MARGUERITE DESLAURIERS AND PIERRE DESTRÉE

Introduction

1

Aristotle's *Politics* is a classic in the history of political thought, a work that later philosophers (including Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Marx) take to be fundamental to political theory. And yet the *Politics* is a work that many readers find both inaccessible and disagreeable. Two factors may explain this mixed response. First, the political entity that Aristotle viewed as the final and perfect form of political life, the *polis* (usually translated as "city-state"), was a small city together with its surrounding territory, more or less independent from other city-states, and nothing like a nation-state.[1] As an independent political structure it disappeared later in antiquity. So one might suppose the *Politics* to be only of historical interest, and its questions to have no bearing on our political lives. And indeed the *Politics* was largely neglected throughout antiquity – although the text was known to some, there seems to have been no ancient or medieval Byzantine Greek commentary on the work, and no translation into Arabic in the Abbasid period.[2] In the Western medieval period, philosophical interest in the treatise was renewed, in spite of the historical distance of the political structures that had given rise to it. The first Latin translation by Moerbeke (around 1260) allowed Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas to write commentaries on the *Politics*, from which grew a Thomist tradition of Aristotelian political philosophy. Beginning in the sixteenth century, however, the interest aroused by the *Politics* was more often negative, particularly in the tradition of modern political thought established by Hobbes.[3]

Hobbes notoriously said that "scarce anything can be . . . more repugnant to government than much of that he [Aristotle] hath said in his *Politics*." This suggests the second factor that moves some to reject the book: not only is it concerned with a political world that is strange to us, but also it contains proposals that many modern readers find deplorable. Hobbes was no fan of any of Aristotle's works, but even those who do admire his moral philosophy or his natural philosophy may find themselves rejecting his political philosophy. At least one scholar has recently described Aristotle as a "totalitarian thinker."[4]

Aristotle certainly was a critic of the democracy of his time, which he understood to be demagogic and to lead necessarily to tyranny. He believed that some people were naturally suited to rule over others, and that the inhabitants of a city could be grouped according to their natural capacities, and natural entitlements, to rule. And so he defends male dominance, slavery, and cultural and linguistic racism, as well as strict limitations on citizenship. There is a growing body of scholarship on these issues in his political philosophy, most of which now seeks neither to defend nor to revile Aristotle for his views, but to situate those views in the context of ancient debates, and to understand the implications of his discussions for our own political lives. Most political communities, for example, do restrict citizenship; we can read Aristotle to understand what sorts of arguments might be made for such restrictions, to ask whether we agree with the premises of his arguments, and to consider the justice of, and the implications of, imposing or lifting such restrictions. Most women still lead lives that are different in important respects from those of the men in their communities; we can read Aristotle to see how a philosopher proceeds who sees that this is not simply a fact, but a political circumstance that requires explanation, to ask whether an explanation is a justification, and to think about the political implications of whatever differences there may be between men and women.

There are other, more positive, reasons to read Aristotle's *Politics*. Many of the political ideas that seemed important to him continue to hold interest for us: justice and the law; the status of the citizen; participation in the affairs of the political community as an obligation and a privilege; human flourishing or happiness; and public education. These remain subjects of political debate. And some recent

reappraisals of Aristotle's political theory (for example, by Richard Kraut, Fred Miller, Josiah Ober, and Martha Nussbaum) have found value in certain of the themes of the *Politics*, especially the notion of human flourishing in a political context.[5]

Aristotle covers a great deal of ground in the *Politics*: he offers an account of human nature as political; distinguishes different kinds of people; describes, classifies, and evaluates a variety of constitutions; proposes how best to structure a political community; and investigates citizenship, wealth, conflict, and education, all the while arguing against some of his predecessors, instructing those who would legislate, and insisting on the continuity between moral and political issues. The *Politics* is an ambitious work that offers every reader an entry into reflection on political life by raising fundamental questions: What is the aim of political community? Why should some people govern others? Who should count as a citizen? Is war ever justified? Many of us will find ourselves in disagreement with Aristotle's answers, but the questions themselves demand reflection and discussion.

