CHAPTER 1

ARISTOTELIAN POLITICAL THEORIES IN A LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

1.1 Aristotle and present-day 'Aristotelians'

In this book, I shall examine the characteristics of Aristotle's political philosophy with reference to his political works, such as the *Politics*, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics*. In particular, it will address the problem of how his aristocratic way of thinking provides useful insights into the problems of political philosophy. Such problems include the distribution of political authority, the cultivation of civic virtue, the development of civic friendship and the arrangements for the economic conditions of citizens. I shall then explain the significance of Aristotle for considering the capacities, relationships and economic conditions needed for citizens to be integrated into political society and engaged in the governance of their society. Although in the past few decades Aristotle's political philosophy has become increasingly attractive to those developing democratic theories such as communitarianism, the capabilities approach and civic republicanism, I think that the original offers more useful insights into the problems of political philosophy than these 'Aristotelian' theories do. The present book therefore attempts to recapture Aristotle's original vision of politics to which present-day 'Aristotelians' have not been drawing full attention. I shall then argue for the importance of two major strains in Aristotle's thought neglected or underplayed in much contemporary writing about the *Politics*: (1) its aristocratic commitment; and (2) the key role of citizen reciprocity.

First, some scholars have tried to interpret Aristotle's political philosophy from a contemporary liberal democratic perspective, and thereby tried to make it compatible with and sympathetic towards the ideas of liberal democracy, such as human

rights theory,[1] the deliberative democracy model[2] and the capabilities approach.[3] 'The democratic Aristotle', however, does not fit perfectly with Aristotle's 'aristocratic' idea that political authority should be distributed according to virtue (ἀρετή) (*Pol.* 3.9.1281a4–8).[4] Moreover, he excludes farmers, merchants and day-labourers from citizenship in an ideal polis (*Pol.* 3.5.1278a8–11, 7.9.1328b37–1329a2). It would thus seem to be a serious flaw that 'Aristotelian' scholars explore democratic theories based on Aristotle's political philosophy in spite of the fact that 'virtue' usually implies superiority, inequality and 'aristocracy'. I think that the democratic way of reading Aristotle's political works needs to be rectified not only by drawing attention to his aristocratic framework, but also by examining his theory of a mixed constitution, and showing how 'modern democracies' are actually, from Aristotle's perspective, one type of mixed constitution that needs the element of aristocratic governance to encourage ordinary citizens to participate in the deliberative and judicial processes.[5] Paradoxically, this reading of the aristocratic Aristotle will provide further fresh insights into the problems of political philosophy in democratic society, such as the distribution of political authority and the cultivation of civic virtue.

Second, I shall show how the concept of reciprocity, returning good for good (one element of the ordinary Greek view of justice, 'helping friends and harming enemies'), makes it possible for Aristotle to develop a political theory somewhat sympathetic towards democracy, even though he does not embrace the democratic idea that any free individual is entitled to participate in the political process. In Aristotle's view, the

[1] Miller, *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics*.
[2] Yack, *The Problems of a Political Animal*.
[3] Nussbaum, 'Aristotelian social democracy', and more recently Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*.
[4] As to the text of the *Politics*, I have followed Ross (ed.), *Aristotelis Politica*, unless stated otherwise. About translations, I have regularly consulted Reeve (trans.), Aristotle, *Politics*.
[5] In *A Democracy of Distinction*, Jill Frank leaves this task aside and calls what Aristotle means by 'aristocracy' 'a democracy of distinction'. Clifford Bates looks not to Aristotle, but Polybius, who in his view originates the idea of a mixed constitution (see his *Aristotle's 'Best Regime'*).

reciprocal equality of governing and being governed in turn is the most important condition for the promotion of civic friendship among citizens. Furthermore, the concept of reciprocal equality enables us to acknowledge the priority of the civic, political relationship over other social or family relationships. This is because in Aristotle's view the citizens' reciprocal relationship of governing and being governed makes it possible for them to cultivate civic virtue and achieve full rationality or be open to 'reason' as practical wisdom instructs. I shall then show how extensive modification of the concept of democracy away from simple majority rule, or the sovereignty of the people, towards reciprocal equality in governing and being governed in turn is needed for us to recognise Aristotle's view of how to make a political system workable from ethical, political and economic perspectives. A focus on reciprocal equality, thus, reflects the key elements in his texts and enables us to offer a more realistic view of a civic relationship than the ones given by present-day 'Aristotelian' political theories.

