Aristotelian constitutions

CHRISTOPHER ROWE

1 Introduction: the nature of the Politics

One of the chief problems about discussing any aspect of Aristotle’s political thought, but especially his thinking about constitutions, is the apparent disorder of the Politics.¹ The relatively loose and dialectical nature of the argument is certainly responsible for some of its unevenness: the repetitions, the omissions of promised discussions of particular topics, and the sudden turns, perhaps as the focus changes between two opposing series of reflections. But even when all of this is taken into account, it is hard not to conclude that at least some of the larger pieces do not quite fit together. This fact is reflected in the old fashion, begun in the nineteenth century, for placing Books VII and VIII after the end of Book III.² Books VII and VIII contain a treatment of the ‘best constitution’; since the end of Book III, as it stands, promises one, there seem to be good grounds for allowing that promise to be fulfilled. Yet this easy solution turns out to cause as many problems as it resolves, since not only do Books IV–VI turn out to contain more backward references to III than VII and VIII, but IV–VI are a considerably more inappropriate sequel to VII–VIII than they are to III. In that case, the most that can be said is that VII and VIII might once, in some different Politics, have followed Book III.

A second solution, sometimes combined with the first, is to explain the anomalies of the text by introducing the hypothesis of an evolution in Aristotle’s thinking about politics. According to one version of this hypothesis,³ Books II–III and VII–VIII represent an early, utopian stratum in the Politics, IV–VI a later ‘empirical’ one; what we call the Politics would in this case represent an uneasy combination of elements from different phases of Aristotle’s philosophical career. According to this view, he moves away from a Platonic preoccupation with ideal constitutions, and becomes more interested in the kinds of issues that relate directly to the

¹ This chapter is intended as a fresh approach to the issues; in the event, its outcome turns out to be encouragingly close in many respects to the conclusions reached in Kahn 1990 and Fortenbaugh 1991. ² So e.g. Newman 1887–1902. ³ Jaeger 1948.
realities of political life. When he complains that 'most of those who write about constitutions, even if everything else they say is fine enough, fail to hit on those things that are of practical use' (Pol. iv.1, 1288b35–7), he is allegedly also marking out his attitude to his own earlier practice.

However Aristotle himself, in the same context, clearly says that writing about the 'best absolutely' and saying what is 'of practical use' are not only compatible, but are actually both to be properly regarded as parts of the business of political philosophy. There is no sign of his supposing that the second somehow replaces the first. Indeed, they are for Aristotle in practice as well as in theory complementary, insofar as the ideal serves as a standard for judging the actual. Although - as we shall see - there are some problems about exactly how it can fulfil this role, these problems are not resolved by the hypothesis that the construction of the best state came first, since it is hard to see what the point is of thinking about what the best political arrangements would be unless this is supposed to have some consequences or other for our thinking about how things actually are.

Of course, the consequence might just be to suggest the necessity of abandoning all existing arrangements, and substituting others. This usually seems to be the view taken by Plato, whose descriptions of 'best constitutions' - whether first-best, as in the Republic, or second-best, as in the Laws (the 'second city') - are accompanied by the explicit suggestion that any other sort of arrangement (unless perhaps it is some kind of approximation to the best) will be no constitution at all. In that case, unless the best constitutes a set of immediately practicable proposals, as it evidently does not (and is not intended to do, even in the case of the 'second-best'), we might seem to be left with no way forward. Here Plato perhaps gives grounds enough for Aristotle's generalized complaint about others who write about constitutions, that they say nothing 'of practical use'; though a more generous, and probably more accurate, reading would be that the cities of the Republic and the Laws are meant to provide models, to which societies would approximate by selecting, modifying and adapting the 'ideal' institutions and laws in accordance with the prevailing conditions. (Nevertheless, insofar as that would evidently require rethinking from the ground up, it would probably still count, from Aristotle's point of view, as 'lacking in practical use'.) Aristotle's own recommendations, as we shall see, may be seen in part as an explicit working out of this process, except that in his case what would be involved would be the reform of existing institutions. If so, the relationship between the 'empirical' parts

\[\text{4 In this sense, Aristotle advocates starting from where we are now, in a way that Plato does not; and this is an important difference.}\]
of the Politics and ‘utopian’ thinking of some sort (even if not of the sort that is actually reflected in Books vii–viii) should be rather close. Chronological and biographical hypotheses about the work will be irrelevant, except perhaps to explain how its still somewhat ill-fitting parts came to be sewn, or tacked, together.

2 Aristotle and Plato

Even a cursory comparison of the Politics with Plato’s Republic, Politicus and Laws is sufficient to demonstrate the very close connections between Aristotle’s political thinking and Plato’s. It is not just that Aristotle frequently criticizes Plato (more often than not, without mentioning him by name), nor that his larger programme in the Politics seems in part determined by his predecessor’s (see section 1 above); the very development of individual arguments, and of treatment of particular topics, often resembles a conversation with Plato as a silent partner. This is nowhere more true than in the case of the topic of constitutions.

In Plato’s most systematic treatment of constitutions, in the Politicus, they are divided into three broad types, each with two sub-types. Cities could be governed by one person, by a few people, or by many; and in each case the sovereign body could either adhere to established law, or they could operate on the basis of what they happened to think best from day to day. In the absence not only of the ideal, knowledgeable statesman, but also of any procedure for arriving at a set of consistently good laws (insofar as any such procedure must depend upon knowledge), even a city which took the option of governing itself according to law would rest on the most insecure of foundations; but this would be better – or at least less bad – than the alternative, of saying goodbye to law and operating according to the preferences and whims of those in power.

