose or end) of each community” (IV. i 1289 a15–18). The reason that several varieties of constitution exist is “that every city has a considerable number of parts,” and constitutions differ “inasmuch as these parts differ in kind among themselves” (IV. iii 1289 b27–38; IV. iii 1290 a6–8). It follows, therefore, “that there are as many forms of constitution as there are modes of arrangement according to the superiorities and the differences of the parts” (IV. iii 1290 a11–12).

The next step is to apply these principles to actual states. One needs, first, an enumeration of the “parts” of the states to be classified. These will vary somewhat from state to state, but certain parts are “necessary,” common to all states. The two parts most commonly thought of are “rich” and “poor,” leading most people to believe there are only two kinds of constitutions, oligarchy and democracy (IV. iii 1290 a13–16). And while rich and poor are indeed “parts of the state in the fullest sense” (IV. iv 1291 b8), they are by no means the only parts. There are many other parts as well, including various occupational groups (e.g., farmers, traders), a military class, and the groups discharging political functions. While certain parts are more important to the state than others (IV. iii 1291 a25–26), all contribute either to its “necessary utility” or to its nobility, and so are distinguished from “parts” that are merely accidental, such as “the tall,” or “the beautiful” (IV. iii 1290 b4–6). Classification, in other words, must proceed by consideration only of essential parts, not accidental ones.

Finally, with a complete list of parts in hand, one can classify. Since the class of objects to be classified, constitution, is defined as “an arrangement of political offices,” it follows that each state’s identity will be determined according to how these offices are distributed among its “parts.” The possible modes of distribution yield the variety of kinds of states. Finer distinctions among types (such as different kinds of democracy) are given when different elements (such as occupational groups) are regarded as parts. When all necessary elements of the state are taken as “parts,” one is able to derive a complete classification of states. This essentially is the method Aristotle follows in every classification of the *Politics*.

No single classification constitutes a complete taxonomy of all possible kinds of state; each one is only a partial ordering. The reason for this distinction is simply that, at different times, Aristotle is interested only in certain parts of the state. He focuses on different parts at different times, never on all of them at once. But he always uses the same method; it is always as we have described it here. What changes from one taxonomy to the next is only the list of parts that he uses in any given case. It may be shown that the method used by Aristotle in generating the taxonomies of *politeiai* in the *Politics* is the same as the method prescribed for classifying other natural objects at IV. iv 1290 b21ff. We see, first, that each classification is a natural ordering, in the sense that the divisions separating the types of state from one another are “by nature.” It is true that particular states may have been fashioned by convention; and individual states may obviously be changed by human artifice into forms different from what they

were originally. A democracy, for example, may be changed by human agency into an oligarchy. But the identity of each state is determined not by human convention but by the nature of the case at hand. What separates democracies from oligarchies is “given” by the specific order of their natural characteristics. This is Aristotle’s chief concession to Plato’s formalism. Each state has its own nature *qua* that state, and it is beyond the capability of humans to alter this natural order. The aim of the scientist is to discover this order, not to change it.

It may be objected about this view that Aristotle claims that “the forms of constitution that are divergences . . . come about against nature (*para physin*)” (III. xvii 1287 b41–42). The divergent forms are “against nature” to be sure. But at the same time, it would be hard to deny that they exist (as deviant specimens of certain animals also do). And since they exist, the scientist must comprehend them in the same way and by the same methods that he comprehends other forms—viz., by their natural divisions.

We also see here division of genera and species (for Aristotle’s technical use of the terms usually translated as “genus” and “species” in the *Politics*, cf. D. Balme, 1962, 81–98) by material *differentiae*, insofar as these are causal for establishing identities. Aristotle is much absorbed throughout his treatise with the question of “parts,” just as he was in the biological analogy mentioned earlier. Some parts are “more fully parts” of the constitution than others; some are “more necessary” than others. But in each case the arrangement of the “parts,” especially the essential ones, is the key to the identity of constitutions.

In other words, the list of parts permits Aristotle to show not only how states differ, but why they differ. Democracies are democracies because (in part) the material parts of these states are arranged in certain ways (i.e., “the poor” holding certain specified “offices”), oligarchies are oligarchies because (in part) of the specific arrangements of their material parts, and the same with other forms. In fact, with regard to the various species of constitution (e.g., forms of democracy, etc.), the sole basis of classification is a matter of how their essential material parts are arranged. Aristotle puts the point succinctly, “Constitutions [*politeiai*] differ in virtue of different groups (i.e., parts) holding sovereign office” (e.g., 1290b 515).

Finally, the various classifications also show the characteristic blend of empirical and logical processes, or, if you prefer, of induction and deduction that I believe is the hallmark of Aristotelian science in general. The compilation of “parts” is based upon a wide-ranging set of observations; one thinks in this connection of the 158 “constitutions” compiled at Aristotle’s Athenian school during his late residency

there. These parts are then systematically arranged into “necessary” and “non-necessary” categories as well as subdivided into types (social classes, occupations, offices, and so forth). Finally, the variety of possible arrangements is specified (though never exhaustively in any one place in the *Politics*) in an essentially deductive process to yield the variety of types of state.

### III. THREE ADDITIONAL RULES OF CLASSIFICATION

When one studies the various taxonomies closely, one discovers three additional principles of classification not clearly described in the account of 1290 b21ff. One finds, first, that each *differentia* beyond the four primary divisions (degrees of wealth, groups of “merit,” occupational groups, and political “offices”) is a specification of its predecessor, as, for example, “biped” is a specification of “footed.” Aristotle’s *differentiae*, in other words, are sequentially ordered—a principle of division that is central in the biological method as well. Second, one notes that one classifies only by essential features, not accidental ones. For example, while “biped” is a specification of “footed,” “white” would not be. Being white is accidental to the essential criteria involved in this ordering. Third, one discovers that states are differentiated from one another on the basis of a plurality of *differentiae* considered simultaneously, not by single *differentia* taken one at a time. This too is a fundamental rule in his biology, perhaps the rule that most clearly separates Aristotle’s method from the method of classification by division preferred at the Academy (cp. Plato, *Statesman* 291 c12 ff. for an example of Plato’s contrasting method; and cf. D. Balme, 1972, for a discussion of the differences). Each of these rules merits a fuller discussion.

#### 1. Sequential Ordering

As to sequential ordering of *differentiae*, Aristotle does not always take the trouble to place the *differentiae* in their proper order; but his *differentiae* are always sequential. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this principle is in Aristotle’s customary way of classifying democracies and oligarchies. These states are fundamentally distinguished on the basis of the *differentiae* “rich” and “poor.” These are “parts” of the state “in the fullest sense,” and this fact makes oligarchy and democracy the two main forms of constitution. But “rich” and “poor” are parts that are themselves capable of subdivision. The easiest and most common

way of dividing these two classes further is by the *differentia* “degree or amount of wealth (or poverty).” On the basis of this *differentia* (or, actually, set of *differentiae*, for “amount of wealth” is capable of a large number of specifications), one may easily discriminate among types of oligarchy (depending upon how rich the rulers are, or, what amounts to the same thing, how many are able to fulfill the property requirements for office), and also among types of democracy (again depending upon the level of property assessment for political office). “Amount of wealth” is thus a specification or determination of its predecessors, “wealth” and “poverty” (or “rich” and “poor”). And this, in fact, is one of the principal specifications that Aristotle uses when discriminating among species of oligarchy and democracy (e.g., *Pol.* IV. v 1292 a39ff., and often).

A more striking illustration of the same principle is found in Aristotle's second classification of democracies (IV. vi 1292 b23ff.). Four types are identified here, ranging from a moderate type in which farmers constitute the civic body, through less moderate forms that include additional social classes and occupations in the constitutions, to a final extreme form in which “everyone shares” in the regime because the poorest receive pay for political service. Several *differentiae* are introduced in the course of this division, but the one that is shown to cause regimes to differ is “leisure time” (*scholē*). Regimes are arranged in this division principally on the basis of the degree to which those who share in offices have leisure to perform the duties of office: the more leisure enjoyed by the civic body in a democracy, the more extreme the democracy. (“Leisure time” plays a different role in the description of the ideal state in Books VII–VIII, as we shall see.)

In the specification of “the poor” through the *differentia* of “leisure” we have here again the characteristic feature of sequential ordering of *differentiae*. Moreover, “leisure” is itself a specification of another important *differentia* in the *Politics*, namely “occupation.” One finds in this ordering of democracies an exact co-variation between “leisure” and “occupation.” Specifically, farmers, because they must work hard, have little leisure (IV. vi 1292 b28); they also tend to be more moderate. Thus, they tend to be more virtuous than those who fill the other occupations of the poor, or so Aristotle thinks, and this also helps to make their rule more moderate (VI. iv 1318 b12ff.; VI. iv 1319 a20ff.). Because they are scattered in the country, they also have more difficulty attending the assemblies and so will not participate as often. This reinforces the other factors that make agrarian democracy moderate (VI. iv 1319 a34ff.). The *banausoi* (often translated as “the vulgar”) and *thetes* (the lowest property class), often

performing the baser occupations or else unemployed, by contrast, have more leisure time (a situation aggravated by state payments for office-holding); they are also more extreme. When, therefore, those who perform the “baser” occupations are admitted into the regime, the form of the regime is more extreme (and so more deviant) than when only the farmers are allowed to participate.

It is worth noting that all of the factors associated with certain occupational groups are evidently causally related for Aristotle. Farmers, for example, have little leisure time because they *must* work hard. Their hard work, in turn, *causes* them to be more virtuous (moderate). Because they are farmers they *must* live scattered in the country, and this *causes* their rule to be more moderate, and so forth. Also one may here note that “leisure time” may be used as a specification of an essential “part” in classifications (even though it itself is not strictly a “part”) because “leisure time” is in fact a division based on “occupations,” and “occupations” are essential “parts” of any state.

By specifying “the poor” through the variable of “occupation,” leisure time thus permits another ordering of democracies. Like the ordering based upon “amount of wealth” this ordering is both “sociological” and “normative.” It is sociological because it calls attention to the occupations of officeholders. It is normative because it orders democracies on a scale of goodness according to the degree of moderation of the government when different occupational groups are admitted. States (democracies) in which the citizen class has little leisure time are more moderate, closer to the mean, with respect to wealth, than states in which the citizens have much leisure time. “Empirical” and “ideal” factors are again found intertwined, permitting Aristotle to refine further the classification of democracies.

Aristotle also orders sequentially “the offices” of the state to yield partial taxonomies. Constitutions will differ not only by virtue of different classes being admitted to office, but also by virtue of the same class holding different offices (e.g., at IV. xiv 1298 a10ff., in the case of democracies). Aristotle’s procedure here is to divide the broad *differentia* “office” (*arche*) into three specific *differentiae*: the deliberative body (*to bouleuomenon*), the magistracies (*hai archai*), and the judicial body (*to dikason*) (IV. xiv 1298 alff.). Along the same lines, the offices of the soldiery, the magistracies, and the deliberative and the judicial offices are called “parts . . . more than those factors which contribute to necessary utility” (*Pol.* IV. iv 1291 a22ff., cf. also VII. ix 1329 a5). Citizens may be distributed among these “parts” in any number of ways. Even within genera (e.g., democracies), different possibilities are available. The poor may be allowed into all of

these offices, or they may be admitted into only some and not others (IV. xiv 1298 a10ff.)

Democracies will differ in kind depending upon the extent of the offices to which the poor are admitted. Further, certain offices are more important than others for establishing constitutional identity. The deliberative office in particular, because it is sovereign (*to kurion*), is most important (*Pol.* IV. xiv 1299a2; VI. i 1316 b31; II. VI 1264 b33). Democracies, therefore, will be more or less democratic as the poor hold more or fewer of the deliberative offices and more or fewer of the other offices as well. The three types of office thus specify the general *differentia* of “office” and allow more precise discriminations among constitutional types.

## 2. Ordering by Essential Features

As already noted, when Aristotle defines something in nature he defines by reference to what he calls essential features. These he discriminates from accidental features, the latter being no part of a proper definition. Identities of things are determined by essences, not accidents. Moreover, essences are usually related to causes: the *reason* for something being of type x rather than type y is that its identity may be explained by reference to causes that are appropriate to things like x but not like y. To use an example previously employed, a nose is a nose because it: (1) has the form proper to noses (formal cause); (2) is brought into being the way noses are typically brought into being (efficient cause); (3) is composed of the material that noses are typically composed of (material cause); and (4) performs the function proper to noses—i.e., smelling (the final cause). These four causal criteria identify essential properties of a thing. They are, one might say, necessary and sufficient criteria for something being a nose. If, for example, something has the ability to smell but lacks the other causal features of noses it is not a nose.

Essential features are to be distinguished from accidental features. Most things in nature are composed of essential and accidental features. To use one of Aristotle's examples from the *Politics*, the polis is defined as an association of people of sufficient number to achieve self-sufficiency and who come together for the sake of life; it continues to exist for the sake of the good life. The definition seems to focus mainly on the final cause (to achieve the good life), but it also mentions the material cause (people, not further specified here but details filled in as he moves along) and the formal cause (later said to be the “constitution”). The efficient cause is more difficult to pin down

but, without entering into modern controversies about this subject (see Introduction), Aristotle seems to believe the polis was created by some combination of a “natural human impulse” (*Pol.* I. ii 1253 a2–4) and a human artificer who first brought humans together into the association called the polis (*Pol.* I, ii 1253 a30–33).

If these are the essential features of a polis, they may be distinguished from accidental features. Factors accidental to the identity of a polis may include: geographical location (wherever the defining factors are present, one has a polis); number and type of buildings in the association; number of people in the association, provided they constitute a number large enough for the achievement of self-sufficiency but not so large as to render “community” impossible); and others. As Aristotle moves along he starts to enumerate additional factors beyond the four “causes” in the definition that contribute to the goodness of the polis (not least the form of the constitution, or *politeia*)—these factors seem to be variable quantities—but the definition captures the essence.

When classifying things in nature, then, one classifies by essential properties only. Because there is only one kind of polis in Aristotle’s account—the form of association captured in the definition (i.e., any differences among true *poleis* are only accidental)—there is no classification of *poleis*. By contrast, constitutions differ in type. As we shall see, constitutions, no matter the type, are all defined in the same way (several factors are involved in a complete definition), but since many varieties exist, classification of constitutions becomes possible. In fact, one of the primary purposes of the *Politics* is to provide a comprehensive classification of constitutions. This is the main subject of the following chapter. We shall see that when he classifies he always does so by reference to essential features, not accidental ones.

Before leaving this subject, one must draw attention to two additional points about classifying by reference to essential features. The first is that a thing’s being defective or deviant does not prevent it from being included in a classification. As long as a thing meets the essential criteria of things of the type to be classified, it may be included in a classification. Many constitutions are defective in one way or another, yet Aristotle includes all deviant forms in his classifications. Indeed, the “right/deviant” distinction becomes for Aristotle *one* of the several factors employed in his classifications, as we shall see.

The other point is how Aristotle derives the “essential/accidental” distinction in the first place. Without being equipped with knowledge of this distinction, identification, let alone classification, becomes impossible. Yet nature does not mark “essential” or “accidental”

features by any manifest signs. It must be confessed that the discrimination involves guesswork—an irreducible factor of intuition. For example, maybe noses *are* essentially for supporting spectacles, and only incidentally for smelling. Nature does not tell us.

It is only fair to say, in his behalf against this criticism, that before making any judgments Aristotle conducts extensive empirical research. What he is looking for are consistent patterns that always or nearly always occur in nature in things that appear at first glance to belong to the same type. For example, all proper noses “smell” but only some support spectacles. One thus infers that smelling is the essential final cause of noses, and that supporting spectacles is an accidental property. In general, the aim in classification is to look for commonalities among all things of the “same” type being studied, in an attempt to determine whether they all share the same four causal properties. If they do, those commonly shared properties may be taken to constitute the essence of that thing.

### 3. Ordering by Multiple *Differentiae*

Finally, in addition to the principles of sequential ordering of *differentiae* and ordering by essential parts, Aristotle also always divides states by considering several *differentiae* simultaneously rather than taking them one at a time. Even at the level of genus this is the case. The sixfold division of states in Book III, chapter vii, for example, mentions four *differentiae*: number of rulers, economic “class” (degree of wealth) of rulers, moral competence (degree of virtue) of rulers, and the kinds of office (*arche*) held by the citizen body (*politeuma*).

The introduction of multiple *differentiae* becomes even more pronounced in classifications on the level of species. This is perhaps best seen in the frequent listings of “parts” of the state in Books IV–VI. Some of these lists contain as many as ten parts (e.g., the careful list of IV. iv 1290 b40ff.), each part representing a specific *differentia* for classification. Since every state is a compound, composed of multiple parts, and since how any given state is classified depends upon the precise arrangement of its parts, it follows that classification for Aristotle is always necessarily by multiple *differentiae*.

Not only this, but the several *differentiae* must be considered together, not individually one after another. Aristotle’s method is perhaps best seen in his manner of classifying species of democracy. Even among types very close to one another in nature (e.g., the first and second forms of democracy), many *differentiae* are introduced. The first and second forms of democracy, to pursue that example, are

differentiated on the bases of: (1) the amount of wealth (property) of the officeholders (IV. vi 1292 b23ff.); (2) the degree of equality ascribed by the laws to the social classes (IV. iv 1291 b22ff.; VI. iv 1318 b7ff.); (3) the amount of leisure time available to the civic body (IV. vi 1292 b28ff.); (4) the occupations held by the officeholders (VI. i 1317 a19ff.); (5) the extent and kinds of office held by the civic body (VI. ii 1317 b17ff.); and (6) the degree to which the laws are sovereign (IV. vi 1292 b27ff., and often).

It would be wrong, Aristotle thinks, to suppose that an accurate and full discrimination between these two types could be given by reference to a single *differentia*; all of these *differentiae* must be considered together in order to see the complete picture. And the same is true with all other divisions found in the *Politics*.

It must be added that, though several criteria of distinction are used in this taxonomy (as in all of the taxonomies of the *Politics*), it would be a mistake to think that Aristotle is talking about several kinds of state. In the example above, only democracies are involved—the first and second species—even though they are distinguished by multiple *differentiae*. Discriminating states in this way will admittedly create difficulties for identifying states on occasion: a particular state may well exhibit, for example, characteristics of two or more types (as is most clear in the case of polity). But these difficulties are not intractable, since Aristotle's method easily permits the creation of new places within the taxonomy as new species are discovered.

## CHAPTER 4



# THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF THE STATE AND SPECIFIC IDENTITIES IN ARISTOTLE'S *POLITICS*

### I. THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF THE POLIS

Each science claims some object or related set of objects as its special province and essential unit of analysis. This object or set of objects is, in fact, what distinguishes each science from the others and demarcates its boundaries from the others. The essential unit of analysis of political science, in Aristotle's view, is the state (polis) or the constitution (*polit-eia*). There are, to be sure smaller associations (family and village) and larger ones (confederations and nations). But these, though they may come before the scrutiny of the political scientist or theorist, will do so only incidentally, not essentially. They are non-essential to political inquiry because they do not fulfill the conditions of a true political association. In a preliminary way, one might say that they deviate from the true political association, the former by deficiency (both in terms of size and maturity), the latter by excess (primarily in terms of size).

The true political association, the polis, falls in between these two extremes. But the polis is the essential unit of politics not simply because it occupies this in-between position. It is the essential unit of analysis because it is in the polis alone that the essential character of the political relationship, that between the governors and the governed, achieves its highest form and fullest expression. The *Politics* is a treatise that attempts to make clear the central aspects of this particular form of relationship and its many varieties.

We have seen in previous chapters that for Aristotle the polis exists "by nature." Polis life is the only fully natural life for humans because it

is only within the polis that humans are able to fulfill their natural purposes. The natural character of the polis thus calls to mind Aristotle's teleology. In searching for the identity of the polis—its definition—Aristotle focuses on the aims or purposes that the polis permits humans to fulfill. In general, purposes are fulfilled by an exercise of function (*ergon*) and capacity (*dynamis*). To know the function and capacity is to know the essential nature of the object, for, as Aristotle says, “all things are defined by their function and capacity” (I. ii 1253 a23–26). Every object is equipped with a function and capacity that uniquely equip it to fulfill its purposes. The attempt of natural things to fulfill their purposes need not be conscious or deliberate; in fact it is for most things unconscious. An acorn does not consciously try to become an oak tree, but that is the purpose it is “trying” to fulfill. Genes, to use an example from evolutionary biology, do not consciously try to create organisms in which they will reside and that will improve their likelihood of survival, but that seems to be just what many genes do. In humans, by contrast, the aim to fulfill the human purpose is conscious, at least in the sense that humans must use “speech and reason” to achieve the purpose of the polis, which is a life of virtue.

We have also seen that to discover the essential nature (or definition) of an object is the same as to discover its highest good. This is because the end (*telos*) of every object is its own good. Function and capacity are related to this good as means to ends; objects fulfill their ends through the exercise of function and capacity. In the case of the city-state (polis), Aristotle discovers not one chief good but two, corresponding essentially to the two parts, body and soul, of the individual members who constitute the state. The first is self-sufficiency, by which Aristotle means the ability of the association to provide for its own material requirements without dependency upon outside sources. Self-sufficiency is a chief good because life itself, that is, physical survival, is good, a point proved to Aristotle's satisfaction by showing how tenaciously people, even people whose circumstances are not pleasant, cling to it (III. vi 1278 b28–30).

The other chief good is a life in accordance with virtue, “the good life.” This is a chief good because humans are uniquely equipped according to Aristotle with speech and reason, by virtue of which they are able to form into partnerships of shared interests and shared beliefs about right and wrong. And since “nature does nothing without a purpose,” it is right and proper (i.e., “by nature”) that humans use their speech and reason to form partnerships of this sort. This is life in accordance with virtue. If they did not form partnerships of this kind, their lives would be indistinguishable from those of other

gregarious animals that lack speech and reason. Nature would then have made something without a purpose, but that is against nature.

A state (*polis*), then, is defined as an association or partnership (*to koinon*) that having come into existence “for the sake of life” has “at last attained the limit of virtually complete self-sufficiency . . . and exists for the sake of the good life” (I. ii 1252 b28ff.; other definitions of “polis” are given at III. ix 1280 b32 and VII. viii 1328 b16). This distinction means that the essential nature of the state is dependent upon what Aristotle regarded as a universal human impulse to achieve self-sufficiency and goodness, or, in a word, self-fulfillment. Self-fulfillment requires life—sheer existence—as a precondition for any further development, but once given life, it demands more. There is an ethical striving within the human soul, or so Aristotle believes. It is a striving to become fully virtuous, or what is the same thing, to develop and perfect the rational function and capacity of the soul. This is the human *telos* (VII. xiv 1333 a19ff.). Admittedly for Aristotle, its full attainment is beyond the reach of most people. Even as an aspiration it may not be always present to the consciousness of those within whom it resides. Still, it is a universal element, indeed, the highest of all goods within the human community (VII. xv 1334 a11ff.). It is the universal human aim to fulfill it.

The capacity for complete virtue requires, among other things, a favorable material environment for its successful nurture (VII. xiii 1331 b39ff.). In particular it requires for human beings a polis, not just any polis, but an ideal polis. A polis that is less than ideal is not adequate for full virtue among all, but it is still better than no polis. Outside of the polis are only beasts and gods. That is, even in less-than-perfect *poleis* some virtue can be achieved, and some is better than none. The reason that the polis is required for virtue is, for Aristotle, a matter of what goes on uniquely in a polis. In a word, what goes on is politics. The polis is the only human association in which genuine political activity takes place or can take place. Other gregarious animals such as cranes and bees may submit to “rule,” but they are incapable of “politics” because they lack speech and reason (*HA* 488a7–14). The political activity that takes place in *poleis* alone ultimately explains the centrality of politics in Aristotle’s theory of the polis, and the sovereignty of political science among the sciences.

Genuine political activity in Aristotle’s thought is difficult to characterize. First, one must not mistake its ordinary practice, which often will be deviant, from what it is by nature, or what it aspires to become—what it is essentially. By nature, politics is the science entrusted with the care and pursuit of the common good; the distinguishing feature of all

“right” constitutions (those that are “by nature”) is that in them the rulers rule for the common advantage (*koinon sympheron*) or for what is “best for the city and its members” (*ariston te polei kai tois koinonousin autes* (III. vii 1279 a30ff.; *NE* VI. v 1140 b44ff.)), or as occurs when those who possess complete virtue are the rulers (1279 a35–1279 b2).

But at the same time Aristotle is clear that this securing of the common advantage is not essentially a matter of the negative idea of restraining injustice; nor does he have in mind an economic advantage, one that might accrue, for example, from the mutual exchange of goods and services (III. ix 1280 b30ff.). These advantages are only “necessary preconditions” of the polis. The “common advantage” has to do with “living well” (*eu zen*) and with “beautiful deeds” (*kalon praxeon*) and attaining justice. “In politics,” Aristotle writes, “the common good is justice” (III. xi 1282 b17–18). (Detailed discussions include Kraut, 2002; Garver, 2011; Reeve, 1998.)

Politics, then, is about attaining a full and virtuous life for the citizens of the polis. It calls upon the highest human faculties—speech and reason—and demands of them noble achievements. It awards the greatest part in the *politeia* to those who most excel in these attainments (III. ix 1281 a4–8). When it is practiced at its best—admittedly rare—it reflects the perfection of the highest element of the soul, the rational faculty, and the proper order among the parts of the soul, with reason ruling over the appetites. Politics is, in short, intrinsically valuable; doing well in this activity is, with the only exception of pure contemplation (*NE* x 7), as well as it is humanly possible to do. Politics, when performed in a polis (with the attendant conditions) cultivates human goodness, and it is for this reason that politics is desirable, even if particular individuals may desire it for other reasons.

Aristotle, then, defines the polis as “a partnership of clans and villages in a full and independent life, which in our view constitutes a happy and noble life. The political partnership (*politiken koinonian*) must therefore be deemed to exist for the sake of noble actions, not merely for living in common” (III. 9 1281 a1–5; Hansen, 2013, chapter 2, believes this definition is not the same as that found in Book I). With this definition Aristotle has established the general boundaries of his discourse. As in any science the proper object of study is the mature, fully developed adult, for only within the mature specimen have the purposes of the object been completely fulfilled. So, while it is proper to begin the study of the polis with a study of the household and village, since genetically these come first in time, they are ultimately of secondary interest. Aristotle’s interest in them all but disappears after Book I. The polis, the mature, fully developed human

association, is “prior,” in the same way that wholes are always “prior” to their parts (I. ii 1253 a19–20). Quickly, therefore, Aristotle’s attention turns to the polis, the mature city-state, and to the parts essential not to its development but to its maturity.

## II. THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF CONSTITUTIONS

When Aristotle confronts the mature polis and begins in Book III the systematic analysis of its nature, he makes an important discovery: while the essential nature of the polis is always the same, individual *poleis* differ in certain important ways from one another. They do not differ essentially: all *poleis* fulfill the requirements of the definition—they all achieve self-sufficiency, and they all, with rare exception, achieve *some* degree of virtue, even if most do not achieve *complete* virtue. But they do differ with respect to their mode of organization. Different *poleis* are put together in different ways (III. 3 1276 b1ff.). This discovery makes it necessary to establish some criterion or set of criteria according to which differences among polises may be recognized and analyzed. It also calls into being the need for a means of classifying the different types once they have been recognized, the need for a classificatory apparatus. Discovering solutions to these problems constitutes a major part of Aristotle’s enterprise in the remaining books of the *Politics*.

The first question to settle is this: by virtue of what factor (or factors) *may poleis* be said to differ from one another in identity? This is the same as asking, “what constitutes the essential identity of particular *poleis* (as distinguished from polis in general)? This is a species of the more general question, “what is the essential nature of any particular whole or composite structure (III. iii 1276 b1ff.)?” The solution to this Aristotle discovers in the idea of the “form” (*eidos*) of the structure: “With any common whole or composite structure we say it is different if the form (*eidos*) of its structure is different” (III. iii 1276 b7–8). The form of the polis is its constitution (*politeia*). The reason for this is that “a polis is a kind of partnership, and is in fact a partnership of citizens in a constitution (*politeia*)” (III. iii 1276 b1ff.). It is for this reason that when a constitution changes, people speak of the state (polis) having changed also. The constitution (*politeia*) is, in effect, the identifying characteristic of each particular state (polis): “Therefore it is clear that we must speak of the polis as being the same polis chiefly with regard to its *politeia*” (III. iii 1276 b10–12).

From this point forward there is little further discussion of the polis per se; nearly the whole of Aristotle’s subsequent concern is with

*politeia*, its varieties and their classifications. Political science is concerned with knowing “the different varieties of the constitutions, how many there are, and how many are their combinations” (IV. i 1289 a10; III. vi 1278 b6–8). But what is a constitution? We have seen already that it is the form of the structure of the polis, or as Aristotle defines it at the beginning of Book III, “a form of organization of the inhabitants of a polis” (III. i 1274 b38–39). The particular kind of form is important. It is determined by the precise arrangement and distribution of its political offices.

How the inhabitants are organized is itself, however, a complex question. It entails actually two essential components, one material, the other ethical. All constitutions aim at “the good.” In this sense all constitutions have the same final cause. They differ, however, in terms of how they define the good. Differences in conceptions of the good account for differences among constitutions. The material cause is a reflection of the particular conception of the good in each constitution. The material component has to do with how the political offices (*hai archai*) of the state are organized and how citizens are distributed among them. Democrats consider one mode of distribution to be “right,” whereas oligarchs regard a different mode to be right. Thus, the particular distribution in each case constitutes the specific form in a material sense of each constitution. The particular conception of justice in each case constitutes the specific form, in an ethical sense, of each constitution (see Kraut, 2002, chapter 4, for a thorough discussion of Aristotelian justice in the *NE* and the *Pol.*).