In order to make clearer these crucial issues in Aristotle's political philosophy, I shall first describe what problems present-day 'Aristotelian' scholars raise in democratic theory and how they develop their political theories on the basis of Aristotle's political philosophy. As mentioned above, there have been three celebrated movements of thought that have attempted to use his political philosophy: communitarianism, the capabilities approach and civic republicanism. These three versions of 'Aristotelian' theory deal with the problems of political philosophy by exploring, respectively, Aristotle's conception of virtue with regard to the importance of a particular social community (communitarianism), the purpose of political distribution (the capabilities approach) and the significance of political participation (civic republicanism). None of these positions denies the importance of basic liberties, such as freedom of speech and assembly, liberty of conscience and freedom of thought. However, they raise questions about the liberal view of the role of society, the principle of distributive justice and the liberal valuation of political participation. In the scholarly literature on Aristotle's *Politics*, these 'Aristotelian' theories have

been criticised, in that they depart from Aristotle himself, but I think that more constructive criticisms need to be made, by our considering whether these theories fully exploit Aristotle's arguments for developing political philosophy.

I shall clarify how these theories use Aristotle's conception of virtue to offer alternatives to modern liberal democratic theories and how they depart from Aristotle himself. Although present-day 'Aristotelian' scholars recognise some differences between Aristotle's and their own theories, they think that some essential elements in his political philosophy serve as a basis for their theories. As mentioned above, this book hopes to bring out the theoretical interest of Aristotle's original thoughts that present-day 'Aristotelian' scholars have not been illuminating fully. To this end, in what follows my first step will be to sketch what elements in his political philosophy have been treated as useful for developing political philosophy, and to point out how recent literature on the *Politics* does not adequately face the problem of reconciling the democratic elements excavated from Aristotle's text with his aristocratic commitment.

1.1.1 *Communitarianism*

Communitarian theorists find Aristotle's political theory attractive as promising a way out of the difficulty they perceive with modern moral theories and as enabling us to acknowledge the importance of an ethical community. In particular, they criticise the Kantian liberal understanding of the self, since it abstracts the self from any contingent characteristic and even from any particular understanding of human ends. I shall illustrate this point through Alasdair MacIntyre's arguments, since he is one of the most influential communitarians who rely on the tradition of Aristotle's ethics.

According to MacIntyre, there are three elements in ethical theories that serve to make the standard they propose intelligible:[6] (1) the concept of untutored human nature, or

[6] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 51–61.

man-as-he-happens-to-be; (2) human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realised-its-*telos*; and (3) the concept of the precepts of rational ethics to instruct the transition from (1) to (2). Ethical theorists usually consider how to make the transition from (1) to (2). In this sense, they presuppose a certain account of the essence of man, or human *telos*, which is the purpose of this transition. In antiquity, reason plays this role in instructing us about both how to figure out our true essence and how to reach it. Modern moral theorists, such as Kierkegaard, Kant, Diderot, Hume and Smith, however, no longer assume that reason can play a role in identifying the essence of a human being. In their views, reason becomes calculative and accordingly can speak only of means, or how effectively to achieve an arbitrarily determined end, not of an end itself. Anti-Aristotelian science contributes to the rejection of the teleological role of reason, since it restricts the capacity of reason as fitted only for the logical assessment of the theories claiming to explain facts. The rejection of the idea of a human *telos* discernible by reason in modern moral theories then leaves two elements, an account of untutored human nature and a particular content for morality. These two, however, do not in general have a harmonious relationship with each other. In other words, the precepts of morality are likely to be ones that untutored human nature tends to disobey. In this sense, the project of modern moral theories was destined to be unsuccessful, since such theories attempted to seek a rational basis for their content of morality in an understanding of untutored human nature, as, for example, in the nature of desire or pleasure, without any account of human essence.