It is part of this (highly dialectical) context in the Politicus that Aristotle seems to have in mind in the following passage from Book iv of the Politics. He has previously said that there are three ‘correct’ forms of constitution, namely kingship, aristocracy, and a form he calls, and says others call, politeia, which is also, puzzlingly and often confusingly, the word in Greek usually translated as ‘constitution’. (For the time being, I shall refer to this third form by simply transliterating it, in fairly traditional fashion, as ‘polity’, reserving specific discussion of its name for later, when the main features of the type have been described.) Each of these three ‘right’ forms of constitution has its own corresponding ‘deviant’ form (parekhasis), and Aristotle is now arranging the latter in order:
Of these deviant forms, it is evident which is the worst, and which of them is the second worst. The deviant form of the first and the most divine must necessarily be the worst, and kingship must either have only the name without the substance, or exist by reason of the great superiority of the person occupying the kingship. Thus tyranny must be the worst, and at the furthest remove of all the deviant forms from being a [true] constitution [or, alternatively, 'from a polity'] oligarchy the next worst (for oligarchy is a very different thing from aristocracy), and democracy the most moderate. In fact one of our predecessors has also expressed the same view, but as a result of looking to a different criterion. His judgment was that if all of them were of a moderate and reasonable sort (epieikes), I mean if there were a good oligarchy, or a good example of the other types, democracy was worst, and if they were all bad, democracy was best. But our view is that these constitutions [by which Aristotle seems to mean primarily oligarchy and democracy] are wholly mistaken, and that it is not appropriate to say that one oligarchy is better than another, but only that it is less bad. (iv.2, 1289a38–b11)

Not for the first or the last time, Aristotle's account of Plato (who is surely the 'predecessor' in question) is less than wholly accurate, since although Plato does use the term 'best' as well as 'worst' in his comparison between constitutions, his position on what Aristotle calls the 'deviant forms' is substantially the same as Aristotle's own: they are all 'faction-states' rather than constitutions. However Aristotle's identification of three 'right' constitutions is a new departure.

For the Plato of the Politicus, the only constitution worthy of the name is the one ruled by knowledge in the shape of the ideal king or statesman. This would have the same name as, but would be quite distinct from, ordinary, law-bound, kingship - itself, of course, to be distinguished from tyranny, which is supposed to operate without laws. Rule by a few people which is strictly according to established law is called 'aristocracy', while if it pays no attention to law, it is simply 'oligarchy' (though in fact both are clearly treated as cases of rule by the few rich); between the two types of 'rule by many', i.e. the type under which law rules and the type under which it does not, there is no distinction of name, both being called 'democracy'. Since under all six of these constitutions apart from ideal

5 So Sinclair 1962 (1981), and Saunders in his revision of Sinclair, though it is not clear that the argument will have justified this conclusion.
6 For a less ambiguous division of monarchy, oligarchy and democracy into good and bad forms, see Isocrates, Panathenaicus 130–3: a 'good' constitution, of whatever type, is one in which the best people rule, with a view to the advantage of the city rather than to their own private gain (cf. On the Peace 91).
monarchy rule is exercised in the interests of the rulers (which is what Plato means by calling them ‘faction-states’, or stasioteia), Aristotle proceeds in effect to lump each pair together, and contrast them with his three ‘correct’ constitutions, which are ‘correct’ precisely in that they do what constitutions are supposed to do. If a city is a kind of community [a koinônia, a group with something in common or shared, koinon, between its members], and if it is a sharing in common [koinônia again] by citizens in a constitution . . .’ (iii.3, 1276b1–2): Aristotle is plainly committed to both premises, and they provide the basis of his notion of ‘deviant forms’.

It is therefore evident that all those constitutions which consider what is to the common advantage are correct constitutions, as judged in terms of what is just absolutely [i.e. as opposed to what is merely just according to some partisan notion of justice]; whereas those that consider only what is to the personal advantage of those in power are all mistaken, and deviant forms of the correct constitutions. For such deviant forms are despotic, and the city is a community of the free. (iii.6, 1279a17–21)

The preceding discussion has just ended on the subject of offices, and of how some people like to hold on to them because of the profit they bring: since a ‘constitution’ is, or is expressed particularly in, an ‘arrangement of offices’ (e.g. iv.2, 1289a15–16), a ‘deviant’ constitution will be one in which ‘offices’ (including assembly and courts) are arranged and used for purposes other than the good of the whole. Under (Aristotelian) kingship and aristocracy, and the special constitutional form called ‘polity’, by contrast, they will be put to proper use.

Aristotle is by and large content to work with this new scheme of six constitutions, and Books iii–vi are mainly built around it. But as soon becomes clear, it is a fairly rough and ready division. There turn out to be many different varieties of oligarchy, and of democracy, some of which border on (‘so-called’) aristocracy and polity. Again, polity is frequently described as a mixture of democracy and oligarchy. There is also the question of where, if anywhere, the (absolutely) best constitution fits in: sometimes it seems to be identified with kingship and aristocracy (see iii.18, 1288a32–b2; iv.2, 1289a31–3; iv.3, 1290a24–8), yet the constitution described in Books vii and viii cannot immediately be identified with either of these, since it is a case neither of rule by one individual nor of rule

---

7 A ‘correct’ constitution, then, will be a just one; but it will be just insofar as it does not treat those who are free and equal (1279b8–13), and so deserve a share in the constitution, as slaves, ruled for the benefit of their masters (1278a32–7). But the question then is: who is to count as a full member of the community? Aristotle’s own answer to this question, in the context of the ideal constitution of Books vii–viii, itself turns out to reintroduce a kind of despotism (see esp. vii.8, and section 7 below).
by a few. Nor can this ‘best constitution’ be meant to be the same as polity, in that it, like kingship and aristocracy, distributes office on the basis of individual excellence, which polity does not. But that in itself means that there will be a radical difference between the first two and the third of the ‘right’ constitutions. Aristotle seems to recognize this:

It remains for us to discuss what is called ‘polity’ and tyranny. We have located our treatment of ‘polity’ here [i.e. alongside tyranny] even though neither it nor the sorts of aristocracy we have just discussed [and associated with it] are deviant forms of constitution, because strictly speaking all these constitutions fall short of the most correct constitution, and so too they come to be counted with these [sc. deviant forms proper], and [at the same time] these [deviant forms] are deviant forms of them [sc. insofar as they are ‘correct’] ... (iv.8, 1293b22–6)

So polity, from another point of view, can actually be classed as ‘deviant’. The immediate task is to understand how the same thing can apparently receive both of two contrary descriptions.⁸

3 Kingship, aristocracy and polity

The starting point is that polity, broadly defined as ‘rule by the many which considers what is to the common advantage’, is both like and unlike the other two ‘correct’ constitutions. It is like them just insofar as they too, of course, are concerned with the common good (and actually realize it), but unlike them insofar as it does not distribute office primarily according to merit or ‘virtue’. So, for example, Aristotle associates the polity with a ‘hoplite’ constitution, i.e. one in which citizenship is restricted to those with the resources to equip themselves with heavy arms (i.6, 1265b26–9; iii.7, 1279a37–b4; iii.17, 1288a12–15). This criterion has to do with wealth rather than any sort of virtue (cf. iv.7, 1293b7–12), even if soldiers, hoplites, are supposed to have one particular sort of ‘virtue’, namely the military sort. (The passage in iii.17 – with which we may compare e.g. iv.7, 1293b20–1 – does in fact refer to ‘distribution of] offices among the wealthy according to merit [virtue, arete], but even here property, and not virtue, is the primary consideration, insofar as it determines citizenship itself.) The same conclusion follows even more directly if polity is to be regarded – as Aristotle repeatedly suggests elsewhere – as a ‘mixture’ of oligarchy and democracy, since as such its essential feature will be just that it balances the claims and interests of the rich and the poor.

Now this is an absolutely crucial difference between polity and the other two so-called 'correct constitutions', because virtue or excellence enters into Aristotle's account of the city, the fundamental political unit, itself. As he says almost at the very beginning of the Politics (1.2, 1252b29–30), 'while [the city] comes into existence for the sake of life [i.e. to enable its citizens to survive], it exists for the sake of a good life', and the good life (as we are reminded by iv.11) is the life of Aristotelian virtue, as described in the Ethics. The absolutely best constitution will be the one—like that of Books VII and VIII—which not merely distributes power according to degree of virtue, but actually has the production of virtue in its citizens as its chief purpose. As we shall see, kingship and aristocracy, as they appear in the list of 'correct' constitutions, are probably ultimately to be treated merely as species of the absolutely best constitution, insofar as they possess both relevant features (distribution of power according to merit, and systematic concern for the quality of the citizens and their life); polity, by contrast—usually, if (as we have seen) not quite always—has neither, and so will 'fall short' of the best. It is on these grounds that iv.8 declared it to be a 'deviant' form ('strictly speaking all these constitutions fall short of the most correct constitution, and so too they come to be counted with [the deviant forms] . . .').

Yet at the same time, and from a different perspective, a polity is a 'correct' constitution, just as much as it 'considers the common advantage'. The goal or telos of the political community is the life of virtue; and according to one well-known Aristotelian principle, it is the telos of a thing which defines what it essentially is. In that polity falls short of this, it will fail to be a true political community (or will be 'deviant', in the literal sense of the Greek word parekbasis: it sets out, as it were, for the appropriate destination, but goes off the road). But Aristotle is unwilling to say this (it is not a deviant form, he firmly asserted in iv.8, even if there is a way in which, 'strictly speaking', or 'in truth', it is), just as he does not say, in the Ethics, that most human beings are not really human beings because they do not achieve the human 'end', even to the degree to which they are capable of it. For one thing, political science would then be in danger of becoming purely theoretical, and, as he declared at the beginning of Book IV, it is part of its business to say something which is practical and useful. But in any case, if it is true of a polity that it 'considers', aims at, the common advantage (III.6, 1279a17–18), then it will genuinely overlap with the 'most correct' constitution; it can even in a sense be said to have the same aim as the best constitution ('the common advantage'), which it has simply misidentified. (Similarly, on the individual level, all
human beings desire what is genuinely good, though most of us are satisfied with what merely appears so.) In this way, the identification of the city— and therefore of its constitution, as its mode of organization— with the achievement of 'a good life' becomes a kind of limiting case, and the true 'deviants' will be just those constitutions that fail to live up to the idea of a community at all.

A constitution can, then, be 'correct' while also 'falling short'. Kingship and aristocracy, for their part, do not fall short at all. But they arise, or are appropriately instituted, only in the most exceptional circumstances:

We must first determine to what [sets of circumstances] a kingship, an aristocracy and a polity are appropriate. The sort of people [the Greek has the term *plethos*, which at bottom indicates an indeterminate plurality; here 'a population'] that is suited for kingship is one that is naturally such as to produce (*pherein*) a family outstanding in virtue in relation to political leadership; the sort (*plethos*) that is suited for aristocratic rule is one which is naturally such as to produce (*pherein*) a collection of people (*plethos*) capable of being ruled, in the mode that belongs to free men, by those qualified by virtue to lead in relation to political rule; and the sort (*plethos*) that is suited for polity (*politikon*) is one in which there naturally exists a collection (*plethos*) of citizens [or, with a different manuscript reading, 'a people of warlike ability'] capable of ruling and being ruled according to a law which distributes the offices to the well-to-do on the basis of merit. So when there turns out to be a whole family, or else some individual among the rest, that possesses such outstanding virtue that it surpasses the virtue of everyone else [i.e. taken together11], then it is just that this family should be vested with kingship and be sowe-

---

9 For the translation of the verb adopted here, see Newman 1887–1902: 1.290. There are serious problems about the passage as a whole, which induce despair in some commentators (e.g. Schütrumpf 1991), but it seems just about possible to make sense of it.