A constitution, then, may be defined as the distribution of offices among people who share a common conception about distributive justice, or as Aristotle says, among people who share a certain way of life (*tis bios*: III. vi 1278 b9–11; IV. iii 1290 a 7–8; IV. i 1289 a15ff.). Aristotle, in other words, discriminates city-states (*poleis*) essentially in terms of: (1) their political structures; and (2) their ethical values. These two elements constitute the *politeia*. The definition of “*politeia*” reveals with sudden clarity what Aristotle’s chief preoccupations are in much of the *Politics*: what are the ways in which political power may be distributed, and what schedule of ethical values underlies these various orderings?

It may be asked whether Aristotle’s idea of *politeia* thus defined includes any persons who do not possess full-citizen status and so do not belong fully to the civic body. Strictly speaking his answer appears to be a negative: the shared life (*to koinon*) is one shared among full citizens only (but cf. Cooper, 1990; Keyt, 1993; Morrison, 1999). In deviant regimes, especially, the conception of justice embraced by the

excluded free population is not the same as that of the rulers (those who do share in the *politeia*), but is in fact often the contrary of it (III. ix 1280 a8ff., V. i 1301 a26ff.). Cities that exclude significant elements of the free population from the constitution would thus appear to contain a second, non-ruling *politeuma* alongside the ruling one, at least in terms of what way of life is regarded as best.

On the other hand, Aristotle frequently observes that any lasting constitution always includes a greater section of the people (*pleios demou*) or a more powerful section (*kreitton*) than it excludes. He gives it as “the great principle (that preserves regimes)” that “the many (*plethos*) wanting the regime is superior (*kreitton*) to those not wanting it” (V. ix 1309 b17f.; also IV. ix b37f.). To secure this favorable balance of desire would appear to require admitting the appropriate number into the *politeuma* or civic body, even if the participation of many of these was limited (II. ix 1270 b20ff.). Excluding large or powerful segments altogether only leads to bad results, at least as a rule. On balance, Aristotle’s thought is that while the idea of constitution logically contains only those free citizens actually admitted to share in office, actual constitutions almost always see to it that this number of full citizens is relatively large, or at least that a relatively large proportion of the polis is regarded as being “parts” of the state, if not parts “in the complete sense.”

It should be observed, too, that Aristotle’s political science is not narrowly “constitutional” in the modern sense (e.g., Kraut, 2002, 15). He is not interested only in formal-legal structures of government (although he is interested in these too). I have already mentioned the ethical (what he regarded as the teleological) dimension of politics. Each community shares more than just a mechanism for governing, a constitution in the narrow sense. It also possesses a set of beliefs, more or less widely shared among its members, that specifies what is permissible in the operation of that mechanism and, by the same token, establishes the shared aspirations towards goodness (in whatever sense) pursued by the members of each community. These two aspects of Aristotle’s constitutionalism are obviously intimately linked. The material cause, the mechanism of government, operates (in healthy regimes at any rate) according to the final cause, (i.e., the principles embodied within the shared values). The pursuit of the principles is facilitated by the structure of the institutions (a detailed discussion of the relationship among Aristotle’s four causes in the *Pol.* is Garver, 2011).

There is no unidirectional determinism in Aristotle, but rather a relationship between institutions and values that is in most cases

mutually reinforcing (cf. Ober, in Lord and O'Connor, eds., 1991, chapter 4). Most communities aspire to be what their political institutions best enable them to be. Every constitution (excluding tyrannies which, as Aristotle tells us, are not genuine constitutions at all) is based upon some principle of distributive justice; they are not, however, all based upon the same principle, any more than they share identical institutional arrangements. Not every conception of justice is equally "good" and not every state achieves its own limited conception of justice in the same degree. Both of these points are central to Aristotle's constitutional theory. Some states come closer to an absolute standard of the good than others; few if any actually achieve the fullness of the absolute standard.

One may then rank in order states on the basis of the degree to which they succeed in achieving that standard. But even with respect to partial conceptions of justice, such as the democratic, not all states or even democracies come equally close to attaining that standard. This fact permits a second rank ordering among states, in this case among states of the same general type. Certain states will be found to be, for example, either more or less democratic depending on the extent to which they achieve democratic justice.

In identifying particular constitutions it is not enough, however, to look only at its particular conception of justice and the degree to which it has succeeded in fulfilling it. This information will tell much, as we shall see, but it is not enough. One must also regard the institutions of government and the distribution of citizens among them. To regard only the "ethical" dimension or only the "material" dimension will yield in either case an incomplete and therefore misleading picture of nature.

It should be evident that the material factor here is not exclusively, or even primarily, an economic order or class. Social classes may and often do occupy the political offices, but the offices might just as well be occupied by other groups, or groups distinguished in other ways. State identities are a matter of political arrangements, not economic ones. Equally evident, too, is that the values (teleology) of a particular state are not "determined by" its economic (or political) order. It is fortunate, to be sure, if the shared value (the principle of distributive justice) is in harmony with the actual distribution of power. But there is no necessity here, and Aristotle does not systematically explore the evolution of ideas or trace their origins in particular material conditions. Sometimes (e.g., IV. xi 1295 b5ff.), Aristotle acknowledges that material conditions do have important psychological effects on individuals and cities, causing, for example, arrogance among the well-to-do or a servile temper among the unfortunate. But such

effects are not systematically explored, much less elevated to anything resembling a theory of economic determinism (Ober, in Lord and O'Connor, eds., 1991, chapter 4). If anything, ideas have primacy over other social factors. But the important point is that establishing essential identities of states is a matter of knowing both their material and ethical/teleological compositions.

### III. DISCOVERING CONSTITUTIONAL IDENTITIES

I have said that the structure of shared values (teleology) is, if anything, more fundamental for Aristotle in discovering constitutional identity than institutional structure, so let us begin there. Generally speaking, the teleological element yields the broader classification, the material element the narrower one. It is, thus, on the basis of the kind of justice pursued within each community, that “right” constitutions are discriminated from “deviant” ones. “Right” are those that pursue a kind of justice that is in “the common interest”; “deviant” are those whose justice serves only the interests of the rulers.

The generic division (Book III, chapter vii) of constitutions into six genera (or, excluding tyranny again, five) is also based in the first instance upon the teleological consideration. Monarchies and aristocracies, though different from one another in terms of the size of the ruling class, are more similar than not because both (uniquely) pursue absolute justice. Polity ranks among the “right” forms (in spite of great affinities with moderate democracies) because its distributive principle is more “right” than “deviant” (though less than perfect). On the “deviant” side of the ledger appear democracies and oligarchies, more alike to one another than to the (numerically) similar polity and aristocracy, respectively, because in both there is a faulty (i.e., partial) conception of distributive justice. The principles of justice are obviously not the same in oligarchy and democracy. In oligarchy, the distribution of political offices to the wealthy is regarded as justice; in democracy, the distribution of political offices to the many (i.e., the poor) is considered justice. It is not the size of the ruling class—few or many—that is decisive in setting constitutional identity, but economic class—the wealthy or the poor—that yields the identity. (Mulgan, 1977, offers a critique of Aristotle’s scheme of classification of democracies and oligarchies.) But both conceptions are “partial” and this fact justifies Aristotle’s classing them together as both “deviant.”

The proper classification of tyranny is more obscure. Sometimes Aristotle holds that tyrannies are not constitutions at all, which would put them outside any proper classification of true constitutions. But

if tyrannies were included in a constitutional taxonomy (as they are, for example, in *Pol.* III. vii), they obviously are “deviant” rather than “right,” because the ruler—the tyrant—rules for his own interest and not the common good. The tyrant belongs “opposite” to monarchies apparently both because he is a single person and because he rules in his own interest.

More complicated is the further division of states on the basis of the material element, the arrangement of political offices. Strictly speaking, “political offices” are better regarded as “formal parts” rather than “material parts” because they are connected to “constitution” by definition, but they are still rightly regarded as “parts.” Like most natural objects, the state (in a material sense) is a composite whole, made up of “parts” (*moría* or *mere*). This is a fundamental aspect of Aristotle’s whole way of thinking about the state (see chapter 3 for a partial enumeration of passages).

First, this consideration leads him to identify in the state two principal groups, constituting a natural order of ruling and subordination. Some members are designated “by nature” as rulers, others are designated “by nature” as ruled. As he says in Book I of the *Politics*: “Because in every composite thing, where a plurality of parts, whether continuous or discrete, is combined to make a single common whole, there is always found a ruling and a subject factor, and this characteristic of living things is present in them as an outcome of the whole of nature . . .” (*Pol.* I. v 1254 a28ff.; but cf. *HA* 4887–14). The ruling principle, or natural order of ruling and subordination, varies from one people to another, at least to some degree (natural slaves, for example, are always among the ruled, at least “by nature”), but some ruling principle is natural for all states.

It is a major undertaking of the *Politics* to determine in each case what this natural principle of ruling is. This question is important for statecraft because injustice and the danger of civil disturbance loom for any state that fails to regulate its constitution according to its natural ruling principle. It is important for philosophy because knowledge of the natural ruling principle for every state is just what it means to know the essential nature of that state. It also draws attention to the fact that the more minute divisions among constitutional types, those below the level of genus (e.g., the various species of democracy), are primarily a matter of the particular arrangement of “parts” in each case. In Aristotle’s words:

We examine the question according to our regular method of investigation. In every other matter it is necessary to analyze the composite whole down to its uncompounded elements (for these are the smallest

parts of the whole); so too with the polis, by examining parts of which it is composed we shall better discern in relation to these [kinds of rulers] what is the difference between them, and whether there is some expertise characteristic of an art that can be acquired in connection with each one mentioned (I. i 1252 a17–23).

To study the subdivisions among *poleis* is thus to study the parts of which they are composed. And since, as is true with nearly all natural objects, the parts of wholes may be arranged in different ways, to study the various ways in which parts of the same kind of wholes may be arranged is to study the variety of the whole objects themselves, in this case the variety of cities and their constitutions. And that too is a principal aim of political science.

All *politeiai* have some essential parts, and certain of these are essential parts of all *politeiai*. For Aristotle it must be borne in mind that essential parts are not necessarily the same as “necessary” parts. Necessary parts are those indispensable to the material survival of the polis or the *politeia*; essential parts are those related to its substantial being by definition. Thus, for example, slaves are necessary (in Aristotle’s view) to the survival of the state but are excluded by him as essential parts (VII. viii 1328 a34–37).

First among essential parts are those parts, already encountered in the definition of *politeia*, called political offices (*archai*), including the sovereign office (*to kurion*). Aristotle postpones the full discussion of these until the final three chapters of Book IV, where they are identified as the deliberative part (which also turns out to be the sovereign office), the magistrates (*archai*, properly so-called), and the judicial part. Of these three only the deliberative part (*to bouleuomenon*) presents any serious difficulties for understanding, and these I shall discuss fully in a subsequent chapter.

It is important here only to call attention to three brief points. The first is that Aristotle regards these parts, and particularly the deliberative, as “more fully” parts than any others, a conclusion we might have inferred in any case by his having made the notion of “political office” and particularly “sovereign office” the constitutive elements of his definition of *politeia*. The political offices, including the military ones, are likened to the soul in animals: “And just as one would count the soul of an animal to be more a part of it than the body, so also the parts in states corresponding to the soul must be deemed to be parts of them more than those factors which contribute to necessary utility” (*Pol.* IV. iv 1291 a24ff.; cf. VII. ix 1329 a3ff., where the same parts are called “parts in a special sense”). Studying the arrangement of “parts” in constitutions, therefore, is very much a matter of studying

the arrangement of its political offices. As stated above, “more fully parts” are the “political parts” (offices and citizens) because they are related to “the constitution” by definition, and so are more properly regarded as “formal” rather than “material” parts.

The second point follows from the first: in studying the arrangement of political offices, the important question to ask in each case is who, i.e., which “part(s),” hold(s) them? For political offices are not the only parts of *politeiai*, or even the only essential parts. All *politeiai* have other essential parts in addition to political offices alone, some more, others fewer, but all of them some. The important question for identifying the various forms of constitution is, “which among these other parts holds the political offices?” In each case the answer to this question yields the species identity of each constitution.

Finally, we should observe that the question of which “parts” hold political offices is the key to understanding which parts count as parts in each constitution. For Aristotle this is a variable; not all parts count as parts in every constitution. In some constitutions there are more elements that count as parts, in others fewer. In democracies, for example, farmers are often counted as parts, while in the ideal state of Books VII–VIII farmers are excluded, for “it is clear that not all the things that are necessary for states to possess are to be counted as parts of a state . . .” (VII. viii 1328 a23ff.). The definition of constitution permits us to know in each case what counts as the parts; those elements are “parts” which share in the political offices. Holding political office, in other words, is the means by which the various elements of the city are elevated from the status of “necessary appurtenances” to full-fledged “parts.”

#### IV. THE TAXONOMIES OF THE *POLITICS*

Every book of the *Politics*, excluding the second, contains at least one enumeration of the “parts” of polis or *politeia*. I count fifteen lists or partial lists of “parts” in the *Politics*. (I have enumerated some of them above. This chapter will give a finer delineation of each part.) Social classes are listed as parts in most of the lists, and are called “parts in the fullest sense” at IV. iv 1291b 9ff., and elsewhere. Qualitative or “normative” distinctions are mentioned and further subdivided in three of the lists (“birth” and “merit” distinguished at IV. iii 1290 a1ff.; birth, virtue, and education discriminated at IV. iv 1291 b31ff.; and education and birth distinguished at IV. xii 1296 b13ff.). The occupations are further divided in several lists (IV. iv 1290 b37ff., IV. xiv 1297 b35ff., IV. iv 1291 b18ff., IV. iii 1289 b31ff., etc.). Some

books contain several lists. The list of Book I, as I have noted already, describes “parts” of the polis only, and thus I shall not consider it here. My concern is only with the “parts” of *politeiai*, or, as in Book III, with the “parts” of polis when it means the same thing as *politeia*. I shall not review here every single list or partial list of parts in complete detail; for that, one might more usefully consult the text itself (see directly above). I shall instead attempt only to characterize in general terms how Aristotle formulates the question of material parts among the several lists.

Four kinds of “parts” are identified by Aristotle: citizens (more properly considered a formal rather than a material part, as explained above), social “classes,” particularly the rich, the poor, and (sometimes) the middle classes (in most of the lists), groups distinguished by their merit or virtue, and occupations. Each of these “parts,” except the part called “the citizens,” is further subdivided: degrees of wealth, kinds of merit or virtue, kinds of occupation. Social “classes” are called parts “in the fullest sense” because these classes, especially rich and poor, are found in virtually every state and membership in one precludes membership in the other.

Among these four kinds of “parts” only citizens are universally parts, that is to say, “parts” of every constitution (although whom the citizens are varies from state to state). This is because a citizen (*polites*) is related to constitution (*politeia*) by definition. A *politeia*, we recall, is an ordering of the political offices of the state; citizens are just those people who are so ordered. But the equation is tautological; it does not tell us who in any particular case the citizens are, but only that whoever they are, they occupy the political offices (unless they are what are sometimes called “second-class citizens”—chapter 1 above). In order to know who the citizens are in particular constitutions one must turn to the other three kinds of parts. The finer classifications of the *Politics* (those that discriminate the various species of each genus) are based upon just this assessment. (For a contrasting account of Aristotle’s method in the *Politics*, cf. Schütrumpf, 1980, 90 ff., 264–86.)

In order, however, for this crossbreeding of parts to be empirically useful, it is necessary to have a clear sense of the identity of each of the other three parts. The part of “social class” is not listed as such, but always appears in its basic specifications: well-off, poor, and (sometimes) middling (e.g., Book IV, chapter xi). Exact income amounts are never given for these groups, although to do so would present no difficulty in principle. Presumably, *actual poleis* in ancient Greece spelled out in precise terms what level of wealth was required to hold political office. In politics, the “right” form of rule by the many, the

ruling class, must have sufficient wealth to equip itself with arms. However, that is our only clue in the *Politics* for determining how rich or poor the rulers must be in the various other forms. “Well-off” (*euporoi*) and “poor” (*aporoi*) are “particularly held to be parts” (IV. iv 1291 b7f.). Not only do they always appear as opposites, they are also mutually exclusive, in that it is impossible for the same person to be both rich and poor. Because “rich” and “poor” are basic, most people think there are only two kinds of regime, oligarchy and democracy. Aristotle shows this opinion to be erroneous, but he does adopt these two forms as fundamental pillars of his own taxonomies.

Next to be considered is the part of “the virtuous.” Like every major part identified in the *Politics*, this characteristic too is further specified by Aristotle into subgroups: those of good birth, those of good education, those of partial virtue, and those of superior virtue simply. Typologies in the *Politics* occasionally make reference to the ordering of these parts in particular constitutions, notably in the type called so-called aristocracies (IV. viii 1293 b35ff.) and certain oligarchies (IV. xii 1296 b31ff.).

The most difficult subdivision is that of the part of occupations since there are so many of these. Rather than describe them all in every list of parts, therefore, Aristotle subdivides them according to type. The broadest division is into the three types: political, military, and productive occupations (recalling Plato’s tripartite division of citizens in the *Republic*). Each of these, in turn, is further divided. Political occupations are either deliberative, judicial, or magisterial (IV. iv 1290 a37ff. and IV. xiv 1297 b35ff.). The military function is divided (although not as systematically as the political) into armed troops, unarmed troops, and seamen. To illustrate, armed and unarmed soldiers are distinguished at IV. iii 1289 b31ff., where they are associated with rich and poor, respectively. Seamen are identified as a “part” of the state at IV. iv 1291 b18ff. The “defense force” is mentioned a third time (without further division) in the master list at IV. iv 1290 b37 where, along with the judicial and deliberative offices, it is called “more truly” a part than the other parts, “just as one would count the soul of an animal to be more a part of it than the body.” Military virtue was also the basis for distinguishing polity from other forms in Book III, vii 1279 a33ff. Finally, the productive occupations are classed as agricultural, mechanical, commercial, fishing, crafts, and manual.

To identify a constitution as to its type (on the basis of the material element) is now a straightforward procedure. One simply holds as constant the “part” of political offices, and examines who, i.e., which “part” in the various senses of the word described above, occupies these

offices. There are obviously three general possibilities and a host of more specific ones, some resulting from mixes of these three, others from further specification of each general type. Either the officeholders are some social class (or mix of social classes), or they are “the virtuous,” or they are those belonging to a certain occupational group or groups, or they are some combination of the above. When, for example, the citizens (or civic body) are “the rich,” the constitution will be of one sort; if the citizens are “the good,” it will be of another sort; and if they are “those who have a certain occupation,” it will be still of another sort.

One may also see now why, among the parts, political offices (*archai*) are special, not only because a *politeia* is defined as an arrangement of offices, but also because, uniquely, it is possible to hold a political office as well as some other occupation. For this reason, “political office” should be thought of as a formal rather than a material part. In every case, one wishes to know which among the non-political occupations is capable of holding political office.

Each of these three “parts” (viz., economic class, the “virtuous,” and “occupation”) may be more precisely specified. Instead of “the rich” we may find the officeholders to be “the very rich,” in which case we shall have a better idea, a more precise idea, of the sort of constitution. Instead of “the good” the officeholders may be those of “good birth,” and that finding too will sharpen our understanding. Also, the officeholders may be drawn from more than a single one of these three parts: “the rich” might be mingled with “those of good education,” to produce a sort of hybrid species. And of course one might expect a good deal of overlap: the occupational group of “the farmers” might well, for example, coincide in large degree with “the poor,” so that a double specification, though in a way a redundancy, is still quite conceivable. We need not run through the vast number of permutations that these principles of classification would permit. Enough is said if the general idea is clear.

We thus find in the *Politics* three taxonomies, none of them fully developed in any single place in the work, but whose general features may be discerned by drawing together the strands of the many partial taxonomies. One of them is a “normative” taxonomy, distinguishing “right” from “deviant” constitutions on the basis of a distributive principle of justice. A second taxonomy, more complex because it orders a greater number of states, is based on the criterion of the economic “class” of the rulers. This taxonomy is basic because classes are parts of the state in a more basic sense than other parts (IV. iv 1291 b5–12). A final taxonomy orders states by considering the occupations of the rulers. Each of these taxonomies may be further refined

by considering finer specifications of the three broad divisions—e.g., types of virtue among different rulers (or extent to which rulers rule for the common interest), exact location within a social class of the rulers, exact occupations of the rulers, extent of powers enjoyed by the ruling class.

Constitutions will be found to differ on the basis of all these *differentiae*, or divisions, whether normative or sociological. All general divisions are capable, as we see, of very fine and minute refinements. As the refinements are more narrowly drawn, individual species of constitution will begin to shade off into adjacent species. The small gaps between distinct species are sometimes filled with hybrid species. All of this lends a certain obscurity and confusion to Aristotle's taxonomies. At times he appears to be less than systematic. Yet ultimately all classifications are rooted in the two primary defining characteristics of *politeia* itself, viz., the material arrangement of offices and the prevailing principle of distributive justice.

We may now grasp the general structure of Aristotle's classification. In the first place we see that the classification of Book III, chapter vii, is actually of a single piece with those of later books. In Book III we find divisions occurring on the basis of wealth (whereby democracy is distinguished from oligarchy), on the basis of the merit or virtue of the ruling class (whereby the "right" forms are distinguished from the "deviant" forms), and on the basis of occupation (whereby polity, here defined as the form in which the military occupations hold political office, is distinguished from other forms). This is not to say, of course, that Books IV–VI add nothing to the scheme set out in Book III. Many refinements are added in later books. But the point is, I think, that the new additions of Books IV–VI are not new principles of division, but rather are refinements—more detailed specifications—of principles already set out in Book III. Aristotle makes finer discriminations within the categories in the later books; the categories themselves remain the same.

Beyond that, the taxonomies exhibit throughout the characteristic coupling of so-called "normative" and "empirical" elements. Both kinds of question are implicit in virtually every classification produced in any part of the treatise. States are either "right" or "deviant," and it is true that Aristotle is at times more preoccupied with states of one or the other of these two broad types. But all states—*politeiai*—are good in some measure; in every case there is to be found at least a partial conception of justice, and this is as true in "deviant" as in "right" constitutions. Similarly, every state, including the most virtuous, has a material component—an ordering of political offices—without a

conception of which the student of politics would fall short of an adequate understanding of specific types. The two kinds of concern are thoroughly intertwined and comingled. But they belong to a single intellectual enterprise, one that aims to comprehend the essential nature of the state as a single, yet complex, unity.

## CHAPTER 5



### EVALUATING THE GOODNESS OF REGIMES

#### I. ASSESSMENT OF THE GOODNESS OF *POLITEIAE*

At the end of Book IV, chapter xi, where Aristotle has been talking about “the middle constitution” (*he mese politeia*), he makes the following observation:

What the best regime is, then, and for what reason, is evident from these things. As for the other regimes . . . once the best is defined it is not difficult to see which is to be regarded as first, which second, and so on in the same manner according to whether it is better or worse. The one that is closest to this must of necessity always be better, and the one more removed from the middle, worse . . . (IV. ix 1296 b3ff.; cf. also III. ii 1275 a37ff.).

Aristotle perceives what may well be called a moral hierarchy among constitutional forms. Some are better, some worse, each finding its place within the hierarchy by reference to its relation to the best. His taxonomies are also moral orderings.

It is easy to be misled. For one thing, constitutions are seldom “right” or “deviant” simply; they may be both simultaneously, with qualification. Democracies, for example, are “deviant” when compared with the best regime, but may nevertheless be “right,” or at least “expedient” (*sympheron*) in a given set of circumstances, and the same is true of oligarchies. As Aristotle says, “while one sort of regime may be more choiceworthy (*hairetoterās*), there is often nothing to prevent another regime being more advantageous (*sympherein*) for certain cities” (1296 b11–12; cf. Keyt in Keyt and Miller, eds., 1991, 270).

What is “right” and what is “advantageous” may thus correspond in particular cases, but they do not do so necessarily. Right regimes always pay heed to the common advantage (*koinon sympheron*); indeed, this is why they are “right” (*orthos*) and in accord with nature (III. vii 1279 a28ff.). But sometimes it is more advantageous (*sympheron*) for a certain city to be equipped with a deviant constitution, say a democratic one. This is evidently because the deviant regime would be more stable than a right one in those circumstances. In assessing moral goodness Aristotle is not unconcerned with the requirements of stability (III. xi 1281 b28ff.; V. i 1302 a4–6ff.). In such cases Aristotle says “it is natural” (*pephykein*) (IV. xii 1296 b25–27; cp. III. 18 1288 b4–6) that a deviant constitution should exist. For something to be natural in certain circumstances is no certain assurance that a regime is “right”; and even if a constitution is “right” absolutely, and so governed according to the common advantage, it may be disadvantageous (i.e., unstable) for certain cities. For such cities, what is advantageous is a deviant regime, which also is “natural” and “safe” for such cities.

The hallmark of a right regime, then, is not merely that it is advantageous, but that it attends to the common advantage. This is “the political good,” “the greatest good and good in the highest degree” in “the most sovereign (science)” (*megiston te kai malista en te kuriotate [episteme]*) (IV. xii 1282 b14–18). When a regime is ruled according to the standard of the common advantage, it is framed in accordance with absolute justice (III. vii 1279 a18–20, 28–30). Indeed, the common advantage is justice (III. xii 1282 b16–18). But deviant regimes too may be advantageous at times, and they too embrace a part of justice (III. ix 1280 a8ff., V. i 1301 a26ff.). So, when evaluating regimes, it is necessary to regard both the degree of absolute justice or goodness in each and the suitability of each to conditions, both the “rightness” of the regime in an absolute sense and the degree to which it achieves rightness appropriate to its kind.

Aristotle’s scheme of normative orderings is complex in another way also. It involves, like classification, the simultaneous consideration of a multiplicity of normative factors. There are five of these that play a significant role in Aristotle’s rank-orderings. These are:

1. a question about whether states are law-governed
2. the degree and kind of virtue of the civic body or *politeuma*
3. the social “class” (in economic terms) that constitutes the *politeuma*
4. the occupational group(s) that constitute(s) the *politeuma* (a specification of 3)
5. the range of powers controlled by the *politeuma*

How these factors arrange themselves in the case of particular regimes establishes the degree of goodness of each constitution.

About the factors in a general sense it should be observed that all of them, with the exception of the first (the sovereignty of law), are identical to the main pillars (differentiae) of constitutional classification described in the preceding chapter. That is essentially why Aristotle's classifications are also, implicitly at least, normative orderings. To say that two states differ is to say not simply that there are formal and material elements that distinguish them from one another. It is also to say that they belong to different places within a hierarchically arranged moral universe; if they are essentially different, it is also true that one is morally superior, the other morally inferior.

The terms of this moral order are established by "nature." Thus, every essential differentia used in classification becomes itself, in its own right, a separate measure of the goodness of the regime being classified. Since several different measures are used for every state, and since there is no requirement that every measure covaries precisely with every other, there will inevitably be some difficult cases. It may happen, for example, that a state that measures as "good" in an absolute sense according to one criterion may measure as "deviant," or at least less than absolutely good, to another. Cases such as this are admittedly anomalous, but they do occur, and evaluating such states is problematic. Generally, though, the several criteria of evaluation tend to be mutually reinforcing, as we shall see.

Finally it ought to be clear that the moral order of states is intimately linked to Aristotle's teleology. All natural objects aim at some good. But not all goods are equally good. The good aimed at by "the best state absolutely" is a higher good than the good aimed at by, say, democracies. It is ultimately the extent to which the good aimed at by a particular state approaches the absolute good that determines the goodness of that state. But again, this is a complex question; final causes are not single factors, but like formal and material ones, they too come in multiples. The goodness of states is understood by a simultaneous consideration of all of these.

## II. INDIVIDUAL CRITERIA OF NORMATIVE ORDERING

### A. The Sovereignty of Law

This is the only normative factor that is not also a differentia of classification. The reason for this is that the question about the sovereignty

of law is really prior to taxonomic division; it serves in the first instance not to mark distinctions among states, but to mark the boundary between “genuine” constitutions and those regimes that are not properly considered constitutions at all (IV. iv 1292 a31).

I say “in the first instance” because Aristotle does not strictly adhere to this principle in application. Reality is not so cut and dried. The various genera of constitutions (including the very best—kingships—and the very worst—tyrannies) have at least one species whose constitution is not “law-governed” (III. xiv 1285 b30–33; IV. iv 1292 a7ff.; IV. vi 1293a 30ff.). But among the other species one must assume distinctions among regimes that come closer to or fall further away from the ideal of “law-governed,” and when this happens the question of “sovereignty of law” serves also to mark normative differences among constitutions. But in general the rule concerning the sovereignty of law is that only states that are law-governed may lay any claim to goodness. States in which “men rule and not the laws,” to invert a Madisonian expression, are never far away from tyranny and, as I have said, are sometimes considered non-constitutions.

There is an important exception to this rule: in states in which the rulers have achieved a perfection of excellence in every virtue the laws ought not to be sovereign (Kraut 2002, chapter 4). In such states the laws would be a hindrance to good rule; such rulers, though extremely rare, are “a law unto themselves” (III. xiii 1284 a13). Law, which is “a rule for equals,” does not fit such exceptional characters. To expect them to submit to it would be an injustice. The only states identified by Aristotle in which such rulers exist are some kingships and aristocracies of an earlier age. Wherever general equality in point of moral virtue among the civic body is the prevailing pattern (and this is nearly universal, including in Aristotle’s own ideal state of Books VII–VIII), the laws should be sovereign as much as possible. This is true even of the ideal state of Books VII–VIII (*Pol.* III. xvi).