II

The title, *Politika*, under which the *Politics* has come down to us, was probably not Aristotle's own.[6] It does, however, reflect the central theme of the work, which is the nature of constitutions (*politeiai*), in the sense of the forms of government (*politeuma*) that a city-state might adopt.[7] When Aristotle wrote the *Politics*, a genre of writing on constitutions was already well established.[8] Plato's *Republic* (the Greek title is *Politeia*) is the most famous work in this tradition prior to Aristotle's *Politics*, but it was certainly not the only one, or the first.[9] Aristotle understood himself to be contributing to this tradition, and to be addressing especially those who were in a position to educate and train those who would become legislators. He accepts some of the assumptions of the genre, disputes others, but tries to meet many of its expectations. Among those expectations was, first, that the author would argue for the superiority of some particular constitution. Such an argument presupposed a classification of constitutions, and so a second expectation of writing on the *politeia* was that it should include such a classification.

Writing in the context of this tradition, Aristotle offers us in the *Politics* both a classification of constitutions, and several discussions of the best possible constitution. A constitution, Aristotle says, is "a certain organization of the inhabitants of a city-state" (III 1, 1274b38); more precisely, it is "an organization of a city-state's various offices" and especially of the office "that has authority over everything" (III 6, 1278b8–10). So, to write on constitutions is to discuss how a city-state should be organized, particularly with respect to rule and authority. The most basic political question is who should rule over others, and on what basis. Aristotle offers us two principles for distinguishing among different kinds of constitution: a moral principle, according to which a constitution is correct or legitimate if it looks "to the common benefit" and is organized "according to what is unqualifiedly just" and incorrect or deviant if it looks "only to the benefit of the rulers," in which case it will be unjust according to the standard of unqualified justice (III 6, 1279a17–20). The second principle of classification, which, like the first, had been employed by others before Aristotle, distinguishes constitutions according to the number of citizens who hold the most authoritative office: one, few, or many. These two principles allow Aristotle to set out six possible basic constitutions (kingship, aristocracy, polity, democracy, oligarchy, and tyranny). This schema is just the beginning; Aristotle gives a complex account of the different forms that several of the constitutions can take, and he seeks to explain how city-states can adopt constitutions that combine some mixture of elements.[10]

In keeping, again, with the tradition of writing on the *politeia*, Aristotle raises the question of which constitution is the best, although he qualifies the inquiry: "We propose to study which political community is best of all for people who are able to live as ideally as possible" (II 1, 1260b27–29). He offers no answer in Book II, but he does indicate in Book III that the best constitution is a kingship or aristocracy; then in Book IV he says that the best constitution for most cities, judged by "a life that most people can share and a constitution in which most city-states can participate" will be a "mixed constitution" which seems to be some mixture of aristocracy and polity (IV 11, 1295a29–31). Later, in Books VII–VIII, he describes the conditions for "the city of our dreams" (VII 4, 1325b36), in which all citizens rule. The relation between these different accounts of the

best constitution, whether they can be reconciled, and how, is the subject of much scholarly debate.[11]

What is clear is that Aristotle believes a constitution must be suited to the character of the people who inhabit a city-state. In an important passage where he appears to offer the reader the program of the *Politics* as a whole (IV 1, 1288b10–20), he compares political science to the skill of an athletic trainer. The trainer must know what is appropriate for the best possible athletes, but also what is suitable for less gifted athletes. Similarly, a legislator must have knowledge both of the best possible constitution under ideal circumstances, and of the various constitutions that would suit less ideal circumstances. Aristotle contrasts his own approach to that of those who "seek only the constitution that is highest and requires a lot of resources," and others who "though they discuss a more attainable sort, do away with the constitutions actually in place" (IV 1, 1288b39–1289a1). Plato is (among others) the target of this remark, aimed at the best city, the Kallipolis described in his *Republic*, and the second best, more attainable, City of Magnesia, described at length in the *Laws*. In both cases these are ideal cities, not existing ones. Aristotle urges us to take an interest in existing city-states, "because it is no less a task to reform a constitution than to establish one actually in place . . . That is why, in addition to what has been just mentioned [i.e. the science of the best possible city], a statesman should also be able to help existing constitutions" (IV 1, 1289a3–7). He devotes so much effort to analyzing existing constitutions – oligarchies, aristocracies, and democracies – because he believes that one might improve existing constitutions, even bad ones. As he often says, practical sciences such as ethics and politics must aim at action, and not only at understanding (see e.g., *NE* X 9, 1179a35–b3).