10 I.e. possessing the outstanding virtue which would qualify them for (monarchic) rule: see e.g. 11.13, 1284b25–34, iv.2, 1289b1. 'Political' leadership, or rule, is presumably which treats the subjects as free rather than slaves (see n.7 above); there is clearly not a reference in this case to 'ruling and being ruled by turn' (see Schofield, Ch. 15, pp. 318–19 above). The 'sort of people' that 'naturally produces' a kingly family is perhaps one in which there is a permanently unequal distribution of the capacity for virtue (cf. 11.18, 1288a39–b2); similarly in the case of an 'aristocratic' sort of people. But both sorts must apparently also be virtuous: see below.

11 The possibility of adding together the individual excellences of a large body of people has been introduced in 11.11, and must be what is in Aristotle's mind here, since it has just been said (1287b11–1288a5) that monarchy will be 'neither just nor expedient' if the monarch is merely *better* than his subjects ('excels them in virtue': see below). This interpretation seems to be confirmed by 1288a26–8, which rejects the possibility that the outstanding individual in question should merely share in ruling on the grounds that 'it is not of the nature of the part to exceed the whole, and this is what will have turned out for someone who exceeds to such a degree' (sc. if he is ruled by anyone else).
reign over all, and that this one individual should be king . . .' (III.17, 1288a6-15)

This passage constitutes a kind of rider to a long discussion of the question whether it is ever justified for a single outstanding individual to rule in place of laws. While the whole context strongly recalls a similar discussion in Plato's *Politics*, and probably in large part starts from it, the tone, and outcome, of Aristotle's argument are rather different.

It is a highly dialectical argument, which now puts the case on one side, now the one on the other. Two important points, however, clearly emerge from it. The first is that Aristotle generally approaches the notion of ideal kingship from his perspective on the city as a community of *equals*. From such a perspective, the outstanding individual may even be seen as problematic, even for 'correct' constitutions, namely those that 'consider the common good' (III.13, 1284b3-7). This is a far cry indeed from Plato's presentation of the ideal king or statesman as *the* solution (if only on a theoretical level) to all political problems. Thus Aristotle's main conclusion to the whole discussion of kingship, which he announces just before the long passage last quoted above (from III.17), is that

it is clear, at any rate from what has been said, that among those who are like and equal (whatever we may say of anyone else) it is neither expedient nor just that one individual should be sovereign over all, either when there are no laws, on the basis that he is himself [a kind of incarnate] law, or when there are laws, and whether he is a good man ruling over other good men, or whether neither he nor they are good, and not even if he excels them in virtue – except in a certain way. (III.17, 1287b41-1288a5)

That is, in normal circumstances monarchy will not be a good thing; and those normal circumstances involve especially a population which can be described as 'like and equal', whatever their level of moral attainment ('whether he is a good man ruling over other good men, or whether neither he nor they are good'). 1288a6-15 then explains the 'in a certain way' ('and not even if he excels them in virtue – except in a certain way'; though

---

12 This typically Aristotelian perspective, in combination with the apparent validation of non-expert views in III.11 (see preceding note), gives sense to 'looking to Aristotle for a philosophy that recognizes communal "discourse" rather than "technical expertise" as constituting our political essence' (Newell 1991:191, citing Beiner 1983, with Gadamer 1975); the case of kingship will turn out to be less damaging to this project than Newell suggests.

13 It is not clear how it could be a problem for kingship, or for aristocracy, since these are actually ways of handling exceptional individuals. What Aristotle means is presumably just that such individuals are generally problematic even for those constitutions that actually do 'consider the common good'; but I shall suggest that in any case kingship and aristocracy, as described in Book III, are ultimately types of only marginal importance in Aristotle's scheme.
as Aristotle says at 1288a6, he has already explained it, 'in a way', before).
There will be (exceptional) populations suited to kingship, and aristocracy, and in such cases virtue should be given its head – provided that it is so outstanding as to excel that of everyone else. The subjects will themselves be virtuous, or inclined towards 'the most choiceworthy life', i.e. the life of virtue (1288a36–7); and that is perhaps what makes them 'capable of being ruled' by others, of the right kind. That the subjects are of this sort means that kingship and aristocracy are 'expedient' in their case, and is also essential for Aristotle's treatment of kingship and aristocracy as forms of the best constitution, since the best constitution must be that which promotes the best life (see e.g. VII.1). But the primary condition of the appropriateness of kingship and aristocracy is the presence of quite exceptional virtue in one or more persons; otherwise it will not be just. (Merely to be better than others is not enough, because there are other competing criteria for the distribution of power. A godlike virtue, however, could have no competitors.)