## B. Virtue

At first one might be led to believe that the goodness of an object is strictly a function of the degree to which that object possesses virtue, or “goodness,” since the good is that at which all objects aim “by nature” (*NE* I. chapter 1; *Pol.* III. xii 1282 b14ff.). This view is only partially correct. Things possess virtue in a variety of ways. One of these, but only one, involves the final goal (*telos*) of the object, the degree to which the goodness appropriate to the class to which that object belongs has been fulfilled. One might call this the degree of

an object's absolute (*haplos*) virtue. In the case of constitutions, the measure of absolute virtue is the extent to which a regime achieves "the good life absolutely."

How does one tell whether a state is achieving, or has achieved, "the good life"? Aristotle's test is this: if the rulers rule with a view to the common advantage (*to koinon sympheron*), the state is ruled in accordance with virtue; if the rulers take heed only of their own private advantage (*to idion*), the state is a "deviation" (*parekbasis*), ruled "contrary to nature" (or goodness: *para physin*: III. vii 1279 a26ff.). Virtuous states, then, are virtuous because their rulers are virtuous (or, what is the same thing, rule virtuously, with the common interest in view); states are deviant because their rulers are deviant, or rule selfishly. Different degrees of both of these are possible, but the test for both is always the same. This is the primary measure of absolute goodness in a state.

But there is also a question about the degree of virtue of an object relative to its specific type. In the case of deviant objects, such as democracies and oligarchies, this is not the same as the absolute virtue of the constitution, but is better called its relative virtue. Thus, while constitutions in general aim at an absolute good (the good life absolutely), species of deviant constitutions may be rank-ordered among themselves according to the degree to which they achieve the goodness appropriate to their own specific forms. This is still a primary measure of goodness, but the standard of measure is a good below the absolute good. It is essentially on the basis of this measure that moderate democracies and oligarchies are "better than" extreme ones.

That is not all. Virtue itself comes in different qualities and quantities. In each case, however, it is the virtue of the *politeuma* that matters. Foremost is the question about the kind of virtue in a given case: is the virtue of the *politeuma* a perfect excellence of every virtue, or is the citizens' virtue one of an inferior sort? This latter concept itself permits two possible alternatives: it may be an inferior virtue (as, for example, courage is a virtue inferior to wisdom), or it may be a less-complete virtue (wisdom alone is less complete than wisdom accompanied by moderation and courage). Aristotle does not seem to subscribe to the view commonly associated with Socrates that the virtues constitute a unity—possession of one entails possession of all in some sense (cf. Kraut 2002, chapter 4). States may be rank-ordered by considering the kind of virtue of the *politeuma* in all of these senses (III. vii 1279 a38ff.).

One wishes to know also how extensive is the virtue of the *politeuma*, or, what amounts to the same thing, how extensive is the

*politeuma* itself. Where the many are admitted into citizenship, if they are all equipped with a high quality of virtue, such states are superior to those in which the few are admitted, assuming the same quality of virtue in the two cases. In other words, not only quality counts, but also quantity. Other things being equal (and of course they rarely are), a more extensive *politeuma* is preferable to a much-restricted one.

Finally, regimes may be ordered by looking at the collective virtue of the *politeuma*. It is possible under the right conditions for a regime consisting of a numerous citizenry to be superior (in the relevant moral sense: III. x 1281 a12–13, III. xi 1281 a39ff., 1282 a38ff.) to a regime of the few “best,” even though individually the citizens in the former are inferior in virtue to the citizens in the latter (Keyt, in Keyt and Miller, eds., 1991, 270). Several reasons are given by Aristotle as to why such regimes are superior:

1. The many may be collectively superior in virtue to the few best (III. xi 1281 b1ff.; III. xv 1286 a25–30);
2. The many may be better judges of the suitability or excellence of laws than those who make them, analogous to diners at a feast (III. xi 1282 a20ff.);
3. The many are less corruptible than the few, as a large body of water is less easily fouled than a small one (III. xv 1286 a31ff.); and
4. The many are dangerous to the stability of the city when they are excluded from honors and offices (III. xi b31–32).

Aristotle is very clear that such arguments would elevate only some popular regimes in the moral hierarchy, not all of them. Popular regimes are advantageous and just only for some cities and some peoples, namely those in which “the many” have achieved at least some degree of goodness (how much is not specified) and are not too slavish (*andrapododes*) in character (III. xi 1281 b16ff., 1282 a16ff.). Even in these cases it is best, Aristotle believes, to restrict as much as possible the powers actually controlled by the many; the many should be allowed to hold perhaps the powers of election and review of magistrates, but not the magistracies themselves (III. xi 1281 b23ff., 1282 a38ff.), and probably not the office that is called “sovereign” (*to kurion* [ibid.]). Nevertheless, when the right conditions are present, the many may be given a share of the offices and honors, and, provided only that the many are collectively superior and that the regime is lawgoverned (III. xi 1282 b2–5), such regimes would be placed above those in which the few best rule.

Summing up, then, we note the following specifications of a constitution's virtue: (1) the degree to which it attains the absolute good, which in politics is the "common advantage"; (2) the extent to which it attains the goodness of its particular type (e.g., the extent to which a democracy attains democratic virtue); (3) the type of virtue of the *politeuma* (Is it a higher virtue or a lower one? Is it a combination of many types or is it less complete?); (4) the extent of virtue in the *politeuma* (Is it a virtue possessed only by a few, or do the many also possess it? If the latter, do the many possess this virtue individually or only collectively?). Each specification helps to fill in the picture of a particular regime's goodness.

### C. Economic Class

The basic rules here are:

1. A leisured class is best, i.e., one that does not have to perform the normal jobs for sustenance or income (*Pol.* VII. ix 1329a1; but cp. *NE* X. vii, where it is suggested that political activity is not compatible with leisure).
2. A "middle" amount of material means among the citizen class is better than either a great deal or too little. (Note that 1 and 2 are not necessarily incompatible; Aristotle evidently envisioned a "leisured middle class" as the civic foundation for his own ideal—see chapter 8 below.)
3. States that mix rich and poor in the constitution are better in goodness than states in which either of these classes exists alone, but are worse than "middle-class" and "leisure-class" states. (I defend the proposition that the "mixed regime" and the "middle regime" are fundamentally different for Aristotle in Johnson, 1988, 189–204.)
4. States in which the majority of citizens must engage in necessary occupations are worse than the ones already mentioned, but are better than those in which the unemployed are admitted; if the civic body must work, it is better if they are engaged in agricultural occupations than commerce and trades (VI. iv 1318 b6ff.)—generally, rural occupations are superior.
5. Worst of all (save tyrannies) are states in which the many hold the offices and are supported in their political activities by state payments. This sort of "unemployed leisure class" is a breeding ground for demagogues and tyrants.

### D. Occupations

See section directly above. Rank-orderings based upon occupations generally follow very closely those based upon economic class. One would expect this since, as we saw in the last chapter, occupations only “specify” the differentia of economic class within the taxonomic schemes. In the same way, the “goodness” of the occupations of different civic bodies fixes more exactly the kind and extent of the goodness of the different economic classes that control different regimes.

It should be emphasized here that the rank-ordering among states on the basis of economic class and occupation is motivated in Aristotle's thought by considerations other than purely pragmatic ones. Agricultural democracies, to take just one example, may be more secure and stable against revolutionary upheaval than city democracies. But their greater virtue stems from other considerations: agricultural people tend to have a more moderate amount of property, a more moderate style of living, a more moderate disposition toward political activity, etc., than city-folk. That is, they approach more closely the cherished ethical standard of the mean, and this is why they are better, and is also (and therefore) why they are more stable.

### E. Extent of Powers

The basic rule here is that the “better” on the other measures of goodness a *politeuma* is, the more offices it should control. In the case of the very best rulers (in the relevant ethical sense) there should be total mastery over all offices with no restrictions imposed even by the laws. Below this very high level, it is always best to have the laws in the sovereign position as much as possible. Within the class of “law-governed states,” every decline in the goodness of the citizens should be matched by a decline in the extent of the powers (offices) they control. The best democracies, for example, are those in which the citizens hold few offices and attend them infrequently, the worst those in which the many hold all the offices and are in continuous session (VI. iv 1318 b7ff.; IV. xiv 1298 a11ff.).

This completes the review of the principles employed by Aristotle in evaluating regimes. We have seen that there are five of these: the extent to which states are “law-governed”; the extent and kind of virtue (in both absolute and relative terms) of constitutions (or better, of the ruling class within constitutions); the social class (in economic terms) of the *politeuma*; the occupational group(s) that control political offices; and the extent of powers controlled by the ruling group.

We may now turn to the application of these principles to actual states, and so to the hierarchy of goodness among constitutions that emerges from Aristotle's *Politics*.

### III. EVALUATION OF SPECIFIC FORMS

#### A. Are the Laws Sovereign?

The answer to this question provides a convenient starting point for all subsequent evaluations. Aristotle uses this standard in two different ways. The first is to mark a division between true constitutions and non-constitutions; states in which men rule, instead of laws, are sometimes considered non-constitutions. The second way is to admit such non-law-governed states into the status of true constitutions, but to regard them as inferior (as a class) to constitutions in which the laws are sovereign. On this latter basis one arrives at the following broad division: good are kingships, aristocracies, polities, democracies, and oligarchies in which the laws are sovereign; inferior and deviant are those democracies and oligarchies in which the laws are not sovereign (the last species named of each of these two forms by Aristotle); and the last form of tyranny, where also the laws are not sovereign.

This broad division is not useful for making finer discriminations. Aristotle tends to regard it as nearly a plain matter of black and white: states are either law-governed or they are not. In the real world things are obviously not so clear-cut, even in Aristotle's world. There are few if any states that are wholly unregulated by legal provisions; and conversely, even as Aristotle himself admits, one will often find law-governed states entrusting important matters to the decision of legislative and executive powers that sometimes rule through "decrees" (see chapter 8). In truth, states will line up not on one side or another of a line, but along a continuum, from those more law-governed to those less so. What Aristotle is saying is that when a state moves too far along this continuum toward the non-lawgoverned end, it ceases to resemble a genuine political association and becomes a gross distortion.

If it is difficult to say precisely where the line between good and deviant lies, the distinction itself is an extremely important division for Aristotle. The question of the sovereignty of law recurs in nearly every book of the *Politics*. The boundary that it marks out places states on the wrong side of it in a position of something like illegitimacy. The reason for this may best be understood by looking at the way Aristotle argues for the importance of this criterion of evaluation.

In part there is a question about stability; states that fail to entrust sovereignty to the law are generally full of disruptions. In this regard they all resemble tyranny, since the sovereign group (whether a few or many) behaves like a tyrant does; in both cases “the spirit (*ethos*) is the same,” as Aristotle says (IV. iv 1292 a15ff.).

But stability is a secondary concern. Primary is the question about the rightness of the rule of law. For one thing, the law is often a better ruler than humans: “Nobody disputes,” writes Aristotle, “that in matters about which it can do so the law is the best ruler and judge” (III. xvi 1287 b17–18). This is because the law is disimpassioned reason, whereas human rule is always mixed with appetite and emotion, and these “warp the rule of even the best men” (III. xvi 1287 a30ff.). Beyond that, law is equality; it recognizes no distinctions in persons. And where “all are alike and equal” it is only just that all be treated equally by law, which means that all be admitted equally to share in the political offices of the state, by turns. As Aristotle says, justice demands that equals should be given equal shares of ruling, and this is law (III. xvi 1287 a10ff.). (Kraut’s 2002, 105–26, discussion of “justice in the broad sense as lawfulness” in the *NE* Book V, is important here.)

Non-lawgoverned states are, then, fundamentally unjust, and this is why they are rank-ordered below all others, even below the lawgoverned deviant forms of democracy and oligarchy. There is, however, one notable exception to this general principle. In some states, Aristotle maintains, the sovereignty of law would be a hindrance to good government. These are states in which the ruling class consists of the exceptionally virtuous. If the rule of law is the “rule of God and reason alone” (III. xvi 1287 a28), then rule by the exceptionally virtuous is even more divine than this. Equality will no longer do in this environment; such individuals can only (in justice) be made permanent rulers, and they can (in justice) rule only by their wisdom. They do not need legal contrivances, for they are incarnate law.

These states, if they exist (and Aristotle maintained that in his day they did not), set the upper boundary of goodness of regimes, just as non-law-governed states of the deviant kind mark the lower boundary. Since rulers of such surpassing virtue would never be more than a small fraction of a whole population, and probably never more than a single individual, states in which they rule are easily identified as aristocracy (or true aristocracy) and the best form of kingship. But for the most part such regimes belong to pure political theory. Political science is more absorbed with the actual—that large number of states (the vast majority in fact) that lie between the two extreme forms of non-lawgoverned regimes.

### B. How Virtuous Is the *Politeuma*?

Quality and quantity both matter when assessing the virtue of regimes. Best, therefore, are those states in which one finds the highest perfection of every moral excellence within a numerous population, and all of those who possess such excellence are admitted into citizenship. States of this sort did not exist anywhere in Aristotle's time and it is safe to say that he held out no realistic expectation of such states ever coming to pass. It then becomes a toss-up between those states in which the few who possess the highest excellence rule (true aristocracy, or true kingship if the ruler is a single individual), and those in which the rulers are the many, and they possess the highest level of virtue of which the many are capable. The latter, I shall argue in chapter 9, is Aristotle's own ideal state, described in Books VII–VIII. Aristotle appears to prefer the former state to the latter (VII. xiv 1332 b12ff.), but the latter is more attainable.

Below these rarefied forms are so-called aristocracies, states that include an element of virtue among a relatively large ruling class (although the virtuous within this class need not be large), but in which this virtue is mixed with other elements, diluting somewhat its purity. Aristotle discriminates between those so-called aristocracies that incline more toward oligarchy and those that incline more toward democracy (IV. vii–viii 1293 b7ff.), but it is not clear how this division might be useful in helping one to discern a normative order among them. More promising might be an investigation into the kind and the extent of virtue in each, although Aristotle only barely alludes to these criteria when ranking so-called aristocracies. He does identify three species of so-called aristocracy, but he is not particularly at pains to distinguish among them. The difference seems to be this: when virtue is mixed with only one other element (wealth or freedom), it is one sort; when virtue is mixed with both wealth and freedom, it is one or the other of the other two kinds, one when there is an inclination toward oligarchy, the other when there is an inclination toward democracy (IV. vii 1293 a35ff.). Aristotle, in Book IV, chapter viii, endeavors to distinguish between so-called aristocracy and polity. There it is shown that virtue itself comes in different qualities: perfect virtue, good birth, good education, and “quality” (the *kaloï kagathoi*). Presumably aristocracies would differ depending upon which of these types of virtue is mixed in with the other elements, although Aristotle does not expressly affirm that this is the case.

Next come states in which the many are admitted into office, but in which the virtue of the citizens is of an inferior kind, the military

virtue. Aristotle names these states “polity” (*politeia*: III. vii 1279 a36ff.). Note that this is the same term Aristotle employs to designate “constitution” in general. It is also the same term he employs to designate particular constitutions that mix “rich” and “poor.” It may even refer to the form of constitution that he designates “the middle constitution” in Book IV, chapter xi. The multiple usages of this single term can, needless to say, create confusion. Thus, just to be clear, in this section I am referring only to *politeia* in the sense of Book III, chapter vii, the form in which the many, said to be incapable of complete virtue but capable of the limited virtue of “military valor,” (i.e., courage: 1279 a39–1279 b5) rule over the state. This is the only genus of regime in the *Politics* for which species are not discriminated, which spares one the necessity of ranking its types.

There are nevertheless many difficulties in Aristotle’s discussion of polity in the *Politics*, to which I return in chapter 8. For now, it must suffice to say that (1) it is a genus containing only a single species (for it is impossible for a genus to exist with no species); (2) the extent of its virtue is great: the many (*to plethos*) are admitted into office on the basis of their virtue; (3) the kind of its virtue is one that aims at the common interest (and, as such, has affinities with the excellence of aristocratic and kingly regimes); (4) yet it is still a virtue below the level of “a perfect excellence in every virtue” that characterizes the best regimes. These considerations place polity between “the best” and “the deviant” in Aristotle’s moral hierarchy.

Next in goodness to polities come those states in which the many, though inferior individually to the few in the state, are nevertheless superior collectively. It is hard to know what name Aristotle would give to such states, since he in fact does not name them. They have certain affinities with moderate democracies, and Aristotle at one point appears to place them among the “deviant” forms (III. xiii 1283 a29). On the other hand, it is noteworthy that Aristotle nowhere calls them “democracies”; instead, wherever he speaks of collective virtue, he is always asking about a regime of “the many” (*to plethos*: III. x 1281 a12–13, III. xi 1281 a39ff., 1282 a38ff.). Further, he is clear that, occasionally at least, such regimes are not merely “advantageous” (*sympheron*), but also just, when the collective superiority of the many is taken into view (III. 11 1282 a38ff., III. xiii 1283 a40ff.). This would seem to rule out the possibility that these regimes are democracies (but cf. Keyt, in Keyt and Miller, 1991, 270; Kraut, 2002, chapter 11; Cooper, 1999).

In truth Aristotle seems uncertain. He appears to have confronted here an argument that he does not especially like, yet whose

compulsion he cannot escape. He has recognized a possible species of regime that, under the right conditions, would seem to have a rather strong claim in justice to a place among the right forms. But he exhibits little enthusiasm. Note the hesitating, almost grudging, and impersonal way he introduces the idea of collective superiority. “The view that the multitude should be sovereign rather than those who are best is a position involving difficulties needing resolution, and while questionable, it perhaps also involves some truth” (III. xi 1281 a39ff.). One senses the presence in Aristotle’s mind of a puzzling and difficult issue. In fairness such a regime should be given priority even over aristocracy and kingship, the best forms, because the size of the *politeuma*, and so the extent of virtue, is much greater. But Aristotle does not concede this. Aristocracy and kingship are (along with “the middle regime”) the only ones called “the best.” Nevertheless, the logic of the case nearly forces the concession. Perhaps in this form Aristotle is anticipating his discussion of his own “ideal” constitution in Books VII–VIII.

Below politics in goodness are states in which the civic virtue is a partial one, in the double sense of that word; it is both an incomplete conception and a self-interested one. These are the democratic and oligarchic constitutions (III. ix 1280 a7ff.). Both of these states commit the same sort of error: mistaking a part of virtue for the whole of it (which is why they are “deviant” forms). But they commit it in different ways. Democracies overgeneralize equality: those equal in point of birth (viz., the many free-born) are allowed equal shares in political offices and honors because of their equality in birth. Oligarchies overgeneralize inequality; those unequal in point of wealth (viz., the wealthy) are given unequal (i.e., greater) control over offices because of their wealth. Both “deviate” since by the standard of universal goodness only those who are unequal in point of virtue (viz., the virtuous absolutely) should rule.

Both of these forms come in multiple species, four in the case of oligarchy, four (or perhaps five) in the case of democracy. The species too occupy different places in the moral hierarchy. Worst of both genera are the non-law-governed regimes. As to the remaining ones, the basic rule is that those regimes closer to a mean are better than those at the extremes. There are many specifications of the mean in this context, but the most obvious one for democracies and oligarchies alike is the size of the *politeuma*; the best of these deviant forms are those whose civic body is neither too large nor too small. The other ways of specifying the “mean,” and so of rank-ordering democracies and oligarchies, are taken up in subsequent sections of this chapter.

What is the relative rank-order in point of goodness between oligarchy and democracy? Aristotle claims that democracy is better (IV. ii 1289 a38ff.), but his argument is curious and Aristotle himself seems not always to be committed to it. It has to do with the idea of “opposites.” Since kingship is the best, and tyranny is the deviation of this form (i.e., its opposite), tyranny is worst. Similarly, aristocracy is second best, so oligarchy, its opposite, is second worst; and democracy, the opposite of the least good of the right forms (polity) is the least bad of the deviant forms (see also *NE* VIII. x).

There are several difficulties with this argument. One is that in earlier accounts of the relative merit of constitutions aristocracy had been placed above kingship, not below it (III. xv 1286 b5–7). Thus, according to the principle of “opposites” oligarchy should be worst, not tyranny. Second, the idea of “opposites” is itself a troublesome notion when applied to constitutional forms. The reason for this is that it is based upon what Aristotle himself calls an “accidental” feature of constitutions, namely the size of the ruling class. In other words, what makes tyranny “opposite” to kingship is the fact that in both forms only one person rules. Yet surely the idea of “opposites” and “correspondence” might look more deeply into constitutional structure than this. Finally, Aristotle seems always to prefer the moderate forms of either democracy or oligarchy to the extreme forms; this would make a categorical pronouncement in favor of either general type difficult if not impossible. For example, would not a moderate oligarchy be “better than” an extreme democracy? Aristotle does not say.

To be sure, there are features of democracy that do seem to place it above oligarchy in the moral hierarchy. Particularly it has in its favor (1) an extensive citizenry, and (2) the idea (fundamental to the idea of politics in general) that, among the free and equal, ruling should be by all, in turns. But oligarchy too has its claims: in its favor are (1) an inegalitarianism that has obvious affinities with aristocratic and kingship regimes, and (2) a greater likelihood of good education among its ruling class (since money then as now brought education within closer reach—cf. *Pol.* IV. viii 1293 b34ff.). It is a close call. Again, everything would seem to depend upon which species of democracy or oligarchy one has in mind, moderate ones (of either type) generally being preferable to extreme forms.

It should be observed, finally, that there are occasions when a democracy or an oligarchy might be a better regime to institute (or preserve) within a specific social setting than one of the morally “superior” forms. That is to say, lawmakers and statesmen need to look to more than simply the virtue of a regime; there is, as ever, a practical

dimension. There are times when aristocracy, say, simply will not do. Aristotle is not only an ethical political theorist; he is also a political sociologist (e.g., Pellegrin, in Shields, ed., 2012, 558–61). His belief, for better or worse, is that some peoples at certain times and places are simply not suited to, indeed not capable of, a high level of virtue, and that for them an inferior species of regime (morally speaking) is the superior choice from the standpoint of what is advantageous.

### C. Which Economic Class(es) Hold(s) the Offices?

The broad categories of “class” in Aristotle’s *Politics* are those of “the rich,” “the poor,” and “the middle class.” Each of these is capable of further subdivisions, e.g., the very wealthy, the extremely poor, and so forth. We have seen already that class is a major pillar of taxonomic division; on the basis of it, all of the deviant forms (with the evident exception of tyranny) are generally situated within the taxonomy. The normative location of specific types follows this classification.

Best are states in which the material level of well-being of the citizens is best. One might suppose that “best” here means “the wealthy,” but this would be a mistake. Too little of anything, including wealth, is not good, but too much is not good either. Best, therefore, comes to mean “a middle amount” (IV. xi 1295 b39f.). One finds a *politeuma* of this sort in “the middle regime,” a form distinct (I shall argue in a later chapter) from the form called polity. The same “middle amount” is also discovered in the “best state absolutely” described in Books VII–VIII (VII. iv 1326 a38–40, VII. ix 1329 a17ff.). From the standpoint of economic class, these two forms are “best.”

Along with a “middle amount” of property comes leisure (*scholē*); it is its natural accompaniment. Leisure, moreover, is necessary to virtue (VII. ix 1328 b40ff.). In the best state, then, the citizens will have a great deal of leisure, which is another indicator of their level of economic well-being. In fact, in his own ideal state Aristotle entrusts virtually all of the so-called “necessary” occupations, including agricultural ones, to slaves and other non-citizens; citizens are, for their part, responsible only for military, deliberative, and sacerdotal functions—i.e., political functions in the broad Aristotelian sense. The economic class of the best state is a materially well-equipped and leisured class.

Economic class plays no role in Aristotle’s discussion of the moral goodness of true aristocracies and kingships. Enough has already been said to show that these are also “the best.” Presumably, then, the rulers of these states would be free of the normal occupations; Aristotle

would have had little admiration for the Cincinnatus figure who left his plow temporarily to direct the Roman ship of state, no matter how virtuous he was. But it is not their freedom from the necessary jobs, but rather their virtue (which depends upon leisure) that causes these regimes to be ranked as morally superior.

Next in goodness come states that mix rich and poor in the constitution, such as do so-called aristocracies and polities. From the standpoint of economic class, the superiority of these forms is a consequence of the fact that a mixture of rich and poor more nearly approximates an economic mean (and moderation) than either class entrusted with governing by itself. Because of the variety of ways in which offices may be mixed between rich and poor, especially in polities (IV. ix passim), one expects that the socioeconomic classes actually participating in polities would vary from one state to another. However that may be, the general idea is clear enough: mixed regimes are superior to unmixed ones whenever wealth is taken as the sole criterion of discrimination.

Finally one may consider the deviant forms, especially democracies and oligarchies. These are both pure "class states" in the post-Marxian sense, that is, both involve the rule of groups who are distinguished from one another solely on the basis of their economic status, and in both cases the rule is intended to serve specific class interests. In terms of the question of the goodness of these forms, Aristotle's basic view is that both "the rich" and "the poor" (whatever terms are used to designate these groups) are "inferior" in an ethical sense to "the middle." The poor, among other things, must work, and so lack the leisure necessary to cultivate virtue (not to mention the material means that the practice of virtue requires [*NE* I. viii, X. vii]); also their jobs are often demeaning and base (*Pol.* VI. iv 1319 a24ff.). The rich may have leisure and, as a matter of definition, have the necessary material means for virtue. But they have too much, which makes them arrogant and oppressive, which is usually a sign of stinginess (IV. xi 1295 blff.). Also, the wealthy are drawn to wealth. Neither extreme is conducive to virtue, and the more extreme in either direction the truer this becomes. Error on the side of wealth is more to be feared than error on the side of poverty.

About tyranny one can say very little; the economic status of the tyrant is never introduced by Aristotle as a decisive criterion for this form. In this respect it is similar to aristocracy and kingship. As with the latter, one assumes an abundance of material equipment in the hands of the tyrant, though in his case it is obviously used for further selfish aggrandizement. Although Aristotle does not say so it

is perhaps best to regard tyranny as the ultimate limit (in size and wealth) of oligarchy—an extremely wealthy “class” consisting of one person (IV. iv 1292 a13ff.).

#### D. Which Occupational Group(s) Hold(s) the Offices?

Occupations tend to follow very closely the economic classes, since the former serve in Aristotle’s taxonomies to specify the latter. At the upper end of goodness are states in which the rulers do not work but only engage in political affairs. These are the aristocracies and kingships, and also include Aristotle’s own ideal state of Books VII–VIII. In the latter, all “necessary” occupations are entrusted to slaves and alien residents (VII. ix 1329 a17ff.).

If members of the civic body (*politeuma*) must work (beyond serving as political functionaries), it is best if their occupations are closely tied to the well-being of the city, particularly the military occupations. Politics, for example, which come next in goodness to the best forms, are sometimes identified as those states in which the citizens are equipped with arms for military service (which corresponds, not accidentally, to the virtue of this form, the military virtue: III. vii 1279 a36ff.). It seems likely that other occupations would also be involved in politics (since “the poor” are admitted into these regimes), but Aristotle does not say what they are.

The deviant regimes too may be rank-ordered by occupation. This is particularly well-worked-out in Aristotle’s discussion of democracies. In these states, the citizen class is composed of people who must work (at necessary jobs) because they are poor. Best are the agricultural occupations, and they are best for several reasons: an agricultural *politeuma* is comparatively well equipped in a material sense, its members are hard workers and are unlikely to spend an excessive amount of time in unnecessary political activity, the agricultural life is a life that promotes a degree of virtue, and so forth (IV. iv 1318 b6ff.). Similar in goodness to this form, and for similar reasons, is the “pastoral” form, in which the citizens are herdsmen (ibid.).

Considerably worse than the rural democracies are the city ones, in which those who hold city occupations (especially manual laborers—*banauoi*—but the translation is controversial) are admitted into citizenship. A large city obviously includes a large number of different occupational groups, but the general idea is that the city is where the poorer elements are concentrated and so constitutions that admit these elements are worse, the more so the meaner the occupations admitted. At the bottom of the stack are extreme

city democracies, in which (1) there is no occupational restriction for holding office; (2) even those with no employment income are admitted, being in effect subsidized by state payments for office; (3) the laws lose their sovereign hold over affairs; and (4) the idea of liberty has been pushed to its unnatural extreme, everyone doing whatever he pleases (IV. iv 1292 a7ff.; VI. iv 1319 blff.).

There is a convergence here, as usual in Aristotle, among several normative factors. Occupations are of different sorts—some better, some worse. The worse ones are also the more poorly paid, although that is not the only reason they are worse. They tend to be held by people of an inferior sort (e.g., people of alien birth, freedmen, people who can claim only one citizen parent, etc.), although again that is not the only reason they are worse. They tend to discourage the cultivation of virtue, and so forth. Aristotle finds the “nature” deck stacked heavily against those who are in the baser occupations (*Pol.* VI. iv *passim*).

Oligarchies present a somewhat more difficult case. Aristotle does not often speak about the occupations of the oligarchical classes. They are wealthy (by definition), but beyond that what do they do? As a consequence of his silence on this point, Aristotle does not classify (or rank-order) oligarchies on the basis of occupation. Instead he uses almost exclusively the criterion of social class—how restrictive is the property-assessment for membership?

There are two or three relevant observations nevertheless. Certain occupations were evidently incompatible with membership in certain oligarchic constitutions; for example, at Thebes it was necessary to have been free of “mechanical” employment (*banauson ergon*) for a period of some years before one was eligible for membership in the citizen body (VI. vii 1321 a29–30). Some oligarchies, secondly, were evidently associated in Aristotle’s mind with certain military occupations, notably those of cavalymen and hoplites (VI. vii 1321 a5ff.). This is a similar requirement that Aristotle specifies for some polities, those inclining toward oligarchies, although usually polities (in the sense of mixed constitutions) incline more toward democracies. Finally, the possession of wealth usually, though not infallibly, points to gainful employment of some sort, so that in certain cases Aristotle finds it advisable for the legislator to impose fines on the wealthy to better ensure their attendance to political affairs.