One of the ways in which Aristotle imagines this improvement might be instituted is clear when we consider another point he emphasizes: that the aim of the city-state, indeed the aim of all communities, is to promote "living well" as opposing to "living" *tout court* (see e.g., II 9, 1280b10–12), contrary to what some sophists had already suggested, and contrary to what Hobbes and many modern political thinkers would later argue. Living "well" in this sense is living a truly human life, achieving *eudaimonia* (happiness or human flourishing), which is constituted by excellent activities (including the exercise of both moral and intellectual virtues). Aristotle

acknowledges that people might come together in the first instance for the sake of protection and material benefits, but he insists that we would choose to live together in these ways even if we did not need, or expect to find, safety and material well-being together. This is part of what it means to say, as he does, that we are political animals (III 6, 1278b19–25). Only within political communities do we find what we need to flourish as human beings.

It follows from this that the task of those who formulate laws, and of those who govern, is to promote virtuous action among the citizens, and more broadly among the inhabitants, of the city-state. Promoting virtue will require a correct constitution, a just distribution of offices, good laws, and good education, as well as virtuous citizens. But Aristotle is very alive to the fragility of political structures, the sources of conflict that haunt every political community, and the difficulty of maintaining political stability. So he is concerned to reconcile certain political ideals with political realities as he sees them. We see this, for example, in the final chapters (14–16) of *Politics* IV, where he addresses the law-giver about different ways in which a state might combine various forms of legislative, executive, and judicial functions, without invoking any ethical principles.

III

We have alluded to certain ongoing disagreements among scholars about the interpretation of the *Politics*. One source of these disagreements is that we cannot say with confidence how Aristotle intended to order the different books that constitute the work as we now have it. A review of the main themes of the eight books reveals that there is no evident organizing principle. Book I begins with some claims about the origins and final cause of the city-state, and proceeds to an analysis of household relations and management. Book II offers an often harsh appraisal of the best constitutions (both ideal and real) described by Socrates and others. Book III deals with some of the fundamental features of political life: citizenship, political virtue, and political justice; it also contains a classification of constitutions and a detailed analysis of kingship. The next three Books, IV through VI, concern themselves with more empirical issues. Book IV studies the existing regimes as well as certain possible constitutions that are good, although not ideal; Book V examines the sources of

political conflict and how to save constitutions from dissolution; Book VI considers how constitutions are established. Finally, Books VII and VIII present the conditions for the best possible city, including a description of the education that such a city should provide to the young.

As this review demonstrates, there are four apparently independent sections of the *Politics*: Book I, Books II and VII–VIII, Book III, and Books IV to VI. Often no remark explicitly links one book to the next or the former, and when the text does include such remarks they are such that they might have been added by later editors. Moreover, the discrepancy in style and tone between the two largest sections is puzzling. Books II and VII–VIII, which treat of the best constitution, are emphatic in both their positive and negative assessments, and offer prescriptions for achieving happiness through political means. By contrast, Books IV–VI are generally coolly descriptive (they are often described as "sociological"), and seem to recommend preserving even bad constitutions rather than enduring political conflict. Moreover, there are discrepancies in content as well as tone. One discrepancy, mentioned above, is particularly important: Aristotle says in Book III that kingship and aristocracy (in which one or a few rule) are the best constitutions, but in Books VII–VIII he describes the best city we could wish for as one in which all the citizens rule because all are equally virtuous.

In the 1920s, Werner Jaeger argued that these discrepancies reflected changes in Aristotle's philosophical approach over the course of his life: Books VII–VIII (as well as III) were the product of his early, Platonizing, years, while Books IV–VI belonged to a later period in his life, when Aristotle approached phenomena from a more empirical point of view.[12] More recently, several scholars have suggested that the discrepancies might be explained by the difference in focus between Books VII–VIII, on the one hand, and Books III–VI on the other. On this interpretation, the city of Books VII–VIII is a utopia, an ideal constitution that would be possible only under ideal circumstances, whereas Books III and IV–VI deal mainly with existing constitutions, and offer judgments about the best possible constitutions in the real world.[13] It has also been suggested, as early as the fourteenth century, that we should re-order the books of the *Politics* by placing Books VII–VIII after Books I–III, so that Aristotle would describe the ideal city before returning, at the end of the treatise, to consider existing cities.[14] But none of the manuscripts

we have follow this ordering, and Books VII–VIII do not seem at all concerned with the six-fold classification of III–VI, suggesting that they were not intended to follow Book III. Moreover, if we preserve the traditional ordering, we can understand the description of the best city in VII–VIII as the culmination of Aristotle's political philosophy, intended to follow after the description of non-ideal constitutions (actual and possible).[15]