Against what MacIntyre regards as the unsuccessful project of modern moral theories, there are, he suggests, two alternatives – Aristotle and Nietzsche. MacIntyre criticises Nietzsche because the Nietzschean Man, the man who transcends, cannot find any good in society, but only within himself, by establishing the standard and authority of good.[7] This is because the Nietzschean Man transcends any social relationships and

[7] Ibid., 256–63.

activities from which 'objective' values are usually derived. According to MacIntyre, to cut oneself off from shared activities means to prevent oneself from finding any objective values outside oneself. John Rawls is taking the same line as Nietzsche when he assumes that any agreement about the good life is no longer expected to be made from a public standpoint. Furthermore, according to the liberal understanding of the self, I am what I myself choose to be. The self can always put in question what seem to be the merely contingent social features of existence, such as the membership of one's own family and a particular city in a particular time. This self cannot find any historically and socially meaningful role, which is what for MacIntyre provides the *telos* of an individual and explains the good for an individual.[8]

Instead, MacIntyre proposes that we need to return to the tradition of Aristotle's ethics, which he regards as representative of a long, continuing tradition of western ethical theories, and from which we can restore the context in which it becomes possible to understand how modern moral beliefs take the form they do.[9] In particular, MacIntyre explores the socialised element of virtue in order to identify the *telos* of a human being: in his view, what is good for an individual depends on the character of the narrative that provides his or her life with its unity. This narrative is always embedded in the story of those communities from which individuals derive their identity. In other words, the self has to find its moral identity through its membership in communities, such as family, neighbourhood, tribe and city. Human virtue then plays an important role in sustaining the social and historical community, which provides an individual's life with social and historical meaning. MacIntyre

[8] Charles Taylor also thinks that the essential characteristic of modern liberalism resides in the freedom to choose one's own form of life. In this view, no choices can be judged morally better or worse, and our obligation to belong to or sustain society, or to obey its authorities, is seen as being derived from our consent; Taylor, 'Atomism', 187–90, 196–7. Michael Sandel also characterises this liberal understanding of an individual as 'the unencumbered self', a self prior to and independent of purposes and ends, in his 'The procedural republic and the unencumbered self'.

[9] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 146.

therefore finds the asset of virtue in its capacity to preserve the tradition of morality.[10]

This understanding of the socialised element of virtue comes from MacIntyre's communitarian treatment of Aristotle's political philosophy.[11] According to MacIntyre, what Aristotle has in mind as civic friendship is virtue-friendship, not pleasure- or advantage-friendship. Citizens' relationships in a polis are considered to consist of a shared recognition of, and concern for, good. In this view, a political community is a common project of creating the life of the city and sustaining moral unity. MacIntyre thus emphasises the moral unity of a political community, from which an individual derives his or her identity. Although he casts doubt on Aristotle's project of identifying the essence of a human being in metaphysical terms,[12] he asserts that the essence of an individual can be defined within a historical and social context, so that the individual can find an objective standard of good.

There are, however, serious doubts among Aristotelian scholars as to whether we can use Aristotle's political philosophy as an intellectual resource for developing a communitarian theory. For example, Richard Kraut points out that what Aristotle regards as the ultimate arbiter of values and standards is not the community or tradition that citizens belong to, but rather the good without any qualification. In this view, a community abandons its own earlier practices when it realises how defective they are, and accordingly 'rational criticism brings about social change'. To be sure, Kraut argues, Aristotle may be called 'a communitarian', in that, in Aristotle's view, citizens need to be concerned not only with their own private

[10] Concerning 'the socially and historically defined self', see ibid., 216–25, and Taylor, 'Atomism', 209.

[11] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 155–9.

[12] Ibid., 163, where MacIntyre states that 'any adequate generally Aristotelian account must supply a teleological account that can replace Aristotle's metaphysical biology'. Richard Kraut explains differences between Aristotle and modern evolutionary theory: Aristotle believes in the fixity and eternality of species, while evolutionary theory does not. Modern biology 'replaces the notion of what is good for an organism with that of its fitness, and fitness plays a purely explanatory role as a theoretical construct of evolutionary biology'; Kraut, *Aristotle*, 89–92.

interests, but also their fellow citizens' good lives, and a polis should play a larger role in cultivating citizens' character than does the political community we nowadays envisage. Their communal relationships are, however, not formed through an emotional, intimate friendship, but by sharing a single conception of the good and a single education.[13]

Bernard Yack also criticises communitarians (and civic republicans) because they lay very strong emphasis on the unity of a political community in which a consensus of moral beliefs is achieved. In his view, communitarians think that an individual cannot be privately happy when the state is afflicted and therefore embrace the idea of a 'communion', the active submergence of an individual's identity in the collective identity. Yack, however, argues that Aristotle's ideas of a political community include more serious possibilities of conflict than communitarians envisage. In defining a human being as a political animal, Aristotle implies that human beings form a political community based not on the consensus, or substantive agreement, regarding what is good and bad and what is just and unjust, but on 'reasoned speech and discussion'. What it means to be a political animal is, Yack argues, that citizens hold each other 'accountable' to the standard of political justice.[14] These debated standards bind citizens together even in large democratic republics in the modern world. In this sense, Yack thinks, Aristotle's political philosophy is useful not only in as small a community as an ancient polis, but also in a modern nation-state consisting of a large population with an extensive territory.[15]