Still, without a more systematic enumeration of the occupations of the wealthy it is very difficult to rank-order species of oligarchy on this basis. Generally oligarchies are better when the oligarchs are more numerous, less wealthy, and not overly eager to participate in affairs.

When a few very wealthy men grasp at power and turn to office for personal gain (IV. vii 1321 a39ff.) and have replaced their own rule for that of the laws, one has reached the limit of deviance of this form. This assessment is made with little regard to the occupations of these men.

A word is in order here about the unemployed. Aristotle's general view is that it is better to work than to be idle, at least under usual conditions. Problems occur whenever people at either end of the economic spectrum have nothing but politics to occupy their attention. Among the poor this means those who are unable or unwilling to hold a regular job; among the wealthy it means those whose means permit them the luxury of not working. In either case danger looms for the state that admits this group into office. But freedom from work can be a good thing if the conditions are right. Aristotle's own statement about what such conditions are is given in Books VII–VIII (which I discuss elsewhere). One notes here again a basic ambivalence in Aristotle's general attitude about the art with which his treatise is occupied. Work is a good thing, promotive of virtue of a sort. But it is also a bad thing, distracting those who do it from the cultivation of the highest faculties of the soul and from engaging in political action. Yet only by such personal development as comes from engaging in political life, or better, from pure theoretical contemplation (*NE* X. vii; *Pol.* VII, i–ii), is it possible to become fully virtuous. One thus confronts a paradox: to work promotes virtue, and yet inhibits it. One breaks free of the dilemma only within the ideal state; for the common run of states it is better for men to work, and only workers should be admitted into office.

### E. What Offices Do the Citizens Control?

One must bear in mind that Greek city-states typically had a variety of different offices to administer affairs. It mattered, then, which offices the various groups of society controlled, for some offices were more important than others (see chapter 6). A systematic rank-ordering of the goodness of regimes may accordingly be made on the basis of how many offices were controlled by any ruling group.

Best are states in which one man or a few men control all of the offices, but only when they are equipped with a surpassing excellence of every virtue; when such men exist, they should be “sovereign over everything” (*kurias panton*). Below this unusually high level of perfection come states that *mix* the offices as much as possible among the different relevant constituencies in society, particularly among the rich and the poor. Neither group should control all of the offices; both

should be as much as possible limited in the extent of their powers by the sovereignty of law.

Among this rather large class of states, the best, evidently, are those that entrust "deliberative and judicial offices" to "the many," reserving the magistracies and perhaps the sovereign office (*to kurion*) to "the few," but only when the "many" are collectively superior in virtue to the virtuous few (III. xi 1281 b26ff.). Next are states (*polit-eiaki*) that divide all offices almost equally between rich and poor, without regard to merit; the better the mix, the more difficult it is to say whether the state is truly a democracy or an oligarchy. A good example is Sparta (IV. ix 1294 b14ff.). As one or the other of these two groups comes to dominate more of the offices, the state deviates further in the direction either of oligarchy or democracy. The limit of perversion is attained when one or the other social class monopolizes all offices in its own hands, leaving nothing to the other, and reigns supreme even over the laws themselves. These are the worst of the deviant forms.

Tyrannies, if they are even to be regarded as constitutions in the true sense, exceed in deviance the most deviant democracies and oligarchies. There are several reasons for this: the ruler is devoid of virtue, he has no other rulers to curb his excesses, and he "controls everything." Again it is the monopoly of all offices in the hands of imperfect mortals, unrestrained even by the laws, that marks this as the ultimate limit of deviance in constitutions. For just as "sovereignty over everything" is best when the ruler is virtuous, so "sovereignty over everything" is worst when he is not.

#### IV. THE MORAL HIERARCHY

Looking at the evidence as a whole, one finds in the *Politics* the following rank-ordering of the goodness of states: monarchies and aristocracies of the "first and best kind" (non-existent in Aristotle's day); Aristotle's own ideal state (outlined in Books VII–VIII); the "middle" constitution (described in Book IV, chapter xi, and, I shall argue, the model for Aristotle's own ideal); so-called aristocracies and imperfect kingships; states in which the many collectively exceed in virtue the few and rule; polities, democracies, and oligarchies (the several varieties of each themselves rank-ordered from best to worst in such a way that the "moderate" forms of each are better than the extreme forms of each); and, finally, tyrannies.

The moral hierarchy is not in itself surprising; it is much what any casual reader of the *Politics* would undoubtedly expect. What is

notable is the manner in which Aristotle derives this ranking, his justification of this scheme by an appeal to “nature.” In particular one might be struck by the convergence of evaluative criteria, each one serving to confirm and strengthen, as it were, the others. When a state is good or deviant it is so through and through; the moral pattern of nature is in Aristotle’s mind a network of mutually reinforcing elements. There is a perfection and harmony about it all that the philosopher must have found breathtaking.

Beside all of this, the various things that people have to say about the goodness of states—the domain of public opinion—is really a secondary concern. So are purely pragmatic considerations, questions about utility and stability. The political scientist ought not to ignore these things by any means. If a particular constitution is expedient, if it “pleases,” one notes that fact. Aristotle was not above being pragmatic. Political science is, after all, very much a science about contrivances that please multitudes and that work. When these are found to exist the political scientist sits up and takes note. But the true measure of goodness is not taken on the pulse of public opinion or discovered in the constitutional mechanisms of stability. It is, rather, discovered in the natural ordering of essential parts and in an objective ethical hierarchy of essential being. Aristotle claims to have discovered this in his *Politics*.

## CHAPTER 6



### WHY CONSTITUTIONS DIFFER: CAUSATION IN THE *POLITICS*

#### I. DIFFERENT CAUSAL ACCOUNTS OF CONSTITUTIONAL DIFFERENCE

Why do constitutions differ? Having identified the varieties, both generic and specific, Aristotle is now in a position to turn to explanation—the search for causes. This is, from a cursory reading of the *Politics*, a question of vital concern to the philosopher. It is a question he puts directly perhaps fifteen separate times in the course of the treatise, and he attempts to answer it even more often than that. It is a question, moreover, that goes beyond identification and classification in significant ways. Indeed, to identify a constitution as a specific type is to implicitly beg for an explanation at the same time, since to call a constitution “of the type x” is to implicitly show why all x’s are of the same type. And to show this is what it means to explain.

Again there are difficulties because Aristotle’s many answers to the question at hand are not obviously all the same. The different types of constitution are variously distinguished from one another by reference to many different causal factors. In particular, constitutions differ because of: (1) most commonly, differences in the arrangement of material parts (*Pol.* IV. iii 1289 b27–28; IV. 1290 a6–7; cf. Johnson, 1990, 110 n. 1); (2) differences in their fundamental principles (*hypothesis*) or defining characteristics (*horos*: e.g., II. ix 1269 a29–34; VI. i 1317 a23ff.; cf. Barker [1946], 257 and nn. 2–3 for a discussion of *hypothesis* in Aristotle’s political thought); (3) differences in their views of what justice means (e.g., V. i 1301 b40 ff.; III. ix 1280 a7ff.; cf. also *NE* VIII. x passim); (4) different conceptions of the proper

“end” (*telos*) of the city, or of its “design” (*bouleuma*), or of its “mode of life” (*tis bios*; e.g., VII. xiv 1333 b5ff.; IV. xi 1280 a7ff.; III. vii 1279 b17–22, and often; cf. Johnson, 1990, 110 n. 4 for a complete list); (5) differences in the aims and achievements of the different framers of constitutions (e.g., *Pol.* II. xii 1273 b30–36).

These several “causes” are not merely variant formulations of the same idea (cf. R. G. Mulgan, 1977, 61–3 for a partial account of causes; also Garver, 2011, chapters 1–3). There may be overlap, but it seems at least a possibility that two states found to be “the same” by reference to one “cause” may well be found to be “different” by reference to another cause. What, then, is the relationship among these causes, and what justifies Aristotle’s rather elaborate treatment of the question underlying them?

## II. CAUSATION IN ARISTOTLE’S THOUGHT

It helps matters when reading the *Politics* if one keeps in mind Aristotle’s famous doctrine of the “four causes” (*Physics* II. 3–5). Causes for him are rather different from what they have become for modern science. Rather than pointing to supposed relations between or among objects or phenomena ( $x$  causes  $y$ ), or to necessary and sufficient conditions for the production of phenomena ( $x+y+z$  are necessary and sufficient for the production of  $p$ ), Aristotle’s causes tended to be more in reference to objects considered by themselves ( $x$ , or the constituent parts of  $x$ , or the aim of  $x$ , causes  $x$ ). The reason for this difference is that Aristotle tended to ask a somewhat different sort of question than have modern scientists. Instead of asking about factors not themselves  $x$  but supposedly connected by some necessity to  $x$ , Aristotle typically asked simply “why is  $x$  an  $x$ ?” without reference to supposed external factors. Aristotle’s science is interesting in part because he usually found multiple explanations. Things are as they are not for simple reasons. As he says, “Since things are called causes in many ways, it happens that the same thing has many causes non-incidentally; for example, both the art of statue-making and the bronze are causes of the statue—not in virtue of something else, but qua statue but not in the same way: one is cause in the sense of matter, the other in the sense of origin of change” (*Physics* II. iii 195 a4–8). This means that one and the same object, even one and the same feature of the same object, may be explained in different ways, depending upon what mode of causality is in question. Or, in different words, each cause explains that of which it is a cause in a different way. In the words of Barnes (1982, 56–57): “The point, then, is not

that x can be adequately explained by y and also adequately explained by some different z; but rather that an adequate explanation of x may require mention of both y and z.”

Aristotle’s answer, then, to the question of why constitutions differ is something like this, at least as a preliminary statement. They differ because their material, efficient, formal, and final causes are different. These are different answers because they each point to different aspects of what they are explaining, but they are closely connected to one another because in each case it is the same object of which they are causes.

Moreover, to count as a cause, each explanation must refer to essential—i.e., non-accidental—aspects of the object at hand. The idea of an essential connection means, first of all, that the connection is universal; the cause must always accompany the object if the cause is genuine. But universality is not a sufficient condition; the connection may be universal and still be accidental. All seagulls may be white, but whiteness is non-essential to seagulls. The further condition is that the cause be connected to the essential being (*ousia*) of the object. The mature and fully rational human soul is the final cause of human life since the rational soul defines the essence of being human.

States, like other natural objects, have both essential causes and non-essential attributes. There is much discussion in Aristotle about both, with something less than precision in identifying the line between them. The best rule of thumb perhaps for keeping the two matters distinct is to watch his language; when discussion proceeds from the definition of the object, it is essential; when it is a question of “suitability” or “appropriateness” of one thing to something else, Aristotle’s mind is usually on non-essential matters. The causes are best understood in the *Politics* with this distinction in mind. (A different account of Aristotle’s four causes in the *Politics* is Garver, 2011; a critical response is Johnson, 2013).

### A. Efficient Cause

Recall that to seek a cause is to seek “the because of which”; it is to ask why something is the case, in this case why constitutions differ. One sort of answer to this question would obviously be to point to the motives and intentions of those responsible for the differences in question (the constitution-maker, or *nomothetes*). This is, of course, a perfectly legitimate way to proceed. One might well say, for example, that Athens is a democracy because Solon made it into one, and that Sparta is an oligarchy (or some other form) because Lycurgus made

it into one. The two constitutions would then be said to be different because they have different efficient causes: the intentions of Solon on the one hand, those of Lycurgus on the other.

This sort of explanation is one that Aristotle uses only in an indirect way in the *Politics*, and in any significant way in only two of the eight books, Books II and VI. By saying that his use is indirect I mean that he nowhere states in so many words that the reason for states being different is that they have different efficient causes. But from what he does say, one sees that this is sometimes what he means. In order to see how this is so, it will be useful to recall how Aristotle views the legislator's craft and to examine what he says about particular legislators in Books II and VI.

Aristotle does not conduct in the course of the *Politics* a systematic inquiry into the origin of constitutions. The first beginnings of many of the city-states of Greece were no doubt shrouded in the mists of ancient history even in Aristotle's day and were therefore inaccessible to inquiry. Yet there were some constitutions (as opposed to cities) whose origins were known, and these were of two sorts: actual states still in existence in Aristotle's day and constitutions drawn up in theory but never actually instituted in practice.

As far apart as these two kinds of regime—actual ones and imaginary ones—may seem to us today, they were not entirely different for Aristotle. The Greek world was a place of constitution-making, both in the way of setting up new states (as occurred, for example, whenever a superpower like Sparta or Athens set out to colonize a hitherto uninhabited place), or in the way of reforming constitutions already in existence, as Solon did in Athens. And whenever a constitution was built for a city, it typically proceeded from the ideas and ideals of its founder. That is to say, constitution building often followed directly upon the act of theorizing about the ideal constitution, or so Aristotle thought. In Book II Aristotle examines some of these endeavors to make constitutions, both those that remained in his day only blueprints for actual states, like Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, and those actually achieved, notably Sparta, Crete, Carthage, and Athens (II. i 1260 b29ff.).

Of the former group, in fact, he seems to believe that he has given a fairly exhaustive account: "Something has been said about almost all writers of this class about whom there is anything noteworthy" (II. xii 1273 b28–30). Book VI raises a closely related issue: how should a lawgiver proceed who wishes either to institute a certain kind of constitution or to amend an existing one? (VI. i 1316 b37–9; VI. i 1317 a33–5) The two books, then, raise essentially the same question, the

former retrospectively, the latter prospectively. Book II asks about how states were formed, which either were proposed or actually established in the past; Book VI asks how states are to be formed (if one wishes them to be based on proper knowledge of constitutions) in the future. This is fundamentally a question about the lawgiver (*nomothetes*), that is, about the efficient cause of constitutions. Here, again, the activity of the *nomothetes* is to be distinguished from the activity of the statesman (*politikos*), the latter of whom is responsible for enacting laws, among other political functions in actually existing states (see Introduction for the distinction).

Of the two activities, the former (constitution-making) is more fundamental than making and changing laws under an existing constitution. For to author a constitution is not only to possibly disrupt the settled legal life of the city; it is to alter the very character of the city, or even to create a community where none previously existed. The fundamental nature of this act can best be gauged by recalling the centrality of the constitution (*politeia*) to Aristotle's entire political theory. Concerned both with political arrangements as well as the deepest ethical strivings of the city, it is not too much to say that the constitution is the very life of the community (IV. xi 1295 b1; cf. the extended discussion above, with relevant citations).

The line between lawmaking (in the narrow sense) and constitution-giving may not always be clear to draw. This is particularly true in the case of existing constitutions that are being amended through legislative acts. Certain legislative acts will obviously be "appropriate" to the existing constitution, doing no more than to bring its legal code into closer conformity with the character of the constitution. But sometimes lawgiving is taken further than this, usually wittingly, and threatens to change the existing order into a new order altogether, say from a moderate democracy into a more extreme form. When this occurs as a result of the conscious intentions of the lawgiver, one may again appropriately speak of an efficient cause of constitutional differences. (Revolutions may also bring about constitutional change [cf. *Politics* Book V] but, because such changes do not normally reflect the deliberate intentions of a constitution-maker, they do not fit the normal model of constitution-making.) Is there a way to tell when ordinary lawmaking crosses the line and becomes the quite different activity of constitution-making?

This question goes to the heart, I believe, of the problem of efficient cause in the *Politics*. Aristotle's manner of settling the distinction, however, is not entirely satisfactory. The principles of a constitution are more fundamental than the laws, as we have said. "The laws should be

laid down,” he says, “to suit the constitutions, the constitutions must not be made to suit the laws” (IV. i 1289 a13–15). The laws, moreover, regulate only “how the magistrates (*archontas*) are to govern and . . . guard against those who transgress them,” whereas a constitution “is the regulation of the offices (*archai*) of the state in regard to their mode of distribution and to the question of who—what group or person—holds the sovereign office and what is the object or end of each community” (IV. i 1289 a13–15). A constitution, we might say, is more fundamental because it determines who, that is, what class or group of people, holds power or is eligible to hold power in the state; the laws regulate only how and upon what objects the power is exercised (cf. Johnson, 1990, 112 n. 16).

Whenever, therefore, laws are introduced that change the qualifications for sharing in the power of the state, they cross the line from mere statutory enactments to constitutional principles. Aristotle, particularly in Book II, discusses framers (*demiourgoi*) of both kinds of laws, statutory and constitutional, but his mention of lawgivers of the former sort is only passing and perfunctory. His attention is focused mainly on the constitution-framer, men like Solon and Lycurgus who framed not only laws but constitutions also. These men alone, those who make constitutions, truly deserve to be considered the efficient causes of the constitutions they have framed and are thus the efficient causes for constitutions being different.

Constitution-framing is a matter of setting power relations in a city. When a *nomothetes* frames a new constitution or amends an existing one, he is fundamentally deciding about who should rule. But he is not doing so blindly or haphazardly. He is doing so rather in accordance with a fundamental vision (*hypothesis*) about how the political world is ordered and how it should be ordered. The best lawgiver, in fact, will always strive to frame the best constitution possible within the limits imposed upon him by the nature of the material that he is working with. That is to say, his mind will be fixed upon the question of who within the given set of material conditions would be the best rulers. Because material conditions vary, so too will the answer to this question. But the principle of deciding in each case is, or at any rate should be, the same: framing the constitution (i.e., determining who shall rule) in accordance with a view of what is best for that state, for those existing material conditions.

This principle of decision-making is the formal “cause as potentiality” of constitutional identity. That is to say, the vision of the lawmaker as to what constitution would be best for a state under given conditions is the form that the constitution would assume in actuality if

the vision were realized. As an image in the mind of the framer, it is not the whole of the formal cause of the constitution, since it is possible for material conditions to prevent the fulfillment of the vision. Thus, for example, in Athens when Pericles, Ephialtes, and “successive leaders of the people led them on by stages to the present democracy,” this came about, in Aristotle’s view, in contravention to the intentions of Solon (II. xii 1274 all-12; cf. *Ath. Pol.*, especially chapters 21–2). Matter is inherently resistant to form and often subverts the intentions of the demiurge, the craftsperson. But the vision is nevertheless necessary in order for matter to assume the form that is desired.

As such, the vision constitutes a part of the formal cause of the constitution, the potential formal cause, and is thus properly regarded as a cause for constitutions being different. The technical term used by Aristotle to describe this part of the formal cause, the vision of the lawmaker, is *hypothesis*, or fundamental principle; it is the vision of the constitution in the mind’s eye of its framer. Because *hypothesis* is both an idea (in the mind of the efficient cause) and a potential shape that a constitution might come to assume (its form), it serves as a natural link between efficient and formal causes of constitutional variation.

## B. Formal Cause

In the *Physics* Aristotle defines the formal cause of something as “the formula of its essence” (*Physics* 194 b23ff.). Another way of saying this is that the formal cause is the what-it-is to be something. It is, as such, of all the causes, the one most closely connected to the substantial being (*ousia*) of objects. It answers the question “why is x an x” with the seemingly tautological answer “because x is x.” Or, as Jonathan Barnes put it, in the formal cause, “what it is and why it is are the same” (1982, 54).

Why do constitutions differ from one another? Because different constitutions have different substantial beings or essential natures. The what-it-is of this constitution is different from the what-it-is of that one. The formal cause is thus asking for a definition of the object, an account of its essential nature. To describe the essential nature of a constitution, Aristotle employs two technical terms, “fundamental principle” (*hypothesis*) and “defining characteristic” (*horos*). These denote, respectively, the essence of a constitution qua potentiality and its essence qua actuality.

Formal causes are often closely linked in Aristotle’s science with efficient causes, particularly in the practical and productive sciences where the formal cause, the form assumed by the completed object,

has a prior existence, at least as an idea, or image, in the mind of the efficient cause, the craftperson (*NE* VI. ii 1139 a32ff. *Metaph.* Z. 7 1032 a31ff.). Constitution-making is no exception. What a constitution becomes, its formal cause, is often just a reflection of the idea in the mind of the framer that informed its construction, after the necessary adjustments have been made for the resistance of matter (cf. *Metaph.* A. 3 983a24ff. and L. 4 1070 b22ff.; also Z. 17 1041b25ff.). Two questions in connection with the “fundamental principle” must be asked: first, what is a fundamental principle for Aristotle; and second, how is one to judge in any given case whether the fundamental principle—the potential formal cause—is ever realized in an actual state, ever becomes, that is, the actual formal cause?

Aristotle's idea of *hypothesis* in the *Politics* may be fleshed out by three illustrations: the *hypothesis* of Plato's *Republic*, that of the Spartan constitution, and, in Book VI, that of democracies in general. Of Plato's *Republic* Aristotle says, in criticism of the scheme of ownership of property in common, that Socrates' “fundamental principle” was in error; he believed that the state should be a unity in every respect, whereas in fact it should be a unity only in some respects (II. v 1263b 30ff.). Sparta's fundamental principle is also criticized, in this case because “the entire system of laws is directed towards one part of virtue only, military valor,” whereas a state should aim at more than this (II. ix 1271 b2–3). In these two illustrations, the “fundamental principle” appears to mean the overriding goal or aim envisioned for the state by the constitution-maker: unity in the case of Socrates, military valor in that of Lycurgus.

Book VI, as we have seen, addresses the idea of constitution-making prospectively: what should the *nomothetes* do in order to achieve the best result? It is necessary, Aristotle says, for the *nomothetes* “to collect together all the features appropriate to the fundamental principle [of his constitution].” Then he turns specifically to the democratic constitution-builder: “The fundamental principle of the democratic form of constitution is liberty . . .” (VI. i 1317 a35–1317 b2). There follows an extended discussion of what liberty means, wherein it is found to be different things, including: (1) to govern and be governed in turn; (2) to live as one likes; and (3) to be governed by no one at all (cf. *NE* 8 x1161 a7ff.; cf. Barnes, in Kraut and Skultety, 185–201; Johnson and Smith, 2001, 78–94; Kraut, 2002, 461 and references in n. 51). Each of these principles of liberty entails a particular kind of constitution, but all entail some form of democracy ranging on a scale from more moderate to more extreme. To say that liberty is the fundamental principle of democracy, then, is to say that it defines the character,

the “spirit” in Montesquieu’s phrase, of the state. As was true in the case of Plato’s *Republic* and the Spartan constitution, the fundamental principle of the state is that overriding goal or object upon which the gaze of the *nomothetes* is fixed when he institutes the basic political regulations of the community.

Of these the most important arrangements have to do with the question of who holds power, and under what terms. In a democracy, for example, the regulations would be so cast as to ensure that the people (*demos*) hold power, for this (in one version or another) is the meaning of liberty, the democratic principle. Since liberty has different meanings, however, there are different possibilities for how the *demos* may hold power (e.g., either all simultaneously or only some at any given time through a system of rotation, etc.); it is the lawmaker’s (for convenience I will be using this term in this chapter to refer to the *nomothetes* unless otherwise stated) task to fix those political regulations that best suit his own particular vision. In an extreme view of liberty, the constitution would place no restrictions on the unlimited exercise of power by everyone. It is to be noted that Aristotle is not thinking here of anarchy—the total absence of government—but only of unrestrained self-government, a rule of men and not of laws, to invert a Madisonian phrase. The contrast in his mind is always between states that are law-governed, i.e., states where stable laws regulate most of the day-to-day conduct of affairs, and states that are not law-governed, i.e., states in which some human agency, whether one man, a small group, or the many, govern by decrees (*psephismata*) and obey no other authority save the ebb and flow of their own passions and whims.

But while fixing the power arrangements of the state is his most important function, the lawmaker must extend his view well beyond this single problem. He must, as Aristotle puts it, “collect together all the features appropriate to the fundamental principle” (VI. i 1317 a35). For if he does not do this, he will create a state in which the fundamental principle is out of step with the other arrangements of the state, and that is not good. What are these other features that the lawmaker’s craft must take in hand? No systematic list is ever produced, but when one collects together Aristotle’s isolated comments on the subject, the range of activities of the lawmaker is vast indeed. It includes, among others: providing for training the citizens in the proper use of property (II. v 1263 a40); regulating property relationships in general (II. vii 1266 b28, II. ix 1270 a20ff., VI. iv 1318 b7ff., VI. vi 1320 b20, etc.); establishing a state of the correct size, population, and geographical setting vis-à-vis neighboring cities (II. vi 1265 a20ff.); providing for

the regulation of marriages and the size of families (II. vii 1266 b8, VII. xvi 1334 b29ff.); establishing proper morals and habits of both sexes (e.g., II. ix 1269 b20ff.); providing for the regulation of foreign affairs in a manner appropriate to the constitution (VII. iii 1325 a10ff., VII. ii 1324 b3–4); instituting public meals where appropriate (VII. x 1329 b5, and often); and most important, establishing the state system of education in order to guide citizens to virtue (VII. xiv 1334 a9–10, VIII. i 1337 allff., VII. vii 1327 b38–39, etc.). (Cf. Lord, 1982; Depew, 1991; Barnes, in Kraut and Skultety, 2005, chapter 8, for a highly critical assessment of Aristotle on this point).

The relationship among these features of a state and its fundamental principle is important to grasp. The fundamental principle is the essential character that the lawmaker wishes the state to have and, as such, entails a particular arrangement of political power. But political power is never exercised in a vacuum; it must always exert its control over a certain kind of population within a setting of more or less given material conditions. The lawmaker is not free to ignore these factors; he must create the constitution using the material at his disposal. He is free, of course, to try to alter the material to some degree, just as a sculptor is free, indeed obliged, to alter the slab of stone he is shaping. But there are constraints on the activities of all craftspeople—including lawmakers. A sculptor cannot fashion a living creature from stone, nor can a lawgiver fashion gods out of humans. The matter places certain constraints on the *demiourgos* that cannot be removed and ought not be ignored.

Because this is true, the lawgiver should cast his view over the whole range of features that characterize states and should try to institute a constitutional structure in such a way that the arrangements of each feature reflect and support all of the other features, especially the fundamental principle. The idea here is one of suitability; certain regulations regarding marriage, foreign affairs, property ownership, and so forth are suitable to certain constitutions, others to others. The fundamental principle is always primary, being the most essential aspect of the lawmaker's vision, and so always comes first; but once it is established, the other arrangements should follow in a manner suitable to it. This is especially true of the education of the young; a healthy and durable state requires that the young be properly trained in the fundamental principle of the state. The lawgiver's function is thus a demanding one. It covers really the whole range of what constitutes a community and not just the constitution in a narrow sense. It is, moreover, easy for the lawgiver to go wrong. First, he

may seize upon an incorrect fundamental principle, either relatively or absolutely. That is, he may choose an incorrect fundamental principle altogether, as Socrates seems to have done in choosing extreme unity as his principle, or he may choose incorrectly for the particular state that he is founding, as, for example, in the case of a framer who chooses liberty as a fundamental principle for a people better suited to oligarchy. The lawmaker must know his material and its limits. The lawmaker may err, secondly, by failing to institute regulations concerning particular features, say marriage and property relations that are most suitable to the fundamental principle. This sort of error is less serious than the first, since such errors are remediable through legislation in the narrow sense, whereas errors of the first sort would entail constitutional reform for their correction. Errors of either sort, if left unattended, lead to weak and unstable constitutions.

There is yet a final difficulty for the lawmaker in instituting his fundamental principle, and that is simply achieving it, making the potential into the actual. To determine in a given case whether he has succeeded one must know the “what-it-is”—*ousia*—of what he was attempting to create. This *ousia*, or essence, is closely related in Aristotle’s science to *hypothesis*, or fundamental principle. The two notions are related as actuality to potentiality; they are not necessarily identical, but they may become so in particular cases. They would be identical whenever the *demiourgos* was successful.

Every object in Aristotle’s science has a definition (*horos*), and this is intimately connected to its essential nature (*ousia*). In the case of “constitution,” the definition, and so the essential nature, has to do with the distribution of political offices and the aim (*telos*) of the community (*Pol.* IV. i 1289 a15ff.; other definitions at III. vii 1279 a26–27; IV. iii 1290 a7–8, and elsewhere). To discover these things is to discover a constitution’s essential nature.

Aristotle explicitly identifies the defining characteristic (*horos*) of only some states. Of aristocracy it is virtue, of oligarchy it is wealth, of democracy it is liberty (*Pol.* IV. viii 1294 a9ff.; see also III. ix 1280 a7ff. and V. ix 1310 a30–31). This means that, for each of these three forms, the defining characteristic explains both how offices are distributed (in aristocracies to the virtuous, etc.) and what aim is sought by the state (virtue in the case of aristocracy, etc.). (Democracy is anomalous: if it is defined as rule by the free its *hypothesis* should be freedom; by contrast, if it is defined as “rule by the poor,” as Aristotle defines it, it would follow that its defining principle should be poverty; cf. R. G. Mulgan, 1977, 61 ff.) To know these two characteristics of any

state is what it means to know its essential identity; they define each state as such. (Note that *horos* establishes only generic identities; all democracies, whatever the species, share the same *horos*.)

We are now perhaps in a position to see how to recognize when a state has become in fact what its framer intended it to be in theory, that is, when the potential formal cause has become the actual formal cause. In the example Aristotle gives of democracy, we find that *hypothesis* and *horos* are nearly identical; in the case of democracy they are both liberty. But while nearly identical, they are not completely so. *Hypothesis* refers to the aim of the founder, who establishes a constitution, whereas *horos* refers to the principle actually established. But, this difference aside, both refer to the essential nature of the constitution, which is, as we have said, the particular distribution of power in the state and the end towards which the state aspires. When the power arrangements and end envisioned by the founder are the same as those actually established, it is proper to speak of an identity of potential and actual formal causes. For in this case, and in this case only, the identity desired for the state, its *hypothesis*, is the identity achieved—its definition. In cases where this equivalence between potential and actual is found to exist, one may rightly conclude that the lawgiver succeeded in his aim: he established in fact the constitution he had envisioned in theory. Potential and actual formal causes coincide. And since the formal causes for each state are different from those of others, we have identified a second reason for constitutions being different.