Here we come to the second important point about the whole context of the latter part of Book III, which is a kind of corollary of the first point. Aristotle's description of the conditions of ideal kingship seems to be necessitated by a continuing acceptance – at least from III.13 on – that it is appropriate for someone with (absolutely) outstanding virtue to rule, not to be subject to those inferior to himself (a point repeated in III.17 itself: 1288a19–28), even though his main argument tends towards the conclusion that perpetual monarchy, under most conditions, is not the right answer. As we have seen, he does not approach kingship, as Plato does, as something desirable in itself; nor in fact is it clear why he should prefer a situation in which one person was outstandingly better than everyone else. Rather, we should expect him to prefer, as an ideal, that everyone should be as good as possible (an idea, of course, which underlies the last part of the description of kingship and aristocracy in III.18). The reason why Plato opts for ideal monarchy is that he insists on the need for expertise, which, he holds, is likely to be very rarely found (so that we shall be lucky to find any single person who has it, let alone a number of such

---

14 I refer here to a part of another problematical sentence; but at least the part itself is reasonably clear.
15 This specification is only explicitly made in the case of an 'aristocratic' people (1288a11–12), but it presumably also applies to one that is 'kingly'. The whole context suggests that aristocracy is a kind of variant of monarchy, with the rule of one person merely replaced by the rule of more than one (a few).
16 See preceding page.
17 1288a36–7: 'with some capable of being ruled and others capable of ruling with a view to the most choiceworthy life'.
people). For Aristotle, by contrast, if there is such a thing as expertise in ruling, it will in the ideal case derive from virtue itself (thus e.g. in iv.13 outstanding virtue is paired with the possession of an equally outstanding ‘political capacity’: 1284a6–7, 9–10). Since virtue is, at least in principle, a goal for all, the emergence of a single individual towering over all the rest might even count as a sign of the others’ failure. But in any case, the final outcome of Aristotle’s discussion is not in doubt: if such a person does arise, then he should be given sovereign power; otherwise monarchy is neither appropriate nor desirable.

Evidently no actual examples of kingship or aristocracy (as described in iii.17–18) do exist, although there are plenty of ‘aristocracies so-called’:

But there are some further [forms of constitution] that show differences both in relation to those ruled oligarchically, and in relation to what is called ‘polity’, and are called aristocracies. Where office-holders are chosen with reference not only to wealth but also to virtue, this form of constitution is different from both the others and is called aristocratic. For in those [cities] which do not make the procurement of virtue [among the citizens] a matter or public concern, there is nevertheless a group of individuals who are those of good reputation, and who are counted as moderate and reasonable (epieikeis) . . . [Aristotle gives examples: Carthage, which ‘pays regard to’ virtue as well as wealth and the consent of the people, and Sparta, which takes into account the first and the third.] There are thus these two kinds of aristocracy alongside the first, [which is] the best constitution [presumably together with kingship]; and there is also a third kind, consisting of all those varieties of what is called polity which incline more towards oligarchy. (iv.7, 1293b6–21)

The form of polity which appears in iii.17 — the ‘hoplite’ constitution, which in many ways resembles, if it is not identical with, the so-called ‘middle’ constitution introduced in iv.11 — is probably also an idealized version of the general type. But that there are supposed to be close approximations to this idealized version in existence is surely not in

18 Cf. EN 11.8, 1141b23–6, quoted by Schofield, Ch. 15, p. 311 above, and Pol. 111.4–5. What is envisaged is very different from the kind of ‘art of ruling’ that Plato proposes, even apparently at the time of the writing of the Politics, i.e. one based on philosophical knowledge: Aristotelian virtue is grounded in precept, habituation, and the growth of insight. The political expert may also be a theoretician like Aristotle himself, offering advice to those in the practical business of governing; his understanding — if Aristotle is to be consistent — presumably ought to mimic part of that possessed by the ideal politician. On the issues here see further Hutchinson 1988:40–9, Newell 1991:199–200; and, for the most extended treatment, Lesz1989.

19 On the implications of the conclusions reached here about Aristotelian kingship and aristocracy for the treatment of the ‘best constitution’ in Books vii–viii, see section 6 below.

20 See p. 371 above.
doubt (the last passage cited confirms, at least, that there are real 'varieties' of such a form of polity). The list of 'correct' constitutions thus combines one realizable type with two that are more remote, if not actually beyond the bounds of possibility. But the virtuous state, whether with one, or few, in control (or even many, as in the constitution of Books VII and VIII), remains as a model to remind Aristotle's readers of what a city might be, and in a better world would be. Moreover, the boundaries between types are sufficiently permeable, as the case of the 'so-called aristocracies' shows, to make that reminder useful, even despite the fact that the conditions needed for realization of the absolutely best are beyond human control. It is, after all, within the power of ordinary cities and legislators to introduce 'aristocratic' elements into existing systems, and so to recognize, to however limited an extent, what Aristotle regards as the (nearly) absolute claims of virtue.

That this is the kind of way his mind is working is confirmed, in a small way, by a passage in Book II, where he is discussing Plato's *Laws*:

The whole arrangement tends to be neither a democracy nor an oligarchy, but a constitution intermediate between these, what they call a 'polity'; for it is made up from those who serve as hoplites. If his [sc. Plato's] notion in constructing this constitution is that it represents the one, of all constitutions, which is most accessible to cities, he may perhaps be right; but he is not right if he thinks of it as the best after the first [i.e. the 'first city', which is identified with the ideal city of the *Republic*]. For one might assign more praise to the constitution of the Spartans, or else some other more aristocratic constitution. (II.6, 1265b26–33)

This amounts to an even more cavalier treatment of Plato than usual, since the *Laws* for the most part describes precisely the sort of constitution which Aristotle himself wants to call aristocratic, that is, one founded on, and training its citizens in, virtue (as he must have known, since the similarities between *Politics* VII and VIII and the *Laws* are far too close to be accidental); what is more, Plato specifically compares the constitution of the *Laws* to the Spartan constitution, and finds it superior. However the point Aristotle is making is unambiguous: the 'polity' should not necessarily be the limit of legislators' ambitions. Given such an approach, and a readiness to embark on the dialectical discussion of possibilities, the peculiar mix in the *Politics* — especially in the earlier books — of the empirical and the utopian or ideal becomes wholly intelligible. So it is, for example, that a discussion of claims to political power brings up the special case of the presence of a single, god-like individual; that leads into what looks like an empirical treatment of types of kingship, but actually includes the
hypothetical case of the ideal king alongside historically existing types (III.9-18).