MacIntyre, however, also admits that there is a serious possibility of conflict in a community and does not treat the standards of a community or tradition as the ultimate arbiter of ethical values. First, he is not reluctant to acknowledge

[13] Kraut, *Aristotle*, 353–6. Andrés Rosler also offers the same type of criticism of communitarianism as Kraut, in his *Political Authority and Obligation in Aristotle*, 167–77.
[14] Yack, *The Problems of a Political Animal*, esp. 51–71.
[15] Ibid., 71–85, for the applicability of Aristotle's political theory to a modern nation-state.

the role of conflict in ethics. He argues that conflict in Greek tragedy, such as that between Antigone and Creon, is 'the conflict of good with good embodied in their encounter prior to and independent of any individual characteristics', and regards highly the role of conflict in helping us understand the context of virtue and learn what our purposes are.[16] Next, MacIntyre's treatment of Aristotle's dialectic is not necessarily communitarian. In this view, the ultimate standards are justified in so far as they have vindicated themselves as superior to their historical predecessors by surviving the process of dialectical questioning.[17] In other words, progress in rational enquiry means not only transcending local and partial points of view, but also becoming able to explain how things appear to be from such local and partial points of view by appealing to how they really are.[18] MacIntyre therefore does not necessarily embrace the values that people hold without reflection in a local community.

MacIntyre also recognises the problems of using Aristotle's ethical theory in a different context. Aristotle's ethics is intended to formulate ethical values that citizens share in the polis. The social practice Aristotle has in mind is the practice of the ancient, relatively small city. There is, however, no longer a polis in our contemporary society. Accordingly, it is pointless applying Aristotle's ethics in a different context, although Florentine and Venetian Aristotelians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries did not find it difficult to use it, because they inhabited city-states, which were relatively similar entities to the ancient polis. MacIntyre then concludes that present-day Aristotelian theorists need 'to give an account of what kind of practice it is that, after the *polis* has disappeared, is able to supply the social context required for an Aristotelian ethics and politics'.[19]

[16] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 163–4.
[17] MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, esp. 7–8, 360.
[18] MacIntyre, 'Moral relativism, truth and justification', 68–73.
[19] MacIntyre, 'Rival Aristotles: Aristotle against some renaissance Aristotelians', 5.

MacIntyre provides a basic outline of the social context that should be presupposed by present-day Aristotelian theory.[20] In an Aristotelian community, there must be sufficient agreement about goods and their rank ordering to provide shared standards for rational deliberation, although, of course, disagreements and conflicts can be allowed occasionally. Unlike the societies of modernity, MacIntyre thinks, this community requires a certain degree of agreement about moral standards in order to make public deliberation possible. Second, an Aristotelian community must be a small-scale local community in which people can call on one another to give an account of their views, so that shared deliberation is effective in decision-making. This type of community is not compatible with the centralised, large-scale nation-state and large-scale market economy, but it may be exemplified even in present-day societies in the form of various communities, such as households, farming cooperatives, schools or small towns.[21] Third, the practices of an Aristotelian community presuppose shared standards of rational justification that are independent of the de facto interests and preferences of its members. Importantly, MacIntyre rejects any notion of civic unity arising from some shared ethnic, religious or cultural inheritance, unlike other communitarians who treat cultural resources as essential for forming their identity. He then develops a theory of rational deliberation that can reach an agreement over cultural boundaries with reference to Aristotle's dialectic. In short, MacIntyre puts his hope in the establishment of the small community in which people can deliberate about ethical values publicly in a dialectical way.[22]

[20] MacIntyre, 'Rival Aristotles: Aristotle against some modern Aristotelians', 39.

[21] MacIntyre suggests the first and second points already in the conclusion of *After Virtue*, esp. 263, where he states 'what matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us'.

[22] For the theoretical background of MacIntyre's arguments in detail, see Knight, *Aristotelian Philosophy*. Other philosophical works from a communitarian perspective are Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* and Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, although Michael Walzer takes a step towards liberalism in his 'The communitarian critique of liberalism', 96–112. Bernard Williams, in common with the communitarians, draws attention to the historical and cultural conditions