### C. Material Cause

Formal and efficient causes, as much as they help us to understand why constitutions differ, do not exhaust the subject. For the following difficulty remains: the founder (efficient cause) has in mind a particular form of state (potential formal cause, *hypothesis*) that he wishes his state to achieve—a particular identity (actual formal cause, or definition). Yet formal causes are only of generic types of states, the broad genera of democracy, oligarchy, aristocracy, and so forth. The formal cause, then, gives the lawmaker only a general idea of what he wishes to do. But states are particular, not general. That is, there are several particular species of every general type—species of democracy, species of oligarchy, and so with the others. In order, therefore, for a lawmaker to make the specific arrangements that he wishes to make, he must have a more exact knowledge of the kinds of constitutions and especially of the species of each generic kind. The formal cause cannot tell him everything he must know. In order to have the fullest

knowledge of each particular kind, it is necessary to have a thorough grasp of the material cause as well.

States differ because they have different material causes. This is one of the most frequently repeated propositions in the whole of the *Politics* (cf. Schütrumpf, 1980, 3ff.). But before we examine the material causes of constitutions we would do well to recall what a material cause is in Aristotle's account of causation. In the passage from the *Physics* (II. iii 194 b23ff.) in which Aristotle explains it, he says that it is "the constituent[s] from which something comes to be, for example, bronze of the statue, silver of the goblet and that type of thing" (cf. also *Metaph.* Delta. 1013 a30ff.). The material cause is the matter that receives the imprint of the form of each object.

What, then, are the material constituents of constitutions? This is a more difficult question than may at first seem to be the case. For not all of the material components, or parts (*moria* or *mere*) of constitutions, are properly regarded as material causes, but only some. Constitutions have many material parts that are merely accidental, i.e., non-essential, and so play no role in causation. The material causes of constitutions are limited to only those parts that are either necessary (and not even all of these in every state) or noble, for constitutions exist to fulfill these two purposes, necessity (life, primarily in a biological sense) and nobility (the good life). (*Pol.* I. ii 1252 b31–32; cf. VII. viii 1328 a23ff. for the distinction between "necessary conditions" and "parts" of the state, and IV. iv 1291 a18–20, where the same distinction is drawn; also Schütrumpf, 1980, 23–30.) Whether a constituent material element of the state is to be regarded as a "part" in any given case depends on the state in question. The general rule appears to be that the more "deviant" the state, the greater the number of "necessary" material elements Aristotle takes into consideration as "parts" (e.g., VII. viii 1328 a23ff.).

Enough has been said in earlier chapters about the "parts" of the state in Aristotle's political science to make a lengthy discussion here unnecessary (see especially chapters 2 and 3). Recall only that they are of four general types—social "classes," the "virtuous" part, occupations, and political offices (*archai*)—and that each general type is further subdivided by Aristotle. Every state contains a plural number of these parts, even if the number in some is greater, in others smaller. States, in other words, are composite entities, so that numerous possibilities exist for how the parts may be arranged. It is the arrangement of parts (in part) that establishes the identity of each constitution.

This, Aristotle argues, is "the cause (*aition*) for there being several different forms of constitution, [viz.] that every city has a considerable

number of parts . . . it is clear, therefore, that there must necessarily be several forms of constitution differing in kind from one another, inasmuch as these parts differ in kind among themselves" (IV. iii 1289 b27–1290 a8). This doctrine of material parts and their arrangement is fundamental for Aristotle's entire constitutional theory, for it explains better than any other cause why constitutions, especially specific types, differ, and why there are as many types as there are. For, as Aristotle says, "it follows [from the doctrine of parts] that there are as many forms of constitution as there are modes of arrangement according to the superiorities and the differences of the parts" (IV. iii 1290 a12–13).

While there are many different possible ways for the parts of constitutions to be arranged, not any arrangement whatsoever is relevant for determining constitutional form, but only some. In particular, one must recall what a constitution is essentially for Aristotle: it is the regulation of the offices of the state in regard to the mode of their distribution and in regard especially to the sovereign office. It follows from this that the relevant question concerning the arrangement of parts is the question about which "parts" are distributed among which offices, and above all, which parts hold the sovereign office. This is what needs to be known in order to know the identities of specific constitutions and to know why constitutions differ.

It is obviously possible for the "parts" to be distributed among the offices in a great many ways. In the case of democracies, for example, that "the poor" hold "the offices" tells us that such states are democracies, but that fact alone does not tell us what sort of democracy. Finer discriminations may be made by referring to other "parts," particularly subdivisions of "the poor." When "farmers" are those among the poor who predominate in government, the kind of democracy has been more precisely identified; another sort is when the mechanics and laborers are also allowed a share in office, and so forth with the other forms. What is true of subdivisions of democracy is true of the subdivisions of other genera as well.

A final word of clarification is in order. In Book VII Aristotle writes, "But since, just as with all other natural organisms those things that are indispensable for the existence of the whole are not all of them parts of the whole, it is also clear that not all the things that are necessary for states to possess are to be counted as parts of a state (any more than this is so with any other association that forms something of one kind)" (VII. viii 1328 a21ff.). The distinction here is between "necessary appurtenances" of a state and "parts rightly so-called"; there are some necessary appurtenances that are not properly

called parts. Later he suggests that in the best state the “tillers of the soil, the craftsmen and the laboring parts generally” are only necessary appurtenances, whereas the military and deliberative elements are parts in the proper sense (VII. ix 1329 a35–39). Property, including property in living things (e.g., slaves), had also earlier been excluded as “parts” of the best state (VII. viii 1328 a34–35).

This is a curious doctrine, for it does not square well with earlier enumerations of parts in the *Politics*. In the earlier lists, farmers and laboring classes of every sort had been counted as parts (e.g., *Pol.* IV. iv 1290 b40–1291 a7; IV. iv 1291 b18ff.). In Book I even slaves were counted as parts, at least of “the household,” which is itself a constituent element of the polis (I. iii 1253 b5–8). Now, however, in Book VII many of these elements are excluded as parts. Has Aristotle shifted his ground?

I believe he has not. In Book VII he is talking about a particular form of state—in fact the best state. In the earlier books his concern is much more typically with actual states, most of which are deviant forms. What is true of the best state is not necessarily true of other forms. One may even go further and say that what is true of each species of state is not necessarily true of any other species. What may count as parts in democracies may not count as parts in oligarchies, and parts in these two forms may not count as parts in aristocracies or in Aristotle’s best state. The reason for this is connected with the aim (*telos*) of each state. (This is the rule, at any rate, that Aristotle follows in his zoological classifications: “Aristotle’s zoological ground for distinguishing definitory from accidental attributes is function. Lungs, heart and liver are definitory because they are for the sake of breathing and the blood . . .” [D. M. Balme, 1972, 115]). It is the *telos* of the state that sets the limits, as it were, to what counts as essential parts of the state. As the *telos* differs from state to state, so do the “parts” that constitute each state. This point brings us to the final sort of explanation Aristotle offers for why constitutions differ, the final cause.

#### D. Final Cause

Again, in Book VII, Aristotle makes the following observation:

The object (*telos*) [of the state] is the best life that is possible. And since the greatest good is happiness, and this is some perfect activity or employment of virtue, and since it has so come about that it is possible for some men to participate in it, but for others only to a small extent or not at all, it is clear that this is the cause for there arising different kinds

and varieties of state and several forms of constitution; for as each set of people pursues participation in happiness in a different manner and by different means, they make for themselves different modes of life and different constitutions (VII. viii 1328 a37–1328 b2).

To paraphrase, one might say that states (constitutions) differ because they pursue different ends.

The doctrine of ends is fundamental to Aristotle's whole constitutional theory, but it requires some explanation. It is, of the four causes, the least "empirical" in Aristotle's science. Often final causes cannot be "seen," just for the reason that they have often or usually not yet come into being. They belong as manifest properties to mature specimens only, and to only the healthiest among these. Since many factors may interfere with growth, objects sometimes never achieve their "ends," and perhaps this is nowhere truer than with human beings and human associations. The latter, unlike unconscious physical entities, are deterred not only by unfavorable environmental conditions; they also uniquely may deter themselves through their own volition or lack of understanding or effort. People make poor judgments about what ends to pursue, and willingly or unwittingly pursue wrong ends. Whether it is a result of defective judgment or perversity of will (e.g., III. ix 1280 a16–17; cf. also NE I. iv 1095 a19ff.), some associations' ends are imperfectly fulfilled or not fulfilled at all.

How, then, is Aristotle able to claim what the final cause of the human association really is? Since it is seldom "seen," most states being "deviant," it must be known by another faculty. That faculty is reason. When it comes to identifying the final cause of the state, Aristotle does not look at actual states. Rather he looks to the opinions of those reputed for wisdom (NE I. v 1095 b23ff.; I. viii 1098 b25ff.). He asks a different sort of question, not "what aims do states usually fulfill?" but "what is the highest good of which humans are believed capable?"

The highest good is obviously not the same as the most commonly attained good, and cannot therefore be found by scrutinizing nature's regularities. In Aristotle's case it can only be found by bringing to bear a set of assumptions, themselves unproved in the *Politics* and mostly inherited from Plato, about what the structure of the human soul is like, about what its highest faculties are, about why these faculties should be cultivated, and about what activities are necessary in order to cultivate and perfect them (see Kraut, 2002, 132–36). These assumptions, and the view about the final end of the state that they entail, are not empirically derived, but come rather from that part

of the Greek legacy that asks not about our achievements but about our aspirations, not about what we have accomplished but about the largely unfulfilled promise which, in this view, awaits us in some distant future. In short, Aristotle's final cause is more properly regarded, for him and us alike, as yet-to-be than as an accomplished fact.

When approaching the final cause, then, it is useful to keep in mind that Aristotle was committed to the following beliefs: (1) states are natural, or "by nature" (even though they are also "by convention"); (2) all natural objects have purposes that they seek to fulfill; (3) the purposes for which the state exists are life and the good life; (4) some states fulfill these purposes more fully, others less fully; (5) it is in part as a consequence of the different degrees to which states fulfill their purposes (or, what amounts to the same thing, the different ways in which they define their purposes), that states differ.

When Aristotle says that states have purposes, he does not mean that states have wills or that they have intentions that they are consciously seeking to fulfill (although individual humans can fulfill their natural purposes only deliberately). Aristotle is sometimes accused of holding beliefs of this sort about natural things in general, but such accusations are unsound. Nor is he quite saying, as Richard Robinson argues, that nature has certain aims that we, as intentional creatures, ought to help her achieve. The statement about nature's ends is not precisely, as Robinson maintains, a concealed imperative based upon the hidden premise that humans ought, so far as possible, help nature fulfill her purposes (R. Robinson, 1962, xvii–xxi).

Rather, Aristotle means that natural things in general, and states in particular, do in fact fulfill purposes. The purpose of each thing may be discovered by finding what it is for because "what it is for" is its final cause. Leaves, to use Aristotle's own examples, exist for the sake of the fruit, the duck's webbed feet for the sake of swimming, and so on with most other natural objects (*Physics* II.8 199a2023). The purpose of states is to enable humans to enjoy life and the good life; this is the "what it is for" of the state, its final cause. As Aristotle says, "Living well then, is the chief aim of all men" (*Pol.* III. vi 1278 b23–24; cf. I. ii 1252 b30–31). Human associations—states in this case—fulfill (or attempt to fulfill) nature's purposes by its members sharing in some conception of goodness. The members are able to do this by virtue of their possession of speech and reason. Speech and reason enable humans to form some conception about what ends they shall pursue, and enable them to communicate those ends to others so that the pursuit of goodness may be shared. It is, in fact, precisely this sharing of rationally conceived ends that constitutes the specific identity

of the human association (*to koinon*). By having ends in common and justly pursuing those ends, each human association at once establishes its own identity as a specific community and establishes its distinctiveness from all other communities.

But different associations—states—share in different conceptions of goodness from others; they define their ends differently. This is why states differ from the standpoint of final cause: states differ because they have different final causes or, what amounts to the same thing, achieve different ends: “Owing to [differing conceptions of justice] the principal varieties of constitution come into existence” (*Pol.* V. i 1301 b40ff.; cf. IV. iv 1291 b10–14.). “The principle of justice” of each state is said to be the “determining quality [*horos*]” of that state (III. ix 1280 a7ff.).

But here we encounter an ambiguity in Aristotle's teleology about which it is important to be clear. States may be said to achieve ends, or fulfill purposes, in two distinct senses. They may achieve absolute ends, or they may achieve ends relative to the constitution (Kraut, 2002, 102ff. draws a useful distinction between “broad” [or natural] justice and “narrow” [or lawful] justice in the *NE*). Aristotle attaches importance to both senses. States achieve absolute ends when they achieve the highest good of which humans are capable, namely perfect excellence in respect of every form of virtue. This usually means some form of aristocracy—permanent rule by a small number of virtuous men—but sometimes it means monarchy or a constitution such as that envisioned in Books VII–VIII. Achieving absolute ends means having “the best” constitution.

Every constitution prescribes “ends”—this is one of the essential purposes of constitutions—yet not every constitution is “best.” Most constitutions, in fact, are “deviant” and so necessarily prescribe deviant ends. “For all men,” Aristotle writes, “lay hold on justice of some sort, but they only advance to a certain point and do not express the principle of absolute justice in its entirety” (III. ix 1280 a9–10). When this happens, it is no longer possible to say that the state has completely fulfilled its natural purposes—to provide its members with self-sufficiency and the good life—for these are the natural purposes of states. One can only say either that the state has incompletely fulfilled its natural purpose (e.g., it has provided self-sufficiency but not complete goodness), or that it has fulfilled some purpose that is “against nature” (e.g., it has provided for numerical equality and liberty among the members, as though this were perfect justice). Aristotle can be found to argue both positions. In his own words: the view of justice put forward by the democrats (i.e., numerical equality

based on free birth) and that put forward by the oligarchs (i.e., proportionate equality based on wealth) are “just up to a certain point,” suggesting that states holding these conceptions of justice advance to a certain degree toward perfect justice; they are not wholly unjust (III. ix 1280 a22–23; cf. also 1301 a36–37). On the other hand, he argues (III. ix 1280 b7–9) that a state that is “truly so-called and not merely one in name” must pay attention to virtue, and that the deviant forms come about “against nature” (*para physin*: III. xvii 1287 b41–42). “The constitution formed entirely and absolutely according to either [the democratic or oligarchic] kind of equality is a poor sort of thing” (V. i 1302 a4–6).

The ends of the state are thus at once both absolute—i.e., set “by nature” and defined as perfect goodness—and relative, i.e., prescribed by each constitution and cast in terms of some conception of justice, different for each form of state. The absolute conception of justice is the main standard for measuring the degree of goodness of each state, but the relative conception of justice is what differentiates states according to their final causes. Democracies pursue numerical equality, giving equal shares to those equal in birth; oligarchies pursue proportionate equality, giving unequal shares to those unequal in wealth; aristocracies pursue proportionate equality, giving unequal shares to those unequal in virtue. In each case, the ends pursued by the state, i.e., the particular conception of justice in each, defines each state as what it is and thus explains from the standpoint of final cause why constitutions differ.

There is here, admittedly, an apparent ambiguity. Every state, even the deviant forms, may fulfill their particular ends to a greater or lesser degree, but they also come closer to or fall further away from the excellence of the perfect state. There is thus, in the account of final causes, actually a double teleology: one that defines states by reference to the ultimate end, another that defines them by reference to their own particular end. The following question then arises: when does a state perfectly fulfill its particular end? For example, at what point does democracy become perfect democracy?

One might expect Aristotle to answer this by saying that a perfect democracy is one that achieves complete democratic justice—numerical equality on the widest possible scale. In fact, however, this form of democracy is, in Aristotle’s view, the worst form of democracy; best for him is that which comes closest to the mean, i.e., moderate democracy, which is actually at the other end of the spectrum from extreme democracy. This answer may not be an equivocation by Aristotle, but rather may merely reflect an ambiguity in his use

of the term “best”: the “best” democracy in a non-normative sense (i.e., most complete) is extreme democracy; the “best” in a normative sense (i.e., most virtuous) is the moderate agricultural form. This ambiguity, if it is one, disappears in the discussion of the “right” constitutions. In them, the most complete aristocracy, for example, is also the most virtuous.

From what has been said, we can see that Aristotle's account of final causes closely mirrors his account of every other causal explanation of states. States have ends, and these can be determined by considering what the state is for, namely self-sufficiency and the good life. In each particular state, these ends are pursued more or less fully, depending upon the particular conception of the good life, the particular view of justice, held by the members. The view of justice, in turn, is reflected in the material cause of the state, the particular arrangement and distribution of the “parts” among the political offices. Each conception of justice, in other words, is achieved by allowing certain kinds of people to share in the government and excluding others. The material cause, for its part, is itself the outcome (in many cases at least) of the conscious activity of the framer, the efficient cause. His aim is to put in place a set of institutional arrangements that best reflect his view of what the state should be, the fundamental principle or potential formal cause of the state. And if he succeeds in executing his plan, the state achieves the definition that he sought, the actual formal cause. The four causes in this way come together to provide, in Aristotle's way of thinking, an exhaustive explanation for why constitutions are as they are, and so why they differ.

## CHAPTER 7



# THE CITIZEN AND THE SOVEREIGN OFFICE IN THE *POLITICS*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Constitutions, we have seen, differ for several reasons, or, stated differently, they owe their identities to the operation of different causes. Of these the material cause is the one most intimately linked to species identity. We are now in a position to explore further the operation of this particular cause in Aristotle's political science. Of the many material parts found in cities, two have a particular and essential bearing on species identity: political offices, on the one hand, and above all the sovereign office (*to kurion*), and citizens (*politai*), on the other. These two "parts" are fundamental in two senses: first, both are essentially and uniquely linked to the idea of constitution itself (e.g., IV. i 1289 a15–17); and second, they are, for this very reason, essentially linked to one another (e.g., III. i 1275 b19–20). A full and accurate grasp of what Aristotle understands by both of these material elements is thus indispensable to a full understanding of his constitutional theory. It should be apparent that both questions belong to what I have been calling "first-order" or "prior" doctrine in the *Politics*. As we move forward I will be treating these two parts as "formal" (connected as they are by definition to "constitution") and "material" (not so connected).

### II. THE CITIZEN

At the beginning of Book III Aristotle claims that, to know the constitution, it is necessary to know the citizen (I. i 1274 b39ff.). But it is not easy to know what the citizen is, and the subject is one of dispute.

It is then necessary to sift through common misunderstandings, the diversity in practice and usage in different regimes, as well as anomalous cases, in order to discover the true identity of the citizen (cf. Johnson, 1990, 136 n. 3). Beyond that, one must find the common nature (*koinon*) of citizenship, what it is universally, and not simply how that nature appears in regimes of one particular sort or another (III. i 1275 a33ff.). And one must also discover the “complete” (*haplos*) citizen, that is, the citizen that is everything that citizenship aspires to become “by nature” when nature has fulfilled its purposes (III. i 1275 a19ff.; cf. Johnson, 1990, 136 n. 4).

Discovering the true citizen is thus an arduous task (recent treatments of this question include J. Cooper, 1990; D. Keyt, 1993; and D. Morrison, 1999; Frede, 2005, in Kraut and Skultety, eds., 167–84; Nichols, 1992, 55–61; Johnson, 1984, 74–80). Aristotle's method in this section of the *Politics* is deliberate and dialectical; he proceeds through a series of imperfect definitions, subjecting each to the relevant criticisms, arriving finally at a perfected definition. Each subsequent attempt approximates more nearly the final goal, retaining what is of value in what has gone before while rejecting whatever does not contribute to the “complete” definition.

In one way the problem of what the citizen is presents no serious difficulty. One might say, simply, that the citizen is the one who holds political office (*arche*). There is little mystery about what this means; to find the citizen means only to find the officeholder(s). But this standard, straightforward though it may seem, nevertheless presents Aristotle with two central difficulties. The first concerns finding an adequate means of identifying in each constitution what “offices” count for the purposes of assessing citizenship. For constitutions differ, and so too, therefore, do the offices (and officeholders) in each constitution. One needs a universal standard capable of covering dissimilar cases. The second difficulty is even more troublesome. The citizen has, like all natural objects, an actual identity (what is found in the actual practices of states) as well as a potential identity (what it aspires to become in the fulfilled state). The definition of citizen must not ignore this aspiring side, for this alone is the “complete” citizen (*pace* Mulgan, 1977, 54–55).

Aristotle's final account of the citizen, then, will be anticipated to have achieved in its complete form a twofold character: one side of it will express the actual and observable facts of citizenship as it is practiced in the various regimes; the other will capture its potential character, what citizens in all regimes aspired to become (even if often falling short or “deviating” from completion). The first of these

aspects is the subject of Book III, chapter I, of the *Politics*, the second of Book III, chapters ii–v.

### III. THE CITIZEN IN THE ACTUAL PRACTICE OF THE REGIMES

In Book III, chapter i, we find three separate definitions of the citizen. The first is (III. i. 1275 a23–24): “a man who shares in the administration of justice and in the holding of office” (*metechein krisios kai arches*). The second is (III. i. 1275 a33): “those who share in indeterminate office” (*politai taus houto [aoristos archei] metechontas*); by “indeterminate office” Aristotle means, specifically, the offices of judge in the courts and member of the assembly. The third, final definition is (III. i. 1275 b19–20): “he who enjoys the right of sharing in deliberative and judicial office” (*arches bouleutikes kai kritikes*). These three definitions are the core of the chapter; everything else in it is an attempt to show why each of the earlier definitions is inadequate.

It is unnecessary to review here in detail the reasoning that underlies these successive revisions, though certain points are worth noting (cf. Johnson, 1984, 74–80). The first definition had defined the citizen as one who shares in the administration of justice and holding of office. But in every state there are different kinds of offices. Citizenship does not require participation in all kinds of offices, but only in certain particular kinds. Those certain kinds, for want of a better term, Aristotle decides to call “indeterminate office” (*aoristos arche*). Hence, the first revised definition of citizen is “one who shares in indeterminate office.”

This distinction between “offices” (*archai*), on the one hand, and “indeterminate offices,” on the other, is of some importance to understanding the development of Aristotle’s thought in this chapter. It is important especially to remember that, although he is not here writing a history of Greek politics, his distinctions are nevertheless often drawn from contemporary practice. Here in particular Aristotle is thinking of typical Greek democracies, as he himself says later (III. i. 1275 b6). In democracies it was possible to identify, broadly speaking, two kinds of offices. On the one hand were offices properly so-called, the various magistracies to which the name *arche* was normally applied. On the other hand were the large popular bodies, the public juries and the public assemblies characteristic of democracies.

This point requires further clarification because Aristotle’s usage can be difficult to follow at times. In Book IV (1297 b35ff.), where Aristotle classifies states according to the three parts or sections

(*moría*) constituting the political offices, he reserves the term *archai* to designate the magistracies. For the other offices he refers only to “the deliberative function” (*to bouleuomenon*) and “the judicial function” (*to dikachon* or *to dikastikon*) without using the word office (*arche*). In his note to III. i 1275 a26ff. (volume 3, 136), Newman notes that assemblymen in democracies would be unlikely to claim to be magistrates, and that jurors and magistrates would also often be distinguished. Ehrenberg notes that in democracies, “the member of a court of law was not an official; he was no archon . . .” (1969, 7; cf. more generally M. H. Hansen 1980, 151–73).

Aristotle's aim, in revising his first definition, is to provide an easy means of distinguishing between these two kinds of offices, i.e., magistracies properly so-called (*archai*) on the one hand, and large popular bodies (assemblies, public juries, on the other). He wished to do this because he wished to show in his definition that citizenship (in democracies) depended not upon occupying (or being entitled to occupy) a magistracy but only upon occupying any type of office, including the office of assemblyman or jurymen. In other words, in democracies there are many offices, and it would be a mistake to think that one must hold, or be qualified to hold, all of these offices to qualify as a citizen. For if this were true, many people would fail to qualify as citizens because of their ineligibility for the magistracies, or at least some of them. But many of these same people would be eligible for the offices of assemblyman or jurymen, and the definition of citizen should recognize that fact, for they too count as citizens. Thus, to count as a citizen in democracies one need not hold or be eligible for the magistracies (although to hold such offices obviously would not disqualify one as a citizen!); one need only serve (or be eligible to serve) as assemblyman or jurymen.

To make this point clear, however, a distinction was needed between offices of the latter sort and magistracies. Such a distinction Aristotle found in the idea of “unrestricted (in point of tenure) office” (*aoristos arche*), jurymen and assemblymen being officials of this sort. “Unrestricted” in this sense means, of course, not continuous service in the large popular bodies—the lottery by which selection was often made would ensure yearly or more frequent rotation—only the lack of legal prohibition for being selected over and over again, without interruption, as was the case for most magistracies. Citizenship in democracy, accordingly, means holding (or eligibility to hold) unrestricted office.

We have a case here of a definition being selected for its comprehensiveness. Those eligible for the magistracies would also have been eligible for the assemblies and juries, since the requirements for membership in the former were either greater than or equal to requirements

for membership in the latter. The reverse was not necessarily true; there were some magistracies that were not open to all classes. Thus, while every magistrate could have been a juror or assemblyman, not every juror or assemblyman could have been any magistrate (eligibility for magistracies is discussed in Hignett, 1952, 157ff., 216–24; and Sealey, 1976, 155–56). And since Aristotle wants to define citizen as broadly as possible, he naturally chose juror and assemblyman (“unrestricted office”) as the standard.

But this definition too is open to criticism (III. i 1275 a34–b22). In particular, it is applicable only to democracies. But constitutions differ, and what may be a citizen under one form, such as democracy, may not be a citizen under another form, such as oligarchy. What is needed, therefore, is a definition of citizen that is applicable to all forms of constitution alike.

The problem, as Aristotle states it, is this: public juries and popular assemblies are regular features of democracies. But these institutions are not present everywhere; they are absent particularly in non-democratic states. In some states, Aristotle says, there are no popular assemblies, but only meetings specially summoned; the decision of cases is remitted to special bodies. Sparta is an illustration: there, the Ephors, the Council of Elders, or some other magistracy (*arche*) handles most decisions (III. i 127 b19–11). Much the same is true of Carthage (III. i 1275 b12–13). But if citizenship is defined, as Aristotle had already claimed, in terms of membership in indeterminate office (i.e., membership in public juries and assemblies), then it would necessarily follow that there are no citizens in states like Sparta and Carthage, where these large popular bodies are not found. This position, obviously, is untenable. A broader definition is needed that incorporates citizens of democracies and non-democracies alike.

Aristotle now finds himself in an interesting dilemma. In order to describe citizens in non-democracies in such a way as to include all “holders of office” and no one else, he would seem to be forced to abandon the idea of “unrestricted office,” the democratic definition. The reason for this is simply that “unrestricted offices,” viz., jurymen and assemblymen, are not always found in non-democracies. But if a retreat from the democratic definition is necessary, a retreat to where? If he returns to the idea of “officeholder” pure and simple, he runs the risk of excluding from his definition those people in democracies who, while ineligible for offices properly so-called (the magistracies), could still serve as jurors or assemblymen. But precisely to include this group as citizens was the whole point of the first revised definition. So, it seems whether he chooses to define citizens as “holders of

office” or “holders of unrestricted office,” Aristotle will exclude from citizenship some people in some states who nevertheless ought to be called citizens.

Aristotle eschews the obvious way out of this dilemma, which would have been to define citizens as “those who share in offices of either a limited or an unlimited tenure.” We shall shortly speculate as to why this is so. Instead, he moves to a new position altogether, one scarcely anticipated in his previous discussion. To find a truly comprehensive definition he now introduces the idea of “an official determined (or limited) by his sphere of authority” (III. i 1275 b16; Miller, 1995, 146 n. 12 disputes my interpretation here). Different officials, he now suggests, have different spheres of authority. Magistrates (in all states) handle a range of affairs, jurors typically deal with other matters, and assemblymen (where they are found) are responsible for still others. The relevant question, thus, in determining the nature of citizenship, is not essentially one of the actual offices held by citizens (since offices vary from state to state—in some non-democracies there are no popular juries or assemblies at all). Rather, what counts for citizenship is the sphere of authority occupied by officeholders. Certain kinds of authority are more important than others in determining citizen status.

In particular, citizens are those who exercise authority in “deliberation” and in “judging” (III. i 1275 b18). In democracies authority of this sort would be exercised by “unlimited officials,” that is by assemblymen and jurymen. But in non-democracies, where these officials are sometimes not found, this kind of authority would often be exercised by other officials (*archai*), such as specially convened councils, or the Ephors at Sparta, or some other body (III. i 1279 b9–12; cf. R. Sealey, 1976, 73–78). It does not really matter which kind of official or officials discharge the authority; what matters is the type of authority being discharged. And for citizenship it is the deliberative and judicial authority that is decisive. So, Aristotle concludes, “what constitutes a citizen is therefore clear from these considerations: we now say that one who shares in deliberative and judicial authority is a citizen of the state in which he holds that authority” (III. i 1275 b12–20).

This definition is obviously superior to the earlier ones, for it succeeds, as they do not, in making citizenship dependent upon a universal element in constitutions, a certain kind of authority rather than a certain kind of office. For deliberation and judging are found everywhere, whereas assemblies, juries, and other particular political bodies are not. Thus, it does not matter (for citizenship) if one does

not sit on a jury court or participate in an assembly; there are states, i.e., non-democracies, where to do so is impossible in any case, since these offices do not even exist. But it does matter whether one judges and deliberates, for these functions occur in every state. And these are the functions that make one a citizen “in the complete sense.”