4 Mixed and ‘deviant’ constitutions

Polity is ‘correct’ because it is true to the idea of a community. But as we have seen, a correct constitution is also a just one: ‘[i]t is therefore evident that all those constitutions which consider what is to the common advantage are correct constitutions, as judged in terms of what is just absolutely . . .’ (III.6, 1279a17–19). ‘Absolute’ justice is here contrasted with the specific, and mistaken, conceptions of justice which are found in the ‘deviant’ forms of constitution; it is the same sort of justice which in III.17–18 dictated that if an individual or family of absolutely outstanding merit should be found, in a certain sort of community, they should be given kingship in that community.

As we have said before, this is not only so [i.e. just] according to the kind of justice which is usually put forward by those who establish constitutions, whether aristocratic, or oligarchic, or again democratic (all of them make their claims on the basis of superiority, but not the same kind of superiority) . . . (III.18, 1288a19–24)

The backward reference is to a passage like that at III.13, 1283a23–9:

In terms, then, of contribution to the city’s existence, it would seem that all of the things mentioned [wealth, birth, virtue, the quality of judgment that may derive from numbers of people working together], or at any rate some of them, might correctly press their claims [to honours and office], but in terms of contribution to a good life, the claims of education and virtue, as we have said before, would possess the greatest justice. But since it is not the case either that those who are equal in only one respect should have an equal share of everything, or that those who are unequal in one respect should have an unequal share of everything, all such constitutions [i.e. those that depend wholly on claims of equality and inequality in this way] must be deviant forms.

This brings us especially to democracy and oligarchy: it is especially the democrats who think that they are equal in all respects because they are equal in one (that they are born free like everyone else), and the oligarchs who think that they are unequal – that is superior – in all respects because they are unequal in one (wealth). So the democrats claim an equal right to office and honours, the oligarchs an ‘unequal’ one; and, says Aristotle, both are in a way right and in a way wrong: justice is equality – but only
for those who deserve an equal share, and it is inequality - but only for those who deserve an unequal share, because they are themselves superior in some relevant respect (iii.9).

Democrats and oligarchs thus have irreconcilable conceptions of justice. Aristotle, like Plato before him, treats the two forms of constitution as polar opposites. But in that case the difference between them cannot be merely - as their names suggest - that the one involves rule by the many, the other by the few; and indeed Aristotle goes so far as to suggest that ultimately number has nothing to do with it, except in so far as 'oligarchy' is usually associated with rule by a minority, 'democracy' with rule by the majority. If we are looking for the real essence of oligarchy, he concludes in iii.8 (and the point is repeated in iv.4), it is that the rich have the power, and the real essence of democracy is that the poor have it. This position is fundamental for his analysis of actual constitutions, because most of these are oligarchies or democracies of one type or another (iv.11, 1296a22-3) - so that people begin to class all constitutions under one or the other head, treating aristocracy as a sort of oligarchy and polity as a sort of democracy, 'just as, in the case of the winds, they treat westerlies under the head of northerly, and easterlies under that of southerly' (iv.3, 1290a18-19). The rich, as well as the poor, will always be with us, and the distinction between them is ineradicable (one cannot be both rich and poor); there is therefore a natural tendency to see it as fundamental everywhere (iv.4, 1291b2-13). Aristotle rejects this tendency:

> It will be truer and better to put it in terms of our own distinctions, and say that there are two constitutions that are well put together, or one,\(^2^1\) and that the others will be deviant forms of these, some of the well-mixed harmony [i.e., apparently, of polity] and others of the best constitution; and these [deviant forms] will be oligarchical when they are too severe and despotic, and democratic when they are relaxed and soft. (iv.3, 1290a24-8)

This loose and difficult sentence introduces one of Aristotle's central ideas, that of mixture as a solution to political problems.\(^2^2\) The 'well-mixed harmony' is either the polity itself, or the related 'so-called aristocracies' which, as we have seen, are elsewhere treated as mixtures par excellence, and possibly superior to polities. Contrasted with this sort of

---

\(^2^1\) One, perhaps, in the case that 'polity' is treated as itself a 'deviation' (section 2 above); kingship and aristocracy are, not for the first time, treated together (section 3).

\(^2^2\) This idea dominates much of the argument of Books IV-VI, which deal with the classification of actual constitutions, the causes of constitutional change, and possible methods for preventing such change; see below.
‘harmony’ are the two deviant forms, oligarchy and democracy, which are both essentially one-sided: the one, in terms of the image, resulting from over-tightening of the strings of the instrument, the other from undertightening (the image itself is evidently somewhat loose, but serves its purpose). Oligarchic rule tends to be ‘despotic’ or repressive, presumably for the remainder of the population, while democratic rule is looser, which suggests one interpretation of the democratic idea of ‘freedom’, in terms of ‘living as one pleases’ (vi.2, 1317b11-17). Aristotle suggests that both alternatives are intolerable, because contrary to that ‘absolute’ or unqualified justice which is essential to human society. Given that constitutional alternatives, in any given case, must inevitably be limited by the quality of population available, there will always be oligarchies and, especially, democracies (in the light of increases in population: 111.15, 1286b20-2), but these may be made more moderate, less unmixed, versions of themselves.

