Plato, Aristotle, and the Purpose of Politics

In this book, Kevin M. Cherry compares the views of Plato and Aristotle about the practice, study, and, above all, the purpose of politics. The first scholar to place Aristotle’s Politics in sustained dialogue with Plato’s Statesman, Cherry argues that Aristotle rejects the view of politics advanced by Plato’s Eleatic Stranger, contrasting them on topics such as the proper categorization of regimes, the usefulness and limitations of the rule of law, and the proper understanding of phronēsis. The various differences between their respective political philosophies, however, reflect a more fundamental difference in how they view the relationship of human beings to the natural world around them. Reading the Politics in light of the Statesman sheds new light on Aristotle’s political theory and provides a better understanding of Aristotle’s criticism of Socrates. Most important, it highlights an enduring and important question: Should politics have as its primary purpose the preservation of life, or should it pursue the higher good of living well?

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To Lindzie

καὶ τὸ ἀρετῶτατὸν ἐστὶ τὸ συζήν

* Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1171b32*
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As solitary a process as writing may be, few political theorists – and I am not one of them – could write a book on their own. Instead, most of us depend on conversations with our teachers, our friends, and our colleagues to spark our thinking. I have benefited from many such conversations, and this book is the fruit of some of them.

My first exposure to the world of Plato and Aristotle was at The Catholic University of America in a philosophy course taught by Rev. Brian Shanley, O.P., who has remained a valuable mentor to this day. My knowledge and appreciation of their works deepened under the guidance of Jean DeGroot, Thérèse-Anne Druart, John McCarthy, Stephen Schneck, Msgr. Robert Sokolowski, Richard Velkley, David Walsh, and the late Rev. Kurt Pritzl, O.P. I doubt that all of these teachers will agree fully with what is written here, but I hope each can take a little pride in having passed on to me an interest in taking these books, and the arguments therein, seriously. I am particularly indebted to Brad Lewis, who was so impressive as a scholar and teacher that I decided to follow his example and attend graduate school where he did.

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I thought I fully appreciated the sacrifices they had made for me. Now that I have children of my own, I realize that I have only begun to do so. Aristotle says that you can never repay your parents; I hope he is right that loving them makes up the difference. Despite living on the opposite coast, my brother Andrew remains a trusted source of moral (and occasionally technical) support. I also thank my in-laws, who have welcomed not only me but also Plato and Aristotle into their lives and on their vacations. I am especially grateful to Kelly, for both her helpfulness and the joy she brings when she visits our house.

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Note on the Translations

I have generally relied on the translations of Carnes Lord for Aristotle’s *Politics* (1984), Joseph Sachs for Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (2002), and Seth Benardete for Plato’s *Statesman* (1984), checking them against those of Peter Simpson (1997), Terence Irwin (1999), and Christopher Rowe (1995), respectively, as well as the Oxford Classical Texts, and occasionally modifying them accordingly.