Again, Aristotle’s aim in altering his earlier definition is one of comprehensiveness: to include the greatest number of cases within a single definition. It appears also that he desires to bring his definition closer into alignment with what he claims in Book I is the definition of things in general:

All things are defined by their function (*ergon*) and capacity (*dunamis*), so that when they are no longer such as to perform their function they must not be said to be the same things, but to bear their names in an equivocal sense (such as, for example, a hand severed from a body may still be called a hand, but it is a hand only in name (homonymously) because it has lost the function of a hand (I. i 1253 a21–25; cf. also Chapter 6 of the present work).

This aim, to define citizen in accordance with the correct way of defining things, reveals the broad pattern of this chapter: each new attempt to define citizenship improves upon its predecessor by extending the comprehensiveness of the concept. “Judging and holding office” is too narrow because it excludes in certain cases members of juries and assemblies. “Sharing in unrestricted office” (i.e., members of juries and assemblies) is too narrow because it excludes in some cases citizens in non-democracies (where such offices do not exist). “Sharing in deliberative and judicial authority” is the final improvement. These functions are exercised in every state, and those discharging them can easily be identified. This is the citizen “in the complete sense” and this is whom Aristotle wished to find.

#### IV. THE COMPLETE CITIZEN

To this point Aristotle has been concerned only to define the citizen. Since his definition fits all constitutions, it is rightly seen as a “complete” (*haplos*) definition. But a further difficulty remains. Just because the definition applies to regimes of every sort, it provides by itself no means of discriminating citizens who are “rightly” so-called from those who, while fulfilling the terms of the definition, are citizens unjustly. For constitutions differ, and so too do the citizens within them. This can lead to disagreements among people about

who are rightly citizens in particular cases. As Aristotle says, "People do not all agree that the same person is a citizen; often somebody who would be a citizen in a democracy is not a citizen under an oligarchy" (III. i 1275 a2–3). Also, he adds, "Hence the citizen corresponding to each form of constitution will also necessarily be different" (III. i 1275 b4–5). Some people called citizens are nearer, some further removed from the complete, the true citizen. Some means are required, therefore, to enable one to sort out the rightful citizen from those of an inferior sort, yet without abandoning the "complete" definition of citizen worked out to this point with such difficulty in the preceding section.

The question about the rightfulness of citizenship is first raised in connection with regimes that have come into being as a result of revolutionary change (*metabole*) of an existing regime (III. ii 1275 b34ff.). People do not dispute in such cases who are the citizens, but only whether these people received citizenship rightly or wrongly (*dikaios he adikos*).

This question is complex and important. It is complex because there is no simple answer to it; any answer must be qualified in certain ways. It is important because it is intimately connected to the central theme of the *Politics* as a whole: what is a state? This is the question that opens Book III, and which is immediately postponed because of the need first to define "citizen" (III. i 1274 b35, returned to at III. iii 1276a 7ff.). "Citizen" has now been defined, so that it is now possible to return to the original question about the identity of the state. It is thus by means of this "difficulty" about the rightful claims of citizenship that Aristotle connects the discussion of citizenship with the rest of Book III.

On one level, it is obvious that a citizen who is not rightly a citizen is still a citizen, since citizenship is defined as sharing in certain political functions. People who share in these functions are obviously citizens according to the definition, even if wrongly admitted to them (III. iii 1276 a5–7). But this is a rather superficial answer. The significant question here is not about a word, but is rather about what constitutes the rightful holding of political functions. And this is at bottom a question about the identity of the state. For there is an argument made by "some persons" that acts discharged by people who are wrongly citizens are not acts of the state, but acts only of a party (whether of one, a few, or many), and therefore are not binding. The identity of the state, in other words, is dependent upon the correctness of political rule by those who are citizens, or about the rightfulness of the claims to citizenship of those who rule. A state is

only a state, therefore, at least according to this argument, when the people who are its citizens are rightfully so. In other cases, although one may speak loosely about actions of “the state,” they are acts of the state only in the same sense as the public acts of a tyrant (III. iii 1276 a17). And we know from other passages in the *Politics* that tyrannies are not properly called “states” (*politeiai*) at all.

The identity of the state is thus really a question about the rightfulness of political rule. It follows from this that citizenship “in the complete sense” is more than simply a matter of sharing in certain political functions; it is also a matter of ruling by right, possessing the kind of virtue that entitles one to rule. This is the means by which Aristotle finally connects the discussion about citizenship with the discussion about constitution (state): not by simply showing that citizens are uniquely “parts” that constitute the whole (had there been no more to the problem than this, chapters ii–v of Book III would not have been necessary), but rather by showing that the identity of the whole (state) is also ultimately a question about the rightness of those who are the parts. The identity of the state, in short, is a question about citizen virtue, about the rightness of the rule of those who discharge political functions of a certain type.

## V. CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC VIRTUE

By this route Aristotle returns to the difficulties associated with his definition of citizen. Since the identity of the state hinges upon a question about citizen virtue, it is impossible to say what a state (*polis* or *politeia*) is without an account of citizen virtue. This is the question that follows: is the goodness of a good man the same as that of a good citizen? This difficulty, like the others, depends for its solution upon a proper understanding of citizenship “in the complete sense.” One may abbreviate by saying that the virtue of a good man is identical to the virtue of a good citizen only in the case of the complete citizen, that is, for the citizen who rightly shares in political functions, and only when he is ruling (actually carrying out those functions) in a good (right) state. The complete citizen, in other words, entails the rightness of his holding office, and the rightness of his holding office, in turn, entails a “right” state. So, again, while it is possible to speak loosely about a “citizen” or even a “good” citizen even in deviant states, such as democracies and oligarchies, to speak properly of citizenship “in the absolute sense” one must speak of those who deserve to rule, the good man who discharges certain political functions in a good state.

Of course one must not forget that the citizen “in the complete sense” is, like Max Weber’s ideal type, a limiting case. It is that towards which citizenship tends without necessarily ever reaching that point in practice (cf. Johnson, 1990, 137 n. 18). To be sure, there are people in every state who discharge the political functions of deliberating and judging, and who therefore are pronounced citizens in those states. As Aristotle says himself, “it is clear that even persons wrongly admitted to citizenship are pronounced to be citizens” (III. ii 1276 a2–6). Such people may even be “good citizens” (III. iv 1276 b34). A great deal of variation among regimes as to a citizen’s identity is not only possible but manifest (III. i 1275 b4–5).

But it must also be remembered that there is a “primary” and “secondary” nature of things (see Introduction). “Now we see,” he writes, “that constitutions differ from one another in kind, and that some are subsequent and others prior; for erroneous and divergent forms are necessarily subsequent to correct forms” (III. i 1275 a35–1275 b1). It follows that the nature of citizenship, dependent as it is on the type of constitution, will also have a “prior” and a “subsequent” form. The “complete” definition is prior; it will have no defect, belonging to the best constitution. It, therefore, entails one who discharges functions “rightly,” possessing the necessary wisdom and virtue. Aristotle is clear on this point also: “And although the goodness of one who rules and that of one who is ruled are different, the good citizen must have the knowledge and the ability to be ruled and to rule, and the merit of the good citizen consists in having a knowledge of the government of free men on both sides. And therefore both these virtues are characteristic of a good man” (III. iv 1277 b13–18).

The question of citizenship is thus complex. On one hand there is common practice and usage. One comes closest to capturing the universal practice of states by associating citizenship with the political functions of deliberating and judging. But on a different level one must not dissociate citizenship from questions about the rightness of political rule. Newman’s note is very useful here (vol. 1, pp. 569–70): Aristotle’s aim here is to distinguish a narrower view of citizen (those capable of ruling well, those equipped with *phronesis*), and a wider one (all citizens including *neoteroi* and those not fit to rule). When this factor—the rightness of those holding political office—is taken into account, citizenship is confined to those who are rightly performing the functions of the office(s). The idea of citizenship from this point of view entails possessing the virtue requisite to ruling rightly. Not every state, obviously, will follow this model; indeed, few if any will.

Yet all states will be said to be “states” and to have “citizens.” And when these conditions are confronted by the student of politics, he will not refuse to call them “states” and “citizens,” but will understand in doing so that they are “states” and “citizens” in a secondary and “divergent” sense from the “complete” sense. The true citizen is the man capable of governing rightly (*Pol.* III. iv 1277 b37; cf. Johnson 1990, 138 n. 20 for a defense of this reading).

In sum, then, it appears that Aristotle actually identifies two citizens, so to speak. The first is the citizen of the completed definition of Book III, chapter i: one who shares in the political functions of deliberating and judging. But this citizen is the citizen of all regimes, without discrimination; the definition takes in the tyrant along with the king, the oligarch along with the aristocrat, the deviant along with the good. It also takes in the working classes (*banauoi*) and even aliens (*xenoi*) wherever these groups are sharing in rule (III. v 1278 a5ff.; 1278 a28). In all of these cases the officeholders are called citizens, yet by right, “offices and honors are bestowed only to merit and goodness” (III. v 1278 a20–21).

A further discrimination is needed, one that separates the rightful citizen from he who only possesses the title of citizen without the just claim to the title. A second definition is accordingly brought forward: the true citizen is not only the one who shares in rule but the one who deserves to share, the rightful citizen.

Such citizens will not be found in the deviant regimes, for these regimes are themselves not right. In such regimes the best one may do is to obey well, to practice well the virtue of obedience in accordance with the kind of regime of which one is a subject. The rightful citizen in the full sense is only he who shares in the offices of deliberating and judging in a right regime.

On the whole Aristotle’s definition of the citizen is as much as it can be. It provides a universal standard for identifying not only who in any given case actually is a citizen, but who rightly deserves to be one. It is thus useful in resolving a number of theoretical disputes about the true nature of citizenship as well as a number of practical disputes arising from conflicting claims to citizenship. One sees well, too, Aristotle’s characteristic habit of lecturing on two levels at once, on the level of theory and on that of practice, on the level of the potential as well as the actual, on the level of philosophy as well as of statesmanship. And, of course, the idea of citizen “in the complete sense” provides a significant clue, if not the key, to the central question of Book III, and perhaps of the *Politics* as a whole: what is the constitution?

## VI. THE SOVEREIGN POWER

To complete the discussion of the material cause of the state in the *Politics* it is necessary to turn briefly to the political function that Aristotle calls "sovereign" (*to kurion*). The importance of this office is underscored in the definition of constitution itself: "a constitution is an ordering of the state with respect to its offices generally, and especially the office that is sovereign over everything (*kurias panton*)."<sup>2</sup> (It should be borne in mind that a *kurios* power in Greek usage is always *kurios* over something. I shall be restricting my employment to those cases where Aristotle means "over everything," i.e., over the constitution—the supreme power as we might say. (Cf. e.g., IV. xiv 1299 a2; VI. II316 b31; etc.; also Mulgan, 1977, 516–18.)

As the definition makes clear, the sovereign office is not the only office in constitutions; magistracies and lesser judicial powers also exist. These are generally not included in the sovereign power. They are of secondary importance, since their ordering does not affect the question of the identities, or essential forms, of constitutions. The most that can be said about them is that they are either suitable or not suitable to the constitutions of which they are parts. Only the sovereign power counts among the powers as a decisive cause in the constitutional taxonomies. For this reason it makes a considerable difference to understand what this power is, and who in any particular case holds it (cf. Johnson, 1985, for a more extended discussion).

Aristotle's idea of sovereignty is completely bound up with his constitutional taxonomy. Unfortunately, Aristotle nowhere defines this concept or even makes it an object of investigation per se. Thus, the only way to get at it is by examining how he applies it as a concept of analysis in his constitutional theory. But the constitutional theory itself, and particularly the taxonomy, is not free of difficulty. As I showed in chapters 3 and 4 above, the taxonomies appear to lack uniformity: they identify different numbers and kinds of species of states; they employ different differentiae in specifying types; and even Aristotle's method seems to change. Because of these difficulties an analysis of sovereignty is more difficult than it otherwise would be. For sovereignty is, as we shall show, a crucial factor in all of Aristotle's classifications of states. If those classifications differ from each other, therefore, or worse, if they are inconsistent with one another, one might plausibly argue that Aristotle's political thought does indeed lack a satisfactory theory of sovereignty, as some, most famously Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* 1651, have argued. The inconsistencies among the classifications would seem at least to constitute presumptive evidence for a weak or incoherent theory of sovereignty.

But I have also attempted to show that the classifications, appearances notwithstanding, are neither inconsistent nor incoherent. They are, in fact, all variants of the same basic model. The concept of sovereignty is in fact their most important unifying link. It is not too much to say that the taxonomies cannot properly be understood without the aid of this concept. To see how it functions within the constitutional theory, it will be best to begin with the first broad classification, the famous sixfold scheme presented in Book III, chapter vii. Everything Aristotle subsequently says about the structure and identity of constitutions ultimately refers back to this scheme.

In Book III, chapter vii, of the *Politics*, in considering how many forms of constitution there are, Aristotle writes:

But in as much as “constitution” (*politeia*) means the same as “civic body” (*politeuma*), and the civic body is the supreme power in the state (*to kurion ton poleon*), and this must be either a single ruler or a few or the mass of citizens, in cases when the one or the few or the many govern with an eye to the common interest, these constitutions must necessarily be right ones, while those administered with an eye to the private interest of either the one or the few or the multitude are deviations (III. vii 1279 a26–31).

The application of these principles to constitutions yields a division of them into six types: the three “right” forms of monarchy, aristocracy and polity, and the three deviations tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy.

To this point Aristotle has identified only two principles of division: that of number of rulers (one, few, many), and that of their moral competence (concern for others above self, concern for self above others). He very quickly discards the criterion of number (at least in the deviant types) for that of economic class (rich, poor, etc.), on the grounds that the few are always the rich, the many always the poor. And even where this is not the case, the question of economic class is still more decisive, since in it is the essence of the distinction among states, whereas number is an accidental attribute (III. viii 1279 b37ff.). Thus, Book III, chapter vii, leaves us with two principles of division that order right constitutions (number and moral competence of rulers), and two principles that order deviant states (social class and moral competence of rulers). Nothing else is added to this scheme in Book III.

But social class (or number, in the “right” forms) and moral competence of the rulers, though fundamental to classifying states, are not sufficiently refined to account for more subtle differences among states. In particular, both expressions leave open the question of who

“the rulers” are. Obviously it is impossible to identify the social class (or number) or the moral competence of the rulers unless one has a means of identifying who the rulers are, or a means of distinguishing rulers from non-rulers. In the passage quoted above, this ruling group (or supreme power, as Aristotle calls it) is identified as the *polit-euma*. But this term, as it stands, is still too imprecise to be of use in classifying or identifying particular states. The reason for this is that *polit-euma* (“the ruling class” or “citizen body”) is itself composite, consisting of many different offices and functions. It follows that the identity of particular states will vary depending upon how economic classes and moral competence are distributed among all of these offices and functions. It is, in fact, the variety of offices in states (and thus the variety of possibilities for distributing citizens among them) that gives to Aristotle’s constitutional taxonomy its superiority in texture and richness when compared with the schemes of classification of his predecessors, e.g., Plato in *Statesman* (291d ff.) and Herodotus (III 80–83). Classification becomes difficult because of the great number of ways in which these offices may be distributed.

But not all offices are equally important in setting the identity of states. One function, or actually group of functions, in particular is of decisive importance: the sovereign power (*to kurion*). This power is not coextensive with government, but it is a part of government, one of the functions among those that constitute the ruling mechanism of states. I have already mentioned the importance attached by Aristotle to the sovereign office: it helps to define the essential nature of “constitution” itself, as we have seen. From the definition it follows that the identity of a particular constitution is given by the distribution of powers among the rulers, and especially by the ordering of the sovereign power. One thus wishes to know, when classifying states, not only whether the rulers are virtuous or selfish and not only whether they are rich or poor; one must also know which offices the rulers hold, and particularly who holds the sovereign office. Both questions must be answered; hence Aristotle gives two separate kinds of account of “parts” of the state. One kind of account (IV. iii 1289 b30ff.) refers to the *demos* and *gnorimoi* (and subdivisions of these), the other to the various political powers (*dynameis*) of which the state is composed (IV. iv 1290 b39–1291 b3). There is no need to assume, as some authors do, a second author or a development in Aristotle’s thought to explain the latter account.

The idea of sovereignty is thus an important key to understanding Aristotle’s constitutional thought. It should be emphasized here that this is not a new or an independent criterion of classification; in

this sense it does not move beyond the two principles of classification found in Book III. Rather, it merely elaborates or gives fuller definition to what is already implicit in them. Book III shows that moral competence and economic class (or number) of rulers are fundamental; Book IV and later books specify, through the idea of sovereignty, who the rulers are. The idea of sovereignty is thus an important clarification of ideas earlier laid down.

## VII. SOVEREIGNTY AND CITIZENSHIP

The issue of sovereignty is closely bound up in Aristotle's thought with the issue of citizenship, although it is easy to miss this point. In modern usage the idea of sovereignty tends to connote a ruling class, separate from the mass of citizens who are subjects. For Aristotle, and this is the critical point here, citizens are the ruling class, those who share in the judicial and deliberative functions of the state. (I discussed in the Introduction some difficulties that seem to beset this definition and references—e.g., “is a monarch in a monarchy the only citizen?” Cf. C. Mosse, 1967, 61ff.; Cooper, in Kraut and Skultety, ed., 2005, 65–89.) For those functions, particularly the latter, are sovereign in Aristotle's view. To put it in Aristotle's terms, the citizens (*politoi*) in any state constitute the civic body (*politeuma*), or conversely, the civic body is composed of those who are made citizens by the constitution (*politeia*) (III. vi 1278 b11ff., III. vii 1279 a25). Indeed, the civic body is the constitution itself (III. vi 1278 b10). And since the civic body “is everywhere sovereign (*kurios*) over the state” (ibid.), it is obviously necessary, if one wishes to know the identity of a state, first to establish who in it are made citizens by the constitution, or who belongs to the *politeuma*. The powers that Aristotle specifies as conferring citizenship are the deliberative and the judicial (*archai bouletikai kai kritikai*). Whoever discharges these powers in any state are ipso facto the citizens of that state, strictly speaking the only citizens of that state. And because deliberative and judicial offices are sovereign, citizens are sovereign. To know in any state, therefore, who its citizens are is to possess an important clue to understanding the identity of the constitution.

To this point, then, we have discovered two clues in determining the identity of Aristotle's sovereign element and thus in understanding his scheme of classification. The first is that the sovereign power is held by those who are made citizens by the constitution (i.e., the *politeuma*); the second, by extension, is that it is held by those who discharge deliberative and judicial functions (since this is what being

a citizen entails, as a matter of definition [III. i 1275 b8–10]). These two dimensions of sovereignty are connected by definition and so are merely alternative ways of expressing the same idea. Yet both are defective for a complete taxonomy because they leave open the question of what the deliberative and judicial elements are. It does not help understanding to say that citizens are those who hold deliberative and judicial offices without knowing what those offices are.

### VIII. THE DELIBERATIVE ELEMENT AND SOVEREIGNTY

Of the two offices, Aristotle regarded the former—the deliberative—as more important for his constitutional taxonomy than the judicial (although the deliberative office may at times include judicial functions). As we have noted, on two occasions in the course of the *Politics* Aristotle expressly identified the deliberative as the sovereign element in constitutions, and in another passage he called it sovereign in the city. There is thus, with respect to this function at least, an association of ideas that corresponds perfectly to his definition of citizenship. Just as sovereignty had earlier been identified with the civic body (those who are made citizens under a constitution), and citizens had been defined as those who share in deliberative and judicial functions, so now deliberative function has itself been shown to be sovereign. It, therefore, becomes a matter of some importance to determine the identity of the deliberative function.

A formal definition of this function appears at *Politics* IV. xiv 1298a3ff.: “The deliberative factor is sovereign about war and peace and dissolution of alliances, and about laws, and about sentences of death, exile and confiscation of property, and about the election of magistrates (*archai*) and their audit.” This is an excellent definition since it identifies precisely who the citizens of any state are, and thus identifies precisely the sovereign power. By determining who discharges these functions—and about this there can be little difficulty—one is able to determine with ease the sort of constitution.

It only remains to show that Aristotle's deliberative element, that is, how it is organized, is indeed decisive in establishing the identities of the various regimes in all of the several classifications in the *Politics*. In order to do this it is first necessary to show that the deliberative element is always understood by Aristotle to be the sovereign power in regimes. There are places at which this appears not

to be the case. For example, there are times when certain powers (not themselves called “deliberative”) are still called “sovereign.” (Instances occur at III. x 1281 a16, III. x 1281 b23, III. x 1282 a13, III. x 1282 a25, IV. vi 1292 a25, V. v 1305 a32, V. ix 1310 a5, etc.). Again, there are times in the *Politics* when certain groups of people are identified as “sovereign” without being identified as holding deliberative powers. (Typical instances of this usage occur at III. viii 1279 b20–36, III. vi 1278 b13, III. x 1281 a12, III. xi 1282 a38, III. xiv 1285 b9, and frequently). Finally, Aristotle sometimes refers to various institutional bodies as sovereign without identifying them also as discharging the deliberative functions (instances at II. ix 1270 b9, II. xi 1273 a38–40, II. viii 1268 a18ff. Cf. C. N. Johnson, 1985, 338 n. 28). (To be noted here is that the decisive question for determining the deliberative power is function, not office; cf. Johnson, 1990, 139 n. 38.) But these usages may all be shown to be only variations on an underlying theme. Aristotle’s sovereign power is always the deliberative element, even when he does not say so in so many words.

It must still be shown, however, that the organization of the sovereign (or deliberative) power is the decisive factor in establishing the identity of every constitution. Two kinds of evidence are useful in demonstrating that this is in fact the case. The first involves the definition of constitution itself. Again, to abbreviate a complex subject, it must be kept in mind that the purpose of definition in Aristotle’s scientific works is to identify uniquely and exhaustively the class of objects being defined (Keyt, in Keyt and Miller, eds., 1991, 256, 276). It is insufficient, moreover, to define by characteristics that merely happen to belong uniquely to a certain class of objects (as, for example, “clothed” in the case of man); to define in this way would be to define by accidental attributes. It is necessary that the definition be carried out in terms of essential properties.

When Aristotle defined constitution, he defined it as “the ordering of a state in respect of its various offices, and especially the office that is sovereign over all matters” (III. vi 1278 b9–10). What is essential to the idea of constitution, in other words, is the arrangement of its political offices (i.e., functions). It follows that constitutional identities are established according to the manner in which offices are arranged. And, as the definition stipulates, the office of greatest importance in these arrangements, and therefore in setting constitutional type, is the sovereign (deliberative) power. (An extended discussion of the sovereign deliberative power is *NE* VI. vii–x).

The evidence from the definition is confirmed by Aristotle's own procedure in identifying and classifying states. I have discussed his method of classifying in earlier chapters (*supra*, chapters 2–3). Suffice it to say that every classification develops directly from the definition already quoted. This is perhaps clearest in the first systematic classification set out in the *Politics*, the famous sixfold scheme of Book III, chapter vii. Here Aristotle is quite explicit: "In as much as . . . the civic body (*politeuma*) is the sovereign power in the state (*to kurion ton poleon*), and this must be either a single ruler or a few or the mass of citizens," it follows that the type of constitution "will be either monarchy when one holds sovereign power (its deviation being tyranny), aristocracy when the few hold sovereignty (its deviation being oligarchy), or polity when sovereignty is held by the many (its deviation being democracy)" (III. vii 1279 a23ff.).

Who holds sovereign (deliberative) power thus settles the type of the constitution. The other schemes of classification follow this model, except that they differ from it in giving a more exact account of (1) who the rulers are in given cases, and (2) which powers among the deliberative ones they actually hold (see below on the problem of the divided deliberative). The point in either case, however, is the same: it is the possession of the deliberative that identifies the state as belonging to one particular type or another. What differentiates states is not the fact that different states have different institutional arrangements (although this too will often be the case: *boule-ekklisia* at Athens, *gerousia-apella* at Sparta). What differentiates them, rather, is the fact that those who hold these offices (or, in any state, the sovereign) are different classes of people. Aristotle's own statement is quite explicit: constitutions differ by virtue of different groups being sovereign (III. xiii 1283 b6).

## IX. THE PROBLEM OF DIVIDED SOVEREIGNTY

It is necessary in this connection to say a word about the problem of divided sovereignty for Aristotle. The reason that this is a difficulty is simply that the deliberative element is itself a composite element. It is not one power, but rather five distinct powers. It is thus entirely conceivable, indeed quite likely, that different powers within the deliberative element will fall to different groups (e.g., "social classes") within the state. When this happens, one is no longer able to speak simply about the locus of sovereignty. Sovereignty now appears capable of being spread out among different groups, yielding the paradoxical result that the same state can be both democratic and oligarchic, or

democratic and aristocratic, or some other combination depending upon just how the sovereign powers are allocated. A classification that generates results of this kind can easily produce confusion. The question before us thus becomes, “Does Aristotle consistently find, in cases of a divided deliberative (i.e., cases in which the deliberative powers are distributed among different parts), one power that is sovereign among sovereigns?” Does Aristotle’s constitutional taxonomy recognize an ultimate sovereign?

There are times when Aristotle seems unconcerned with this difficulty; sometimes he proceeds as though classification depends merely upon a kind of multiplication of functions in the hands of one or another “part” of the state. For example, as more “offices” are held by “the wealthy,” the more “oligarchic” the regime; no mention is made here of other parts sharing in deliberative offices. But at other times he is quite attentive to problems in the taxonomies generated by a divided deliberative. This is most clearly seen in his extended discussion of the deliberative element itself (IV. xiv 1294 a4ff.). This whole discussion is framed with the idea in mind that how one distributes the deliberative element among the several different “parts” of the state will determine the form of the constitution. Since obviously many different distributions are possible, one wishes to know which powers within the deliberative element are most closely connected to the identities of the regimes, and so to his ultimate sovereign.

I have made the argument elsewhere (1985, pp. 343–46) that such an ultimate sovereign power does exist in Aristotle’s taxonomies and that this power is the legislative. This inference is based upon the following considerations:

1. Of the five powers associated with the deliberative element in the formal definition of that “part,” no other power (besides the legislative) is ever expressly called the “sovereign” power. It is true that the powers of election and review of magistrates at times appear to be associated with the idea of sovereignty (e.g., III. xi 1281 b34, VI. iv 1318 b30, VI. iv 1319 a4–5, III. i 1274 b33ff.), but such associations may be shown to be incidental, and the attribution of the idea of sovereignty to these two powers is thus inferential at best. Beyond that, Aristotle at times plainly suggests that election and review are not sovereign powers (II. vii 1268 a5ff., II. xii 1274 a17ff.). On the other hand, there are strong links in several places in the *Politics* between the idea of sovereignty and the legislative power (II. ix 1270 b7ff.; II. x 1272 b1ff.; II. xi 1273

a12ff.; cf. *NE* VII. viii 1141 b23–32). This fact does not entirely settle the matter because legislation itself, as we have seen, could take different forms: constitution-making, legislation proper, and passing decrees. But at least we know enough to see that Aristotle had “legislation” in some sense in mind as being the sovereign power. And of the various distributions of the deliberative powers described at IV. xiv, the organization of the legislative power appears most closely to correlate with constitutional identity (*pace* Mulgan, 1977, 58).

2. Aristotle's repeated insistence is that, whenever possible, laws and not men should be sovereign. This is obviously among Aristotle's most settled convictions. The emphasis that one finds throughout the *Politics* on the idea of the sovereignty of law has the effect of throwing the legislative power into sharp relief. For one thing, Aristotle is quite clear that even in law-governed regimes, there will inevitably be times when the laws cannot be sovereign, when human authority is necessary to supply what the law has failed to supply (III. xv 1286 a22–23; cf. III. xi 1282 b3–5; III. xv 1286 a20ff.; III. xvi 1287 a25ff.; *Rhet.* 1137 b12–15; cf. Johnson, 1990, 144 n. 43). When human authority is exercised in these circumstances to enact laws or decrees (*psephismata*) for the regime, such authority can only be called “legislative” (but see Johnson, 1990, 140 n. 42 for a qualification), and Aristotle notes the great importance that attaches to authority exercised in this way (III. xv 1286 a24).

The very fact that the law usually should be sovereign (see Chapter 4 for the exceptions to this rule) suggests that Aristotle regarded the law, and so legislative activity, with particular reverence. One must recall in this connection what the rule of law meant for Aristotle. It was the rule of reason or rational principle (*logos*: *NE* V. vi 1134 a35). In order for it to be rule of this kind, the legislator must himself be capable of discerning this rational principle and bringing it into existence within the human community. He must, in other words, be equipped with the highest faculties and gifts, especially those of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and understanding (*nous*: *NE* X. ix 1180 a22–23). Legislative wisdom is accordingly the “master wisdom” (*architectonike phronesis*: *NE* VI. viii 1141 b20ff.), suitable to those discharging the highest activity of the state. Put differently, the purpose of laws is to make men good and just, and since laws emanate from the legislator, the ultimate goal of the legislator is also to make men good and just (*NE* II. ii 1103 b2). This is the highest good that can be attained

in the political community, making legislation the highest art (cf. Kraut, 2002 chapter 4, for a more detailed treatment of “lawfulness” in the *NE*).