The way in which this is to be done is by combining democratic with oligarchic institutions, and vice versa. So for example, under a democracy the function of deliberation and decision-making about political issues is given to all citizens, under an oligarchy only to some; but when some of the citizens are in control of some things [but not all], for example, when all the citizens are in control in regard to war and peace and the examination of office-holders, but specific office-holders are in control of everything else, and these are elected or chosen by lot [one editor changes the text to read ‘elected and not chosen by lot, which makes slightly better sense], then the constitution is an aristocracy [or, with an alternative manuscript reading, ‘then it is an aristocracy or polity’]. If those in control of some things are elected, and those in control of some other things are chosen by lot, and chosen by lot either on its own or from candidates selected in advance, or if decisions are given to a joint body, some of whom are elected and some chosen by lot, some of these features belong to an aristocratic constitution [especially that of election, on the assumption that election is on the basis of merit], others [sc. those involving mixing of different arrangements] to polity itself. (iv.14, 1298b5-11)

Proper mixing in this way will produce closer and closer approximations to the ‘well-mixed harmony’ which is polity or (so-called) aristocracy. This whole discussion belongs to that part of the Politics (Books iv–vi,

---

23 See especially i.2, 1253a29–39.
often called the 'empirical' part\(^2\) in which Aristotle turns from predominantly theoretical questions to questions of a more practical sort. The programme is laid out at the end of iv.2:

We must first distinguish how many different varieties of constitution there are, given that there are more than one type both of democracy and of oligarchy; then [we must consider] which is most common [or 'accessible': \textit{koinotatē}] and which most choiceworthy after the best constitution; and again, if some other constitution has turned out to be aristocratic and well put together, and at the same time fits the case of most cities, which it is; then also which of the others is choiceworthy for which [peoples] (for perhaps for one people democracy is more a necessity than oligarchy, while for another it is the other way round); and after this in what way the person who wishes to set up these constitutions, i.e. each kind of democracy and also of oligarchy, should set about it; and finally . . . we must embark on the question in what ways the constitutions are destroyed and in what ways they are preserved, both in general and in respect to each individual type, and through what causes these things most tend to come about. (iv.2, 1289b12–26)

The most 'common' or 'accessible' type will presumably be polity; it is under this second question ('which is most common . . .') that the discussion of the 'mixing' of democratic and oligarchic elements seems to belong. The list as a whole introduces Aristotle's attempt to say something 'of practical use', instead of merely talking about the best conceivable (iv.1, 1288b35–9, partially quoted in section 1 above).

I propose to end the present part of the chapter by asking about the precise relationship that is supposed to exist between the discussion of the 'absolutely best', as illustrated most obviously by Books vii and viii, and Aristotle's allegedly new and more practical questions; especially the question about the most 'accessible' type of constitution.\(^{25}\) First,
however, it will be useful to say a little more, and more directly, about Books IV–VI themselves. Book IV essentially deals with the detailed classification of constitutions, but itself already strays into the question about their destruction and preservation. Book V then takes up the question directly, both in general terms and with reference to particular types: democracies, oligarchies, and – surprisingly – tyrannies; Book VI essentially picks up and develops points from the previous two books, especially with relation to democracy and oligarchy. Aristotle’s programme at the beginning of IV might lead us to expect V and VI to supply a pathology of real, live states, perhaps of the sort we find in Thucydides. If so, we are likely to be disappointed. Although the two books do frequently refer to actual cases, they use these not as raw data for investigation, but rather for purposes of illustration, and then only fitfully. What they offer is for the most part highly general, resting on exhaustive surveys of theoretical possibilities (especially in relation to the methods of distributing offices), and on the extended development of two basic ideas: that extreme versions of the three types of ‘deviant’ constitutions, to which most actual constitutions belong, are less likely to survive than moderate ones, and – in the case of democracy and oligarchy – that moderate versions will be those that move towards the middle ground, and/or the kind of mixture of democracy and oligarchy that is now firmly associated with ‘polity’ (IV.8). Tyranny, for its part, should either actually change in the direction of kingship, or appear to do so.

How, then, do such practical, even pragmatic, issues relate to the treatment of the ‘absolutely best’ constitution in Books VII and VIII? It seems fair to assume two things: first, that the ‘absolutely best’ should, in principle, provide the standard by which other constitutions are judged (if it is best, after all, then it is better than the others, and the others are presumably worse by the same criteria by which it is judged to be best); and second, that the ‘mixing’ recommended in Books IV–VI, of oligarchic and democratic elements, will improve those cities to which it is applied. It ought then follow that these cities will have become better by

27 So, e.g., in v.7: ‘Changes in aristocracies [i.e. ‘so-called’ aristocracies] are especially likely to go unobserved because the dissolution happens gradually; this is something we said before in a general way about all constitutions... This is what happened in the case of the constitution of Thurii...’ (1307a40–b7).
28 The ‘absolutely’ best contrasts with what may be best under given conditions: thus the ‘middle’ constitution in IV.11 is introduced as ‘best for most cities and most men’ (1293a25–6).
29 For the general issues here, see Schofield, Ch. 15, pp. 310–15 above, Roberts, Ch. 17, pp. 360–5 above, Rowe 1977 (1991), Irwin 1985, and Rowe 1989 (but the following discussion modifies the views expressed in both Rowe 1977 (1991) and 1989).
the standard of the best. But it is not clear that this is so. According to Aristotle’s argument, they will certainly have become more just. However justice is not exclusive to the best constitution; while it is certainly just, in virtue of the way it distributes power (i.e. to those who merit it), other constitutions will apparently be equally just, including polity itself, which falls short of the best. (The people to whom it gives power may be inferior to those who would hold it under the best constitution; but among the people actually living under a polity, those who most deserve power will have it – which is surely what is meant by justice in this context.) It will also be the case, largely if not exclusively as a consequence of the greater justice of the new arrangements resulting from the mixing, that the cities in question will be more stable. This consequence is obviously of some importance, given that Aristotle assigns the major part of two whole books to a discussion of the causes of and cures for instability; but again, stability is surely not itself what defines the best. Although it would presumably be the most stable, or as stable as any constitution could be, insofar as it involves a citizen-body united in a single aim, the best constitution is best because of that aim (and its achievement), and not because of the stability that flows from it.