IV

The essays in this volume take up some of the most important questions, philosophical and political, that Aristotle raises in the course of the *Politics*. They have been organized to follow, by and large, the order of the books, with two qualifications. First, the volume begins and ends with contributions that consider the relation between the *Politics* and some other work or works. "The political character of Aristotle's ethics" by Dorothea Frede concerns the relation between Aristotle's moral philosophy and his political philosophy; and both Bryan Garsten's "Deliberating and acting together" and Richard Kraut's "Aristotle and Rawls on the common good" evaluate the relationship between Aristotle's *Politics* and aspects of contemporary political philosophy – deliberative democracy and Rawls' liberalism, respectively. The other essays in this volume are organized to follow the themes of the books in sequence, but many discuss aspects of different books, reflecting the way in which certain themes resurface throughout the *Politics*. Five essays concern Books I and II: Fred D. Miller, Jr. sets out Aristotle's political anthropology and its basis in claims about reason; Pierre Pellegrin offers a new understanding of the relation between master and slave; Karen Nielsen addresses Aristotle's views on wealth (How much do we need? Is private property good?); and Marguerite Deslauriers argues that for Aristotle inequality is fundamental to political unity. Another five essays concern themselves with Books III through VI: Andrés Rosler, beginning with the gap between the virtuous person and the virtuous citizen, argues that Aristotle is more political, and less focused on what is morally good, than we might suppose. Christoph Horn develops an account of Aristotle as a political loyalist, by posing the question of obligation: Why should we obey laws imposed on us? Don Morrison offers an interpretation

of the notion of "common good" so central to Aristotle's classification of the constitutions. Marco Zingano demonstrates that Aristotle's conception of natural justice is not opposed to political justice. Melissa Lane builds a new interpretation of Aristotle's account of democratic processes, especially deliberation and decision. Antony Hatzistavrou analyzes Aristotle's description of the sources of political conflict. Finally, Pierre Destrée's essay connects the aims of political life to the discussion of education that occupies Aristotle in Books VII and VIII.

Although the essays are, then, ordered to follow the structure of the *Politics* as we have it, certain themes recur in several contributions, and give the reader a sense of Aristotle's political preoccupations. The relation between politics and morality is clearly something Aristotle both embraces and worries about (see the essays by Frede, Miller, Rosler, Zingano, and Destrée). Commonality and the common good is another theme: What should we have in common, what does it mean to have it in common, and what will the political effects of common possession be? (Nielsen, Deslauriers, Morrison); how should we understand the common good? (Morrison, Kraut, Destrée). Political conflict – what it is, how to avoid it, and how to act when it does arise – is a third important theme (Rosler, Horn, Hatzistavrou). Reason, political deliberation, and decision-making make up a fourth theme (Horn, Lane, Garsten, Kraut), one that recalls the connection between Aristotle's moral psychology and his political philosophy.

Before leaving our readers to discover the essays in this volume – essays that aim both to introduce newcomers to Aristotle's political theory and to offer fresh perspectives to more seasoned readers – we conclude with two remarks. First, it is obvious to Aristotle that we cannot avoid being political, or that if we should manage to avoid it we would be incomplete as persons. In order to realize our political nature, we need to observe, analyze, and evaluate political possibilities; we need to participate in political reflection. Hence the importance of engaging with works such as Aristotle's *Politics*. But political reflection, however careful and comprehensive it might be, would be pointless were we not willing in some way or another to act to preserve, or to change, the political communities in which we live. Politics, for Aristotle, is a practical science, and so one that aims at truth in action.

Aristotle would say that how we organize ourselves politically is up to us, in the sense that it depends on our actions, but he would not allow that all forms of political life are equally good. It really does matter what we do. How to live in a political community is not a trivial question, and yet we may very well get it wrong. This brings us to the second remark. It is not only political life that we might get wrong; it is Aristotle himself. "About anyone as great as Shakespeare," T. S. Eliot once remarked, "it is probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong."[16] So, too, with Aristotle it is doubtful that we can ever offer a definitive interpretation, but this collection of essays is an attempt to help us change our ways of being wrong, if we cannot be certain of being right.

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