3. Above all, however, one must notice how Aristotle employs the idea of sovereignty of law in the various taxonomies of the *Politics*. The taxonomies contain a number of very fine distinctions, but one broad line of division runs through practically all of them: certain constitutions are law-governed, whereas in others men are sovereign instead. On this basis, the extreme form of democracy is distinguished from more moderate forms (IV. iv 1291 b37, IV. iv 1292 a6, IV. v 1292 b21), the extreme form of oligarchy is distinguished from its more moderate forms (IV. vi 1293 a12ff., IV. xiv 1298 b2ff.), absolute kingship is distinguished from all other forms (III. xv 1268 a1ff.), and extreme tyranny is distinguished from other deviant forms of one-man rule (IV. x). In most cases, rule of men instead of laws is a sign of deviance. The one exception is when one man, or maybe a small number of men, are so exceptionally virtuous that law would be a hindrance to their excellence in ruling—but this is a problem more of theory than of practice (III. xiii 1284a11–17).

The point of these divisions is always the same: except in the rare instances of absolute rule by one man or a few men of preeminent virtue, for whom the laws would be a hindrance to good government, it is always best to leave as much sovereignty as possible to law and as little as possible to men. Governments in which decrees (*psephismata*) are allowed to override laws are never far away from tyranny. They differ so markedly from law-governed constitutions, in fact, that Aristotle sometimes denies them the title of constitution altogether (IV. iv 1292 a32ff.).

This classificatory principle, which permits one to distinguish among constitutions on the basis of whether or not they are law-governed, is central to Aristotle’s whole taxonomy. It has the effect of placing the legislative function in a central position. No other deliberative function can claim the same prominence. The reason that the principle of sovereignty of law is not as clear as it might be in Aristotle is that he has applied it in two different, though not incompatible, senses. Sometimes he used it as a means of discriminating among constitutions within his taxonomy; when he does this, legislative sovereignty is the decisive criterion in setting constitutional types. But sometimes he used it to discriminate not among constitutions within the taxonomy, but rather between true constitutions (those that are

law-governed) and non-constitutions (those that are not). And historically it is this latter application of the idea that has attracted the greater attention.

But even in true constitutions the laws cannot resolve every issue, even if they are well-made. In every state there will be times when it is necessary to legislate. This may be a dangerous power, open to abuse. Aristotle's caution is thus understandable, and one can easily see why he regarded this power as the most sovereign of all. But it would be a mistake to assume on that account that whenever legislation occurs, constitutions cease to be true constitutions. They cease to be true only when sovereignty over legislation becomes extreme, the laws deciding nothing, the people (rich, poor, etc.) everything. When legislative activity occurs within the context of a law-governed system, those who discharge this function, far from being illegitimate, are the ultimate sovereign.

## X. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have been investigating what are evidently the two most important material "parts" of constitution from a classificatory standpoint, the citizen and the sovereign. Knowing the identities of these two groups takes one very far towards understanding not only individual identities of regimes but also where regimes are located in Aristotle's moral hierarchy; again, classification and moral ranking are mirror reflections of one another, as throughout Aristotle's text.

It may be noted that to know the identity of either one of these elements is almost, though not quite, equivalent to knowing the identity of the other; in the main, citizens are just those who hold (or are eligible to hold) sovereign office, and further, they are citizens because they are so eligible. The converse also is true: those who hold the deliberative powers are (again, as a rule) the citizens. Deliberative powers were, of course, not the only powers exercised in the polis, and citizens therefore would customarily discharge other powers besides just the deliberative ones. But as to acquiring the identity of citizen, nothing mattered so much in Aristotle's thought as participating in deliberative functions, and nothing contributed so much to the identification of deliberative powers with sovereignty as the fact that citizens discharged them.

Finally it should be evident that all of the taxonomies in the *Politics* make regular reference to these two parts in essential ways. Citizens are specified in many different ways, e.g., as the wealthy, or the poor,

or the farmers, or the virtuous, or the artisans, or what have you; in each case the identity of the citizens shows the type of the regime. The deliberative element is also specified, in this case according to the various powers encompassed by it. Regime identity is again revealed by knowing which groups hold which of these powers. Both “the citizen” and the “sovereign” are thus intimately linked to the entire theory of the constitution in the *Politics*, and so belong centrally to the “first questions” of Aristotle’s political science.

## CHAPTER 8



### POLITY AND THE MIDDLE REGIME IN THE *POLITICS*

#### I. INTRODUCTION

We turn now to the consideration of a pair of questions of a different logical order, questions belonging to what I have been calling “posterior” or second-order questions of the *Politics*. The first of these is about the form of constitution given the name “polity” (*politeia*) by Aristotle. It is mentioned briefly in Book III, chapter vii, then pursued at greater length in subsequent books as a response to the question “what constitution is best for the majority of states?” (IV. i 1288 b35ff. IV. ii 1289 b14ff., IV. xiii 1297 b32–34). The second is about the constitution that is said to be “best absolutely” (IV. i 1288 b23ff., IV. ii 1289 a3lff., but taken up mainly in Books VII–VIII). One wishes to know the identities of both these forms.

These are “posterior” because a coherent discussion of them presupposes a fairly well-developed first-order doctrine. They are also aimed more clearly at “statesmen” than at “theorists.” The recommendations given in response to these two questions can be put to immediate practical use by a statesman equipped with proper knowledge.

But Aristotle’s discussion of these second-order issues is beset in both instances with many difficulties. In both cases he seems to give conflicting answers; he wavers and equivocates. His thought is difficult to follow. There are many obscurities in the text. Yet both are integral, indeed central, to the overall aim of the *Politics*. Perhaps there are no two questions in which Aristotle was more seriously interested in this work than these. It becomes important to understand them as he did.

I argue that much of the confusion surrounding Aristotle's discussion of these two questions is a consequence of an inadequate understanding of the first-order doctrine. When they are viewed against the backdrop of these higher-priority issues much of the difficulty disappears. This means disentangling the second-order elements from the first-order ones and showing how the first-order doctrine informs and illuminates Aristotle's peculiar discussion of these two important second-order questions. I shall take up the question of "polity" first, then the question of the "best constitution absolutely."

## II. DIFFICULTIES IN ARISTOTLE'S PRESENTATION OF "POLITY"

There are four related difficulties in Aristotle's various discussions of polity (in the narrow sense of a species of constitution) in the *Politics*. One of these is that he seems to define it differently in different places. Of course *politeia* is his generic term for "constitution" in general; in this sense all constitutions of whatever type are *polit-eiai*. But as a specific form it seems to be different things. At times (III. vii 1279 a37–39) it is "rule by the many (*to plethos*) with a view to the common advantage." At other times (IV. viii 1293 b33–34, 1294 a23–34) it is called "a mixture of oligarchy and democracy"; still elsewhere (IV. xi 1295 a36ff.) it appears to be identified with "the middle constitution" (*he mese politeia*). These are not isolated or unique definitions. The first, which is also associated with rule by those who possess the military virtue (or again, with those bearing heavy arms), recurs at IV. xiii *passim*; cf. II. viii 1268 a23, II. ix 1270 a2–6, and VI. iii 1289 b30. The second recurs throughout much of Books IV–VI; sometimes (e.g., IV. viii 1294 a23–24) it is called a mixture of rich (*euporoi*) and poor (*aporoi*), or of the wealthy (*plousios*) and the free (*eleutheroi*). The third definition is prominent in IV. xi *passim* and has been detected by some commentators in IV. xii–xiii (e.g., 1296 b35–37).

A second difficulty is closely related to this one: Aristotle appears to equivocate concerning the manner in which political offices are distributed in polity, that is, the principle of distributive justice in this form. Sometimes (e.g., III. xvii 1288 a15–17) he holds that polity should recognize "merit" in assigning offices; at other times (e.g., IV. viii 1293 b32ff.) he claims that only wealth and freedom should be regarded. Some commentators have detected an even more deep-seated ambivalence in Aristotle's discussion: sometimes he seems to favor enlarged popular powers for this form of state, at others he

argues that the power of the *demos* in polity ought to be restricted in various ways (Robinson, 1962, 110).

There is, too, a question about the relative goodness of this form of constitution. Aristotle appears unable to make up his mind. At times he calls it “the best state” without qualification (IV. xi 1296 a7ff., IV. xi 1295 b35ff.); at other times it is a “right” form, but not the best “right” form (III. vii 1279 a37ff.); yet again it is classed as a deviant form, but only by comparison with the “most right constitution” (*orthotatē politeia*: IV. viii 1293 b25–26, IV. iii 1290 a24ff.); and in one particular instance Aristotle demotes it still further, refusing to class it even among “the best after the first form” (II. vi 1265 b32ff.). (Cf. Mulgan, 1977, 102 and 113, who finds discrepancies in Aristotle’s accounts of this form; Bluhm, 1962, 743–53, defends the unity of Aristotle’s treatment of polity.)

Finally, there are questions about the prevalence of the form called polity and about its attainability. Aristotle again seems confused. At times he claims that it is a rare form, even asserting that “it either never comes into existence, or seldom and in few places” (IV. xi 1296 a37–38; IV. xi 1296a23). But elsewhere he states that it is the form “most commonly existing” (or “most attainable”: *koinotatē*) of all forms of constitution in the existing states (II. vi 1265 b29–30). (The translation of *koinotatē* has been disputed, but the two most commonly used English terms appear to mean much the same thing; for the controversy, see Johnson, 1990, 153, n. 7.) One must also wonder about the state that Aristotle called “best for most cities” (IV. xi 1295 a25), or again, “the best of the constitutions speaking generally” (IV. xiii 1297 b43). If this is the same as the form “more generally shared by all states” (see parenthetical note directly above), as it appears to be, and the latter is polity, then why does Aristotle also say that polity does not often exist?

In short, polity runs up against a number of difficulties in Aristotle’s treatment of it. It is defined in several different ways, it embraces different principles of distributive justice, it occupies different positions on a hierarchy of goodness, and it appears paradoxically to be both rare and common. The claims brought forward on its behalf are not only divergent, but seem even to be ventured with little regard to principles of consistency and non-contradiction. Is it possible to reconcile the several accounts?

### III. THE IDENTITY OF POLITY: NOMENCLATURE

Part of the difficulty surrounding the question of the identity of polity is one of a proper nomenclature. With respect to this form, misusages

abound to a unique degree, and much of Aristotle's discussion is taken up with sorting through confusions that flow from this source. There are several distinct difficulties that can be mentioned only briefly here. The first is the fact that polity (alone among types) shares its name with the name common to all constitutions, *politeia*. The question then inevitably arises, at least on certain occasions, whether Aristotle himself intended *politeia* to be understood in its generic or its specific sense (for example, *Pol.* IV. xii–xiii 1297 a6, 8, 12, and 17; also IV. xiii 1297b2, 26; IV. xiv 1298 b28, 36; and V. ii 1320 a16; cf. Robinson 1962, 106–9).

Then, too, there was popular usage. Aristotle identified two principal kinds of error in this regard. The first concerned people calling by the name “polity,” constitutions that really were some other form, usually so-called aristocracy (IV. viii 1293 b36, IV. vii 1293 b20, V. viii 1307 a13). The other was essentially the reverse of this: people calling by some other name (usually democracy) constitutions that truly were polities (IV. iii 1290 a18ff., IV. xiii 1297 b23–26; cf. also IV. viii 1294 a20ff.). Either sort of error will lead to difficulties in the proper identification of the form under investigation. Language exists to direct objects perspicuously to their appropriate referents; hence the need, insisted upon by Aristotle, for clarity and consistency in terminology. Objects must be properly named.

Aristotle's own explicit statements about the appropriate nomenclature for polity may thus be regarded as a promising starting point for apprehending this form. First are the definitions discussed earlier. Of the several definitions given there, only two are explicitly associated with the name polity: those states in which the many rule with a view to the common interest (III. vii 1279 a37–39), and those states that are “a mixture of oligarchy and democracy” (IV. viii 1293 b34–35). These are the only explicit definitions of polity in the *Politics*. The definition equating polity with rule by the heavy-armed citizens is intended by Aristotle only as a clarification of the meaning of the first definition and should not, therefore, be regarded as a separate definition. (We shall later investigate whether this clarification is compatible with Aristotle's other statements about polity.) And “middle constitution” is nowhere expressly called polity, and so should not be regarded as a definition of that form either. This is an important point, one to which we shall return.

Other explicit testimony confirms the nomenclature established in the definitions. Aristotle often notes that states close in form to polity should not for that reason be called polity (e.g., IV. vii 1293 b20; IV. viii 1294 a20; IV. viii 1294 a28). And when discussing other mixes

besides that of polity Aristotle could scarcely be more emphatic: “It is manifest that the mixture of the two factors, the rich and the poor, ought to be termed polity, while the mixture of three factors (of rich, poor and virtue) deserves the name aristocracy” (IV. viii 1294 a22–24; cf. IV. viii 1293 b35–36).

#### IV. THE CLASSIFICATION OF POLITY

This evidence from Aristotle’s statements on nomenclature is corroborated by his testimony about the proper classification of this form. Here the concern is not with the right name for a particular object but with the proper identification of the object itself; not with the signifier but with what is signified. The distinction is subtle, but important. For, unlike questions of nomenclature, questions about the identity of objects bring into play Aristotle’s whole classificatory apparatus. The reason for this is simply that polity is one among many constitutional forms, and a perplexing and difficult one at that. To classify is to identify, to discover polity’s proper place among the universe of constitutions. This is the purpose of classification.

We need not review here all of the principles of classification that have been outlined in earlier chapters. It is helpful to recall, however, that classification may be according to genus or according to species. Genus classification proceeds by examining: (1) who holds the offices in the state, particularly the sovereign office; and (2) what is the aim or end (*telos*) of the constitution. Species classification is established by looking at the arrangement of the various “parts” of the state. Since these are numerous in states of any significant size, species classification must pay heed to a relatively large number of “parts” (chapters 2–3 above).

Considering polity as a genus, we can determine that offices are distributed to both rich and poor. From the standpoint of the distributive principle, this characteristic is the hallmark of the genus. The end of polity, like that of aristocracy and kingship, is virtue. But the rich and poor are incapable of perfect virtue; at best they may aspire to military excellence (III. vii 1279 a36ff.). Polity as genus, then, is the state in which rich and poor (1) occupy the political offices (in some combination) and (2) possess the military virtue. Since military excellence is usually associated with the possession of those with military equipment, polity is the form of constitution in which the arms-bearers are sovereign.

Species identification of polity is somewhat more complicated. Recall that four “parts” play an essential role in specifying constitutional

identities: the part of economic “class” (wealthy, poor, the middling); that of “virtue”; the various productive occupations (farmers, herds-men, artisans, etc.); and the political occupations. A state’s species identity is established by looking at how the first three of these (and their subdivisions) are distributed among the last, the political functions. The basic question Aristotle always asks is simply, “Which ‘parts’ hold the political power?”

Polity is unique among states in this particular respect: no single “part” holds the offices, but rather many; and further, the offices in which the “parts” share are themselves multiple. It is a state, in other words, whose proper apprehension requires that account be taken of a relatively large number of parts distributed among a variety of offices. When polity is considered from the standpoint of “economic class,” it is the state in which both rich and poor share in office (IV. viii 1293 b34; IV. viii 1294 a23–24; IV. ix 1294 a38ff.; IV. xiii 1297 a14–1297 b1; V. vii 1307 a7ff.; VI. 1318 a30ff.). When it is considered from the standpoint of “occupation,” it is the state in which those who bear arms share in office (II. vi 1265 b29; III. vii 1279 b1–4; III. xvii 1288 a14–15; IV. xiii 1297 b2–5; IV. xiii 1297 b13ff.; V. xiii 1297 b23–26). When considered from the standpoint of “virtue,” it is the state in which those who possess virtue of a certain sort share in office, not “perfect excellence in respect of every form of virtue,” but the virtue of military valor (III. vii 1279 b1–4). And when polity is considered from the standpoint of the political functions shared in by these “parts,” it is the state in which the parts are distributed among all functions—those discharged by magistrates, judicial officers, and sovereign deliberative officers—and are not confined to some particular office (the marks of a good distribution of political offices in polity are mentioned at IV. ix 1294 b15ff.; IV. ix 1294 b35ff.; IV. xiv 1298 b811; IV. xiv 1298 b8–11; IV. xiv 1298 b30ff.; IV. xv 1300 b1; IV. xvi–1301 a15).

In the case of polity, then, there is, strictly speaking, no simple answer to the question “who holds political powers?” Those who discharge the powers (or are eligible to do so) are not only the “rich” and the “poor,” although, since “rich” and “poor” are parts of the state “in the fullest sense,” this way of describing polity, namely as a mix of rich and poor, is obviously the most common and fundamental. But polity is not just any mix of these two classes. The poor in particular must be of a certain sort: they must possess heavy arms (cf. Barker, 1946, 151, n. GG; R. Robinson, 1962, 102). This fact entails three further conditions of polity. First, the poor, in order to have furnished themselves with heavy arms, must have had enough wealth to do so;

that is, the poor citizens in polity cannot be extremely poor, too poor to furnish and own arms (IV. iii 1289 b28–32). This passage shows the danger of thinking that the “poor” in mixed regimes (polities) were like the poor in extreme democracies. They were typically much wealthier, though not as wealthy as the well-off in oligarchies. Second, the armed citizens of polity must have cultivated that part of virtue associated with defense of the city against external enemies, namely military valor. Finally, those who possess the franchise in polity, the wealthy and the heavy-armed citizens, must be distributed relatively evenly among all political functions, each class sharing in some functions, both classes sharing in others, and a part of each sharing in still others. (*Pol.* IV. ix gives a thorough discussion of how democratic and oligarchic offices are mixed together in various ways to produce polities; cf. E. Braun, 1967, pp. 80–85.)

## V. POLITY AND THE “MIDDLE CONSTITUTION”

It is now possible to consider the relation between Aristotle’s polity and the form of state called the “middle constitution,” the subject of *Politics* IV. xi. It is widely assumed among Aristotle’s commentators that these two forms of constitution—polity and “the middle constitution” (*he mese politeia*)—were intended by Aristotle to be identical. Richard Robinson, one of the few writers who even raises the possibility that the two forms are not the same and gives reasons for supposing so, still concludes that the middle form is intended to be the same as the mixed form called polity (Robinson, 1962, 100–101; Huxley, 1985, 140).

In view of the preceding discussion, however, the argument that the “mixed regime” and “middle regime” are the same must be qualified in certain important respects. The two forms are, to be sure, similar in a number of ways, some of which Robinson identifies. But they are also different, and the differences too are fundamental. Whether one regards generic attributes or specific ones, “polity” and “middle regime” are different forms. Their distributive principles are different, their aims are different, and they differ, too, in how the material “parts” are arranged in the constitution.

Let us first discuss their similarities. First, both forms are relatively virtuous and are classified among the right forms of state. They both resemble democracy more than oligarchy since they both allow a relatively large number of people into full, active citizenship. Both are relatively secure against revolutions and other forms of civic unrest. Both are recommended by Aristotle as states that democracies and

oligarchies should try to approximate. And perhaps most noteworthy, both aim at, and to a certain extent achieve, a “middle” state of affairs.

These similarities are no small matter. But similarity does not make identity. The similarity in this case, if not mere coincidence, is only a consequence of the natural affinities that will exist between any middle and a mixture of its two extremes. When rich and poor are mixed in a single constitution, their policies may be more moderate and their net average income more “middle” than if either group controls the constitution alone. But these facts do not somehow convert the rich and the poor into a “middle class,” or cause either group to prefer a “middle way of life.” More succinctly, not every “mix” is “moderate,” and not every “middle” is a “mix.”

The similarities between the middle constitution and the mixed state called polity should not, therefore, be allowed to obscure the differences between them. Several considerations need to be weighed. First, it is no small matter that Aristotle typically employs a separate name for the middle state. We have already remarked about the importance to him of precision in terminological usage, particularly with regard to difficult and abused terms like polity. It would be strange indeed if, when describing the “middle state,” which is not obviously the same as polity, he had ignored his own customary procedure and grown careless with his own nomenclature. When he discusses the middle state, which he does in any extended way only in Book IV, chapter xi, he always refers to it as “the middle constitution” (*he mesē politeia*) or some equivalent expression, never as “polity” (*politeia*) (Johnson, 1988, n. 26).

Just as weighty is the consideration that the classification of the two states is different. Genera are divided by taking account of (1) the distributive principle—who holds the powers, and (2) the end (*telos*) of each form. The distributive principle of polity is “a combination of wealth and freedom” (IV. viii 1294 a9ff.); powers are distributed to the well-to-do and the poor (or the freeborn) in some combination. In “the middle regime” they are distributed to the “middle class” (IV. xi 1295 b5–15; 1295 b35–40). This may seem an academic distinction. Sociologically there may be little difference between Aristotle’s “middle class” and a *politeuma* consisting of a fairly well-to-do “poor” (those wealthy enough to procure heavy arms) and a more conventionally “wealthy” class (i.e., not extremely wealthy), particularly when he writes that the assessment for the arms-bearers should be “the largest [amount] that would let those sharing in the constitution be more numerous than those not sharing” (IV. xiii 1297 b1bff.). Such an assessment would undoubtedly encompass much of any possible

“middle class,” however defined (and Aristotle unfortunately nowhere defines it), while still excluding the very poor. But the whole tenor of the discussion of the “middle” regime in IV. xi is that it excludes poor and rich alike, not that it mixes them; or perhaps better, that the classes of wealthy and poor have been replaced by a middle class.

Again, the aim of polities (in the sense of Book III, chapter vii) is that part of virtue associated with military service; it fulfills its aim when the *politeuma* achieves a level of courage. The aim of the “middle constitution” is a “middle way of life” (IV. xi 1295 a34ff.). This is not the same as the military virtue, for the latter is said by Aristotle to be less than “perfect excellence” (this being beyond the reach of the many), whereas the “middle life” is said to be “the best life” (without qualification).

If polity and “middle state” are different genera, then they must also be different at the species level (for species of different genera are always different). That this is so is confirmed by examining species classification. The rule for discriminating species turns on examination of the “parts” and their arrangement, and the most basic of these is the part of economic class. We have already shown these to be different in polity and middle regime. A second material differentia is that of “the virtuous part.” In polities of the type described in III. vii, this is identified with the militarily valorous, in middle states with the completely virtuous. Also, in polities defined as a “mix of rich and poor,” the virtuous part is some combination of democratic and oligarchic justice; in middle states it is the “completely virtuous.” A third material part is the “occupations” of the civic body. These occupations are not named in Aristotle’s discussion of the “middle regime,” but it is significant that in polities the distinctive occupation is that of “hoplite” (i.e., the heavy-armed), a doubtful fit with “a middle life.” A final material differentia is the part called “the political functions”; in polities the offices are shared by rich and poor, neither group being sovereign, whereas in the middle state all offices are monopolized by “the middle class.”

By both nomenclature and classification, then, it appears that polity and the “middle” regime are distinct forms, and not only at the genus level but at the species level as well (Johnson, 1990, 154 n. 22). In view of this fact, the several difficulties described at the beginning of this chapter surrounding Aristotle’s discussion of polity disappear. To recapitulate briefly, these difficulties were: (1) discrepant definitions of polity; (2) apparent differences in the distributive principle of polity; (3) uncertainty about polity’s place in the moral hierarchy; and (4) absence of clarity about polity’s prevalence and attainability.

Recognizing distinct forms in “polity” and “middle regime” permits a resolution to each of these difficulties. In general what we find in the *Politics* are certain statements made by Aristotle intended to characterize polity, and other statements (almost entirely confined to Book IV, chapter xi) made in reference to the middle regime. Comparing the two sets of statements one finds the following:

1. “Polity” is consistently defined as a mix of wealthy and poor in the regime, but it is a mix of a specific sort, namely one in which the poor are at least wealthy enough to supply themselves with arms and possess at the same time that part of virtue called courage. The middle regime, by contrast, is not a mixture but rather a regime based on a “middling part.”
2. As to distributive principle, polity is a confusing case because it recognizes not one single principle but several; that is, in polity, offices are distributed on the basis of wealth, on the basis of free birth, and on the basis of virtue (to the extent that courage is a part of virtue). The middle regime again presents a sharp contrast: the only distributive principle suggested for it is virtue, and evidently a relatively high quality and quantity of it.
3. The goodness of polity cannot be easily summarized, although the many statements Aristotle makes about it are mutually consistent. In brief, polity is: a right form (III. vii 1279 a30ff.); not the best right form (ibid.); not the second-best form, since it lacks an aristocratic element (except the incomplete virtue of courage), but best after the second-best form (II. vi 1265 b32); it is also said to be close in goodness to the most moderate (or least deviant) species of democracy and oligarchy (VI. vi 1320 b22ff.). By contrast, at *Politics* III. xi 1281 b24–25, Aristotle claims that the many (*to plethos*) “are not wealthy and have no claim to virtue.” This, in truth, is a fairly extreme position, and not entirely consistent with what Aristotle has to say elsewhere about democracies (e.g., III. ix). It suggests not only that there is no virtue in democracies but that oligarchies are above democracies in goodness. Neither of these views is regularly adhered to by Aristotle. But however that may be, the middle constitution is always ranked higher in goodness than either democracies or oligarchies. (Cf. D. H. Frank, 1983, 112–15; and T. Irwin, 1985, 150–67; also chapter 5 above.)

In short, in Aristotle's *scala naturae* polity (in the sense of “mixed regime”) falls just below so-called aristocracies and just above moderate democracies and oligarchies. This is, I believe, the only interpretation consistent with the important passage at IV.

vii 1293 b22ff. In speaking of “so-called aristocracies” Aristotle wrote: “These, then, are two kinds of aristocracy, besides the first, which is the best constitution, and a third kind [of so-called aristocracy] is those instances of what is called polity that incline more in the direction of oligarchy” (Cf. also the much-debated passage at IV. iii 1290 a22ff.; and Johnson, 1988).

Aristotle’s statements about the middle regime are more straightforward; it is said simply to be “the best” (IV. xi 1295 b35–36, 1295 b3–4, 1296 a7–8), or at least the best in goodness after an ideal beyond reach (IV. xi 1295 a25ff.). As such, the middle regime bears striking affinities with Aristotle’s own “best” regime described in Books VII–VIII (see below). In any case, “the best” and “third-best” cannot be the same, a point that strongly confirms the non-identity of polity and middle regime.

4. As to the attainability (or prevalence) of polity, there can be little question that it does exist. For one thing, several actual regimes are explicitly called polities by Aristotle (V. iii 1303 a4–5; V. iv 1304 a27–28; IV. ix 1294 b19). Other states should be called polities if they were correctly named (see above). Beyond that, polity is supposed to be the state “most commonly existing (or attainable) of all the forms” (II. vi 1265 b30ff.), or again, the type “most generally shared” (IV. I 1288 b34ff.). Thus, even if not widely prevalent, polity is still fairly common and attainable.

Again, the contrast to the middle regime is striking. This form, being the best attainable, is beyond ordinary reach. It is based upon a social condition not usually found, a large “middling” element (IV. xi 1296a23–24). And about the rarity of this form Aristotle is unusually explicit: “Either it never comes into existence or seldom and in few places” (IV. xi 1296 a38–40). This statement would make very little sense if it were intended as a reference to polity.

For a number of reasons, then, “polity” as a specific form of constitution seems not to be identified with the form called by Aristotle “the middle constitution.” If they were the same, Aristotle would be found to have abandoned his own customary careful attention to precision in the naming and classifying of states. It would be necessary, further, to explain why Aristotle sequestered the discussion of “the middle state” in a separate chapter, removed from the main discussion of polity. And Aristotle, finally, would be confronted with several additional embarrassments concerning conflicting and even contradictory statements about the meaning, the prevalence, and the goodness of

the form of state called polity. It is, I believe, much more economical, and more charitable to Aristotle, simply to suppose that the two forms, polity and the "middle constitution," are not the same. This is not to say, of course, that the two have nothing in common, that they are wholly different. On the contrary, because they both hover about a social middle, as it were, they have much in common. But they hover in fundamentally different ways, and so they should be regarded as different.

## CHAPTER 9



### THE “BEST STATE ABSOLUTELY”

#### I. INTRODUCTION

It remains to consider that part of the *Politics* that deals with “the best regime.” The matter is complicated in several respects. For one thing, Aristotle suggests that it might be necessary to distinguish between what is best absolutely and what is an attainable best (cf. IV. xi 1295 a25–33; also II. vi 1265 a19–20, VII. iv 1325 b37ff.). Then too, the discussion of “the best” (in both senses) is scattered throughout the *Politics*; an adequate discussion is forced to pull together many separate strands of thought. Further, it is not always clear that the many passages that address this subject are all mutually compatible; they often seem discrepant in a variety of ways. And it does not help matters that, of the two major parts of the *Politics* where “the best” is discussed, one of them is certainly incomplete and the other may well be too. Book VIII, the second of two books addressing “the best constitution,” breaks off abruptly prior to completion, and some scholars suspect that a discussion of the best regime that may have appeared just after Book III xiii 1283b10 has either been lost or was not finished (von Arnim, 1924, 70–77; Rowe, in Keyt and Miller, eds., 1991, chapter 2).

Perhaps most perplexing of all, however, is that Aristotle appears to be deeply ambivalent about the true identity of the best regime. At times, it seems plainly to mean for him more or less what it meant for Plato in the *Republic*: a permanent rule by the few (or one) supremely virtuous person(s) over the many who are inferior in goodness but who are capable of obeying well (e.g., III. xviii 1288 a33ff.; VII. xiv 1332 b16ff.; Bates, 2003, part III; Newell, in Lord and O’Connor, eds., 1991, 191ff.; Nichols, 1992, chapter 4). At other times he seems just as plainly to mean that the perfectly just regime is one composed

of equals ruling and being ruled in turn, on a rotating basis (III. vi 1279 a22; cf. II. xi 1273 b12–15; III. xvii 1287 b37ff.; IV. xi 1295 b23–27). Moreover, Aristotle says that friendship and partnership among equals is necessary to the nobility of the polis (III. xi 1280 b33ff.). These are obviously not only different conceptions but are fundamentally opposed, a fact that contributes in no small measure to the confusion surrounding Aristotle's discussion of this form.

Leaving aside for the moment this last question, the chief difficulties in the presentation of the best form are these:

1. Different regimes are called "the best" at different times: aristocracy (the only word meaning "government of the best": IV. vii 1293 b1–3; cf. III. vii 1279 a36; IV. i 1288 b10ff.; this is possibly the form he is describing in Books VII–VIII; cf. Lord, 1984, 245–6 n. 3; Newell, 1987); kingship (*basileia*) (III. xviii 1288 a33ff.; V. x 1310 b6ff.; V. vii 1310 b33ff.; IV. ii 1289 a39ff.; etc.); the "middle regime" (IV. xi, in several places). Aristotle's own "best regime" of Books VII–VIII (e.g., VII. i 1323 a14ff.), never given a name by Aristotle in the extant portions of his treatise; and possibly one of the forms of democracy in the right circumstances (Siegfried, 1933, 390–91; Keyt, in Keyt and Miller, 199, 239; Waldron, in Kraut and Skultety, eds., chapter 6).
2. Different conceptions of the kind and extent of "virtue" in "the best regime." In kingship and aristocracy, the ruling class is said to be "proficient with a view to the whole of virtue" (III. vii 1279 a39ff.); in the middle regime, the kind of virtue is "the virtue that is a middle course," and it is found evidently only among the rulers, who are "the middle element" (IV. xi 1295 a37ff.); the virtue of the civic body in the ideal state of VII–VIII is that virtue required for ruling and being ruled in turn, and it is required individually of all the citizens (VII. xii 1332 b35ff.; cf. Johnson, 1990, 166 n. 5).
3. Discrepant accounts about the attainability of the best form, as to aristocracies and kingships. Aristotle apparently believes that they do not exist in his own day, that they are unlikely to exist ever again, but that they did exist in historical times (III. xv 1286 b7ff.). About the middle regime, Aristotle appears to affirm somewhat paradoxically both that it is best for most cities and that it is extremely rare (IV. xi 1295 a25ff., 1296 a37ff.); the ideal regime of VII–VIII has evidently never existed, but it is expressly affirmed to be not beyond human reach (VII. iv 1325 b38–40). Throughout Book VII Aristotle employs the convention of speaking of

a regime that would be "what one would pray for" (*kat' euxen*) (e.g., VII. iii 1325 b37; VII. ix 1330 a26; VII xi 1331 b20). His meaning is that the regime described in VII–VIII is an ideal within human reach, but that some of those features that make it ideal are beyond the ability of the legislator to control, and so must be brought about by fortune (*tyche*; cf. especially VII. xii 1332 a28ff.). These are the things one would pray for, since there is no other way to bring them to pass through deliberate human action (Kraut, 2002, chapter 6).

Again, I believe it can be shown that much of the difficulty described here can be removed by referring to Aristotle's first-order doctrine. It helps, in other words, in this case as in other second-order issues, to know what "the state" is and to know the criteria that are appropriate for judging a particular form to be of one sort (in this case "the best") rather than another.

But the best regime presents a unique difficulty. This is that "the best" coincides in a particular way with "the constitution in the complete sense." To say what is "the best" is much the same as to say what "the constitution" is, so in one sense this question belongs to the first-level doctrine of the *Politics*. But at the same time, it has been necessary to answer first "what is the constitution" before one may adequately approach "the best constitution," so in another sense the question belongs to the second order. The answers to the questions posed differ somewhat, depending upon the sense in which one thinks about it. The question "what is the constitution?" asks for a definition, whereas the question "what is the best regime?" asks for a description of an actual specimen. But there is nevertheless considerable overlap between the two. At this point especially, Aristotle's first-order theory is thoroughly intertwined with a second-order difficulty.

## II. CONSTITUTIONAL CLASSIFICATION AND THE BEST STATE

It is a settled conviction with Aristotle that the formal cause, or identifying characteristic (*horos*) of the best state, is virtue, just as wealth identifies oligarchies and freedom democracies (IV. viii 1294 a9ff.; see also III. ix 1280 a7ff. and V. ix 1310 a30–31 for corroborative statements). This is another way of saying that the final cause, or ultimate aim, of the best state is absolute justice, since virtue is the capability (*dynamis*) that enables the goal (*telos*) of absolute justice to be achieved. Virtue, of course, is itself not one but many, and not

every virtue is as essential to the best state as every other. One virtue in particular identifies this form and distinguishes it from other forms: the political virtue (*phronesis*: III. viii 1277 a15–16; III. viii 1277 b25–27; VII. xiv 1333 a15ff.; E. Barker, 1946, 103, n. 2, and 320, n. EEE; and W.R. Newell, 1982, 163ff.). This is not to say that the political virtue is the only virtue to be found in the best state; the other virtues, and especially those that enable those who are ruled (either permanently or for a time only) to be well ruled, will also be found. As Aristotle says, “The good citizen must have the knowledge and the ability both to be ruled and to rule, and the merit of a good citizen consists in having a knowledge of the government of freemen on both sides” (III. iv 1277 b10ff.; III. xiii 1284 a1–3). But in order for a state to be the best absolutely, its rulers must possess *phronesis*. And conversely, where the rulers of a state are found to be those who do possess *phronesis*, it may be truly said of this state that it is the best state.

Knowing that virtue of a particular kind identifies the best state as such is not sufficient, however, to fix its identity exactly. Formal cause is sufficient only for distinguishing among generic types of state, not the specific forms of each genus. The full discrimination among forms depends upon the material cause, upon how, in other words, the material parts of each state are arranged. If “virtue” gives identity to the genus of this group of states, the arrangement of parts in each virtuous state identifies the particular species within that genus. The precise arrangement of its parts must therefore come under scrutiny in order to grasp fully and accurately the identity of the various species of “the best state.”

The arrangement of material parts is itself a question about who governs in any given case. To ask about the arrangement of parts is to ask who—i.e., which group or groups of people share in the political functions of the state, and particularly the sovereign power. Where the poor (*aporoí*) share it is a democracy, where the wealthy (*euporoí*) share it is an oligarchy, and so forth. In the best state the parts will be arranged according to the principle of virtue; powers are assigned to those with virtue. And because the virtue involved essentially in the best state is the political virtue, the officeholders in this state will necessarily be those who possess this virtue. The “parts” here are those equipped with the political virtue; the identity of the best state is fixed as such by virtue of the fact that these people, and only these people, share in the offices and honors of the state. And, one must keep in mind that the “part” of the office-holder-citizen is a more fundamental part than the other “parts” because “office-holders-citizens” are

related to the definition of "constitution, as other "parts" are not. They are thus uniquely "formal parts."

We are now in a better position to understand Aristotle's evident inconsistency concerning the identity of the best state. Since the meaning of the best state is determined, according to Aristotle's rules of constitutional classification, by virtue of offices and honors being assigned to the politically virtuous, it follows that any state in which this distribution of offices is found to exist is "the best."

There is, obviously, more than a single possibility for this particular distribution. Everything depends, as Aristotle often says, upon the character of the people in each case. It is possible, for example, that only a single person in a given state possesses the necessary virtue; if offices are assigned exclusively and absolutely to him, then one has here a legitimate case of the best state, this one happening to be kingship (III. xvii 1288 a7ff.). If several men possess the ruling excellence, and offices are distributed exclusively among them on a permanent basis, another form of the best state exists, this one being aristocracy (III. xvii 1288 a10ff., and often). And when the many possess this excellence and rule, either permanently or by turns, assuming that this situation ever occurs or could occur, still another form of the best state would be found to exist. The name given by Aristotle to this latter form is "the middle constitution" (IV. xi 1295 a36ff.). (I argue below that the "best state" of Books VII–VIII is a fuller account of the "middle constitution" discussed in the last chapter.)

### III. THE MIDDLE CONSTITUTION

Aristotle does not expressly name the regime of Books VII–VIII by the name of any of the specific forms of constitution listed and described in the taxonomies. Because he sometimes calls it the regime "one would pray for" some German scholars refer to it as a "*Wunschstaat*." Many scholars believe he intended it to be an aristocracy, and there is some support for this view (e.g., Kraut, 2002, chapter 6). It is occasionally argued that Aristotle thought of it as a moderate democracy, although this argument is controversial and, in my judgment, difficult to defend. My own view, which I have never seen seriously defended in the literature, is that it is possible that Aristotle meant Books VII and VIII to be a fuller description of the "middle regime" of Book IV. xi. At least it is worth the attempt to marshal the arguments in support of this view.

Several considerations need to be weighed. First, the middle state is one in which "life is lived without impediment in accordance with

virtue" (IV. xi 1295 a37ff.). And since "virtue is a middle course" (a fundamental tenet of Aristotle's ethical doctrine), the state in which the middle course is achieved in its fullness is best. It is true, of course, that not every virtuous state is best, but only those in which the virtue of the rulers is the political virtue. But this is precisely the kind of virtue Aristotle discovers in the middle state. Other states, he says, err either on the side of haughtiness in the rulers or servility in the subjects, but the middle element (i.e., the rulers in the middle state) best know how both to rule and be ruled as is fitting for free men. Their virtue is the one closest to the ideal of the political association, since they alone are willing partners in an association among free and equal men, "and surely the ideal of the state is to consist as much as possible of persons who are equal and alike" (IV. xi 1295 b13–27). The idea that the ideal state (in one of its forms at least) is composed of people who are alike and equal helps to show that Aristotle's own ideal is not, as some scholars maintain, an aristocracy. For the whole point about true aristocracies is that in them the people are not all alike and equal, and it is just this fact that justifies the permanent separation of rulers, those who are better, from ruled, the many who lack the virtue of the few (VII. xiv 1332 b17ff.). More will be said on this point below.

Not only this, but on several occasions Aristotle expressly states that "the middle state is best" (IV. xi 1295 a37ff., IV. xi 1295 b3–36, IV. xi 1296 a8–10, IV. xi 1296 b3–8). Some commentators have been led to see in these assertions only a qualified approval of the middle form, not the unqualified approval that attaches to "the best state absolutely" (e.g., Miller, 1995). The main reason for this is that, at the beginning of Book IV, chapter xi, where Aristotle first introduces the subject of the middle state, he says that he is looking for a state "best for most cities and most of mankind, if we do not judge by the standard of a virtue that is above the level of private citizens or of an education that needs natural gifts and means supplied by fortune, nor by the standard of a constitution that attains an ideal height, but of a mode of life able to be shared by most men and a constitution possible for most states to attain" (IV. xi 1295 a25–32). The argument is that, since the middle state is below an ideal beyond human reach and is thus attainable by most states, it cannot be "best." On this view, the constitution of Books VII–VIII is a model or pattern that existing states should try to emulate, knowing in advance that the perfection of the best absolutely can never be achieved in practice (e.g., Kraut, 2002, chapter 6).

Here I believe Aristotle has been misunderstood. The distinction in his mind is not between "best" and "something below the best,"

but between an ideal beyond ordinary reach and one within ordinary reach. Both are ideal, but in different ways. States beyond ordinary reach are extremely rare; if they have ever existed in the past, their time has evidently passed. This is apparently what Aristotle had in mind when he said, "True kingships do not occur any more now, but if ever monarchies do occur they are rather tyrannies. [This is because] men of equal quality are numerous and no one is so outstanding as to fit the magnitude and dignity of the office" (V. x 1313 a4–9; cf. III. xv 1286 b7ff.). Governments of this sort would be like having gods as rulers—a situation perhaps not totally inconceivable but still one that defies realistic expectations:

If then it were the case that one class differed from the other as widely as we believe the gods and heroes to differ from mankind, having first a great superiority in regard to the body and then in regard to the soul, so that the pre-eminence of the rulers was indisputable and manifest to the subjects, it is clear that it would be better for the same persons always to be rulers and subjects at all times; but . . . this is not easy to secure, and we do not find [it] to exist . . . (VII. xiv 1332 b17ff.).

But not all ideal states are like this. Some, while still ideal, are attainable. They, too, are naturally above the ordinary run of states, requiring as they do a variety of unusual and difficult conditions, including appropriate material conditions and a virtuous citizenry. The appropriate material conditions include the physical and geographical setting, the size of territory and population, as well as the amount of wealth among the citizens required for leisure and liberality (cf. especially VII. iv 1326 b5ff.). But these conditions are not beyond reach for all cities, or necessarily even for most cities. Much depends upon what the lawgiver chooses to do. Provided only that the right natural conditions are present, i.e., conditions beyond human control (VII. xiii 1332 a28–30), the best constitution may be brought into existence through wise constitution-giving. No one, or no more than a very few, have yet carried through with legislation of this sort; the attainable ideal is as a result nearly as rare as the ideal beyond ordinary reach. "But the Greek peoples reputed at the present day to have the best constitutions, and the lawgivers that established them, manifestly did not frame their constitutions with reference to the best end" (VII. xiv 1333 b1ff.; cf. also IV. xi 1296 a37–40). The ideal within reach is attainable because it is possible, and political theory should be as much as it can be about what is possible (II. vi 1265 a19–20; cf. also VII. iv 1325 b37ff.).

There are, thus, two kinds of ideal state in Aristotle: that beyond ordinary reach and the one that can be attained by many cities. The “middle constitution” is the state of the latter kind. It fulfills, as we have seen, the necessary criteria for being “the best,” particularly a citizenry that has attained the political virtue: knowledge of ruling and being ruled as befits free men. It also is equipped with the proper material conditions, above all a large middle class, and thus a citizenry of the many capable of affording a life of leisure in accordance with virtue.

In actual practice the middle element is often small when compared to the rich and poor classes, and thus middle constitutions are rare (IV. xi 1296 a22ff.); that is what we should expect in any case of a state deserving the title of “the best.” But middle classes may be brought into being and increased in size through wise legislation; hence, much of the advice in the *Politics* to lawgivers is to act in ways that would help bring into existence a large middle class. That a life of full virtue requires material means and leisure is stated at VII. v 1326 b30 ff., and is suggested at IV. xi 1295 b4–7. It is a rare form, to be sure, but given the appropriate natural conditions, including sufficient leisure for the rulers to be freed of necessary occupations—a precondition of ruling well (VII. v 1326 b30ff.; IV. xi 1295 b4–7)—a wise legislator equipped with the proper understanding of the character of this best state could undertake actions that would enable it to be brought into existence. Once established, this best state would offer the additional promise of durability.

#### IV. THE IDEAL CONSTITUTION OF BOOKS VII–VIII

The “best regime” of Books VII–VIII is, I believe, nothing other than a fuller and more systematic account of this “middle constitution,” one framed with a mind toward stating its necessary conditions and the steps required to bring it into existence. These may be briefly recounted here.

First, as to necessary conditions, these include a territory of the appropriate size (one between the too large and the too small, i.e., a mean), and a citizenry equipped with the natural characteristics enabling it to be educated in reason and knowledge of political virtue (one between the too spirited and the too servile) (VII. v 1326 b27ff. [proper extent of territory]; VII. v 1326 a6ff. [proper size of population]; VII. vii 1327 b18ff. [proper natural character of citizens]). These are, as it were, the raw materials of the best state. They are necessary conditions because, without them, even the wisest legislator could not hope to establish a state that is best “without qualification.”

They are not only necessary, however; they are also natural conditions. The material conditions—above all a population capable of complete virtue under the wise tutelage of knowledgeable educators must be at least potentially within reach. These conditions are rare and somewhat beyond the reach of even the wisest lawgiver to create. Good fortune must play a role or else the project of establishing the best state is condemned in advance to failure (VII. xiii 1332 a28–30). Good fortune and wise legislation must work together to produce “the best.” In Aristotle’s words, “That fortune (*tyche*) controls external goods we take as axiomatic; but when we come to the state’s being virtuous, to secure this is not the function of fortune but of science and policy” (*episteme kai proairesis*: VII. xiii 1332 a31–34). With imperfect material equipment, something less than the best may be established but not “the best attainable state absolutely.”

These necessary conditions are the starting points of the legislator’s craft. But they are only a beginning. Other steps must then be taken to bring the best state into existence, and it is here that the legislative art comes into its own and finds its appropriate sphere of operation. First it is necessary to supply the state with a constitution suited to the best state. This means assigning offices to the fully virtuous. Since the virtuous in question in this best state are the many, offices are to be distributed among all of them, on a rotating basis determined by the age of the officeholders, younger citizens sharing in the military offices, older citizens occupying deliberative, judicial, and sacerdotal offices (VII. ix 1329 a2–17, VII. ix 1329 a27–34, VII. xiv 1332 b36–40).

But a constitution is not only a particular ordering of political offices; it is also a “way of life” (*tis bios*: IV. xi 1295 b1–2). A virtuous way of life is life in accordance with a mean. In order to establish a state that is truly “the best,” therefore, the lawgiver must see to it that the citizens are supplied with the necessaries enabling them to live a life in accordance with a mean.

Life in accordance with a mean itself entails essentially two components: a material component and an intellectual (or moral) one. The life of the mean in a material sense is one equipped with an amount of property sufficient to enable a life of leisure and of liberality. Leisure is necessary for the cultivation of virtue (VII. ix 1329 a1–3); liberality, when it is combined with temperance, is the relevant virtue in the realm of material existence. The too rich and the too poor achieve this virtue only with difficulty, since the too rich are usually too grasping and stingy, the too poor too servile and want the means for liberality (II. vi 1265 a32–38, VII. v 1326 b32–33, VII. ix 1329 a18–22; cf.

Kraut, 2002, chapter 6). The best state, then, will be composed of citizens who are “in the middle” in a material sense, the middle class. Only citizens in middling material circumstances can hope to achieve the fullness of virtue required of citizens in the best state. Legislation, accordingly, should be so framed in this state as to ensure the establishment and persistence of a large middle class.

Aristotle is less thorough than one might wish in his discussion about the actual degree of wealth to be possessed by his “ideal” citizens. They must be “well-off” (*euporoi*: VII. ix 1329 a19) and they must possess enough material means to permit a life of “temperance and liberality” (II. vi 1265 a32–39; VII. x 1326 b32–33). Further, they are to “possess arms” (VII. x 1329 b37–38), and each citizen is to possess two parcels of land, presumably of equal size, one in a “district near the frontiers” and another “near the city” (VII. x 1330 a9ff.). Aristotle does not say how large the parcels should be, at least in the extant portions of the work, but since the whole territory of the state is moderate in size, the parcels will be neither huge nor tiny. The general principle for middle constitutions is that those “who possess political power also possess a moderate and sufficient subsistence” (*ousian mesen kai ikanen*: IV. xi 1295 b40–1296 a1), for this is “best” (IV. xi 1295 b4–6).

In an intellectual (or moral) sense, the life of the mean requires a suitable education. Ensuring the proper education for the citizens also falls within the purview of the legislator. A suitable education is one designed to cultivate to its fullest extent the rational element of the soul, for this element is the highest, and people become fully virtuous as a consequence of the cultivation of what is highest and most noble in them (VII. xiv 1333 a29ff., VII. xv 1334 b15–18). Every virtue should be cultivated fully in every citizen in the best state. In addition, as we learn in *NE*, one becomes virtuous not by knowing what virtue is (although knowing what virtue requires of a virtuous person is a necessary condition of being virtuous) but by doing virtuous deeds. Thus, the wise lawgiver must provide opportunities to the young to practice virtue in appropriate circumstances until virtue, through habit, becomes embedded in one’s soul as a permanent feature of one’s character or disposition (*NE* II. i 1103 a30–1103 b35).

And since the political virtue, knowledge of how rightly to be ruled and, above all, to rule, is the highest virtue in the political association, this virtue should be the most highly cultivated. Knowledge of ruling and being ruled, the political virtue, is itself a mean, in this case between the too haughty and the too servile. Citizens of the best state will accordingly be those properly educated into complete virtue, and

above all possessing a proper understanding of how rightly to rule and be ruled in turn, for among equals, this is absolute justice (III. xvi 1287 a17–19; cf. III. xvii 1287 b41ff.; VII. xiv 1332 b25ff.; VII. xiv 1333 a1–6; and often; cf. Lord, 1982).

The best state of Books VII and VIII, then, according to this argument, is one of the three best states described in the *Politics*, the one corresponding to “the middle constitution” of Book IV, chapter xi. All of them are “the best absolutely” because in all of them, virtue is the ruling principle. Or, what amounts to the same thing in all of them, those with virtue (and only these) are assigned to the political functions and honors of the state. In all of them, moreover, the aim (or final cause) of the state is absolute justice and to be best means to have achieved this aim. The best state then constitutes, as it were, another genus in Aristotle’s constitutional typology, of which kingship, aristocracy, and the middle constitution are the species. It now remains only to examine the relation among these three species of the best, and to discover whether one of them deserves the title of “best among the best.”

## V. ARISTOTLE’S BEST STATE ABSOLUTELY

As is true with the other genera, the species of “the best” are identified by reference to the material cause, that is, how the parts of the state are distributed in different cases. Formally, the parts of all three “best states” are identical, consisting of these two only—those fully equipped with virtue and the political functions of the association. When the “virtuous part” occupies the “political part,” there is a best state. But the “virtuous” in one best state is distinguishable from this element in other best states in terms of the numerical size of the part. In one best state, the “virtuous” may be an individual (which yields kingship), in another best state it may be the few (which yields aristocracy), or again it may be the many (which yields a “middle regime,” as described in IV. xi and in Books VII and VIII). The material cause thus gives the three species of the genus of “the best state.”

Seeing the ideal regime of Books VII and VIII as a “middle” constitution helps to resolve, I think, all of the difficulties that we encountered earlier in Aristotle’s presentation of this form. Different definitions, different distributions of “virtue” among the citizens, different degrees of attainability of the “best” form are all possible because the best form is not one but three. Aristotle’s statements in the final two books of the *Politics* are in reference only to the third in the group, the “middle regime.”

But by recognizing different species of best state, Aristotle is forced to embrace two seemingly incompatible notions of the very character of the political association and the political art. For, in the case of kingship and aristocracy, what is called for is a cadre of permanent ruling officials (either one or a few), who, like Plato's guardians, are in exclusive enjoyment of state powers without interruption. In the case of the middle constitution and the ideal state of Books VII and VIII, on the other hand, there is a notion of politics that envisions a sharing in power on a rotating basis, a notion, in other words, that what politics is all about is ruling and being ruled in turn among equals. This ambiguity is no longer a mere matter of nomenclature and classification. At stake rather is the very essence of politics, what it means to say that this form of activity is the political form and not some other.

I believe we have here a case of genuine ambivalence on Aristotle's part (also Rowe, in Keyt and Miller, eds. 1991, chapter 2). There is, first, Aristotle's belief, confirmed by his view of political history in Greece, that the golden age of Greek politics had passed. There was a time, he thought, when at least some of the city-states were ruled over by a sort of superhuman race of men, as far above the rest in physical and moral stature "as the gods and heroes from mankind" (VII. xiv 1332 b16–17).

Although he does not identify who these rulers were, perhaps he was thinking of legendary figures like Agamemnon and Achilles in the poems of Homer. So surpassing were these men in "human" attributes that "the virtue of all the rest [collectively] and their political ability is not comparable with the virtue and ability of [them]" (III. xiii 1284 a3ff.). They are not fit to be ruled, since to rule over them would be to allow the inferior to rule the superior, and that is unjust (III. xiii 1288 a17ff.). They cannot even be subjected to any law, since law "is concerned with people who are equal in birth and ability, but there can be no law for such men . . . [for] they are themselves a law" (III. xiii 1284 a12ff.). The quasi-divine character of these men is frequently emphasized (e.g., at VII. xiv 1332 b16–19, where they are likened to "gods and heroes"; at III. xiii 1284 b22ff., where rule over such men is likened to rule over Zeus; and at IV. ii 1289 a39ff., where true kingship is called "first and most divine"). Nor would it be just or seemly to ostracize or banish them (III. xvii 1288 a25ff.). Accordingly, when a city is "given" such a man or group of men, it has but one choice: willingly and gladly to submit permanently to his (or their) absolute authority (II. xiii 1284 b33–34, III. xvii 1288 a27ff.).

But the days of that kind of rule are gone. To find "the best state" in the modern age one is forced to search elsewhere. Aristotle discovers

a form suited to the modern age in the "middle" constitution. But here too there is uncertainty. The question now is, can this form ever be achieved? For the requirements for the middle form would appear even more insurmountable than the requirements for the kingships and aristocracies of old. Instead of needing surpassing virtue and stature in only a few men (or in one man only), one is now committed to finding these qualities in many men. Surely one must wonder whether this condition is not beyond human reach altogether. Are humans (the many) capable of this sort of perfection?

Apparently Aristotle thinks they are. Otherwise it would be difficult to understand why he would go to such lengths as writing Books VII and VIII at all. Other statements in the *Politics* would be equally perplexing. For example, at Book III. iv 1277 a1–3, Aristotle states that a condition of a state being "the best" is that "all the citizens have the virtue of the good man." Why would he say this if the condition could not be realized in practice. One also rightly wonders how large the *politeuma* would be in this ideal regime. Unfortunately Aristotle does not say. The number of "five thousand" recommended by Plato in the *Laws* is criticized by Aristotle as being too large (II. vi 1265 a10ff.). Aristotle himself favors a civic body of a "mean" size, large enough for self-sufficiency but not too large (VII. iv 1326 b2ff.).

What sort of virtue is attainable by "the many"? If the perfection Aristotle was seeking in the middle constitution were the surpassing and semi-divine virtue found among ancient kings and aristocrats, Aristotle's answer would have been that the many will never attain to this level. But that is not the level of perfection Aristotle seeks in the middle constitution. In effect he has lowered the standard of "the best." In the middle constitution he no longer requires his citizens to be gods or quasi-gods. Instead he has his mind on mere mortals as his ideal citizens. Obviously their virtue will be cultivated to the fullest extent possible. This requires the correct political institutions and, above all, an education and an intellectual diet suited to "the best." But these citizens still fall short of the surpassing and semi-divine talents of the kings and aristocrats of days gone by (VII. xiv 1332 b12ff.). If the latter were ever anywhere to be found again, it would only be just to let them rule permanently (*Pol.* VII. xiv 1332 b16–19; cf. also II. ii 1261 a37–40; III. xvii 1288 a28–29; III. xiii 1284 b32–34).

So, while Aristotle has lowered his standard of "the best" in describing his own ideal state, he has also broadened it. In it the many will be virtuous, not the few. This is not the collective superiority of the many that commends certain popular regimes in Aristotle's judgment.

Rather, this is a state in which each citizen among the many has individually attained to the fullness of virtue, reached the attainable limits of human capability. Equality has replaced superiority as the distributive principle of justice: each, being equal in virtue to the others, is assigned an equal share in political offices and honors (*Pol.* VII. xv 1332 b25–28; cf. also II. xvi 1287 a12–17; VII. iii 1325b7–10). And since it is the many who have attained to this equal virtue, they share in the offices by rotation, ruling and being ruled in turn.

But is this form of constitution, any more than the ancient kingships and aristocracies, really attainable? One might well argue that all three are beyond reach, and that what the latter two require in the way of the amount and quality of virtue in the rulers is more than matched by what the middle state requires in the way of the extension of virtue, the number of people constituting the citizen body. The question is, can the many individually ever achieve full virtue at all? Is Aristotle here thinking of an actual possibility or only a theoretical one? Does the possible in this case ever stand a chance of becoming the actual?

Traces of hope may be found here and there in the *Politics*, but on the whole Aristotle wavers between indecision and pessimism. Certainly not every social group is capable of human fulfillment, but only a few (VII. xiii 1331 b40ff.; III. xvii 1287 b37–1288 a29; III. xi 1281 b18ff.; VII. xiii 1332 b1ff.). Even among these some will have an easier time of it than others, and even the most favorably situated will be forced to overcome great obstacles before they can be said to have achieved the fullness of virtue. The obstacles are not only external—although these exist too (VII. iv 1325 b37–38)—but internal as well, residing within the souls of the individual members. There is, to be sure, a natural impulse among humans to become virtuous and to achieve perfect happiness, but there are other impulses, perhaps unnatural but nevertheless just as powerful, pulling in the opposite direction: material greed, selfishness beyond natural bounds, even wickedness (II. v 1263 a40ff.; II. v 1263 b23ff.; II. vii 1267 b1–5; VI. iv 1318 b40, 1319 b30).

Still, in the final two books of the *Politics*, Aristotle undertakes to describe the conditions under which such a society would come about if it ever would. He states expressly, moreover, that the requisite conditions must not be beyond all bounds of possibility; that is, they must be actually possible. Indeed, Aristotle is critical of those thinkers, like Plato, who he believes ignores even natural limits in their speculations about the ideal state. He is emphatic on the point that, while political theory is free and indeed obliged to ignore existing

circumstances when constructing the best state, it is not free to ignore the natural constraints in the material used in that construction (II. vi 1265 a19–21; also IV. xi 1295 a25–30; VII. xiv 1332 b15ff.; VII. iv 1325 b40ff.). And since one of the conditions for this fully virtuous society is that all the citizens achieve the fullness of human virtue, it follows that Aristotle regards this achievement as possible, at least for some Greek cities. He suggests, too, as we saw, that this state is more attainable than true aristocracy or true kingship, since the conditions required for the latter are beyond the ability of humans to control, whereas the conditions for Aristotle's own ideal come in some measure within the purview of the legislator (VII. xiv 1332 b15–25).

Aristotle's best state of Books VII and VIII is thus the "attainable ideal." But the idea is never far from Aristotle's thought, even in these two books, that if a man or men of truly extraordinary virtue and capacity was or were ever found, it would be only just for the rest willingly and gladly to submit to his (or their) rule forever, or at least for as long as such rulers exist in the world (VII. xiv 1332 b15–25). The best state that is truly the best absolutely is a state ruled by such men, rule by a few being better than rule by one, but neither realistically to be expected nor even hoped for.

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