But in that case improving an inferior or ‘deviant’ constitution ought to mean ensuring that it somehow paid more attention to virtue; and since virtue has no role whatever in either democracy or oligarchy, no amount of mixing them, in the way that Aristotle proposes, is likely to help improve them in that direction. If so, then we might be justified in beginning to doubt whether this part of the programme of Books IV-VI really coheres with the remainder of the Politics; and it may be added that the tone of that programme in general, both as laid out in iv.1-2 and as actually executed, sometimes suggests that what ‘political science’ (politike) has now become is a neutral set of techniques for organizing political communities, independently of any external standard. An example is the last question in the list at the end of iv.2, ‘in what way the person who wishes to set up these constitutions, i.e. each kind of democracy and also of oligarchy, should set about it’; for this appears to include even the most

30 That might look like an overstatement, in the light of what is said about the ‘middle’ kind of people in iv.11 (if the middle constitution is indeed a kind of polity: see n.25 above), since Aristotle lays some stress on their lack of the vices that tend to go with extremes of wealth and poverty (1295b3-21: the wealthy tend e.g. to get above themselves and commit large crimes, while the poor are not to be trusted and are too liable to petty crime . . .). The difficulty is that one could hardly turn a democracy or an oligarchy into this kind of middle constitution without some kind of equalization of property, an idea which Aristotle criticizes severely in 11.7; practical reform is then going to have to rely on other measures, which would not either produce a ‘middle’ class, or promote virtue in any other direct way.
extreme type of democracy described towards the end of iv.4 (129244–30), in which the people become like a composite tyrant. Then too there is the essay at the end of Book v on ‘how tyrannies are preserved’.

Yet Aristotle is plainly more against extreme democracies than moderate ones, and even more plainly against tyrannies; if, as he holds, they are not an appropriate solution for any community (any Greek one), it would be at least ungenerous to insist that he would include his observations about some of the less palatable ways in which tyrannies are in fact preserved in the category of the ‘useful’. As for the proposals for mixing democracies and oligarchies, the outlines of a justification of these are perhaps suggested by the argument in section 3 above: that insofar as polity borders on ‘so-called aristocracies’, which do have something genuinely in common with true aristocracy, i.e. rule by the best, to make cities approximate more closely to polities will in a genuine — if still accidental — way bring them closer to the best. Or, to put it in another way, the closer they are to being ‘correct’ constitutions, i.e. real ones, the more chance they might have (given people of quality, and a following wind) of becoming genuinely comparable with the best.31

5 ‘Polity’

The form of constitution called politeia (‘polity’) is clearly central to Aristotle’s scheme. It is probably best described as an attainable ideal (of sorts), which has close connections with something people call, not wholly misleadingly, ‘aristocracy’. It is introduced in a number of different guises, but between these there is a detectable family resemblance: if it is a mixture between democracy and oligarchy, or somehow in the middle between them (11.6, 1266a26–8), or equally capable of being called both, or neither (iv.9, 1294b13–16, 34–6), then it will not be wholly inappropriate to think of it also as a kind of restricted (hoplite) democracy. All such descriptions are probably of the notional type, ‘polity’; as with the other types (kingship, aristocracy, democracy, and so on), actual varieties are probably best treated as species, or variant forms.

In any case, as we have seen, it stands for the ‘correct’ form of rule by many, where ‘many’ means at least considerably more than a few. For Aristotle, the natural state of affairs will be for the citizens to ‘rule and be ruled’, that is, for each to take his turn at ruling: a city implies a collection of citizens, who barring exceptional circumstances (i.e. the ones that call

31 And if so, of course, people living under them will have become more like those living under the best constitution, at least to the extent of having the kind of virtue attributed to the mesoi in iv.11.
for ideal kingship or aristocracy, or else where people of insufficient quality happen to have acquired membership of the city) will be free and equal. ‘A city aims at being, as far as possible, composed of people who are equal and alike . . .’ (iv.11, 1295b25–6). It is this idea that is probably captured by the name ‘polity’: in other words, it stands for ‘citizen constitution’. The usual way of taking the name is to associate it with the idea of ‘constitution’ itself, for which Aristotle himself gives some encouragement, in that he notices the fact that the two things share the same name: ‘when the mass of the people govern with a view to the common advantage, the form of government in question is called by the name common to all the constitutions – politeia’ (111.7, 1279a37–9). On the face of it, ‘constitutional government’, or something similar, seems appropriate enough as the name of the thing in question. This is, after all, supposed to be a ‘correct’ form of constitution, by comparison with the deviant forms, which as deviant are hardly ‘constitutions’ at all. However, this is an Aristotelian idea, whereas the name itself is introduced as one in wider circulation: when it makes its first appearance in the Politics, it is that form of constitution which ‘people call “politeia”’ (11.6, 1265b28; similarly on numerous occasions). What some people call politeia, outside Aristotle (especially the orators), is something like ‘free government’, which is opposed to tyranny, and this looks close enough to his idea, if we remember that democracy – which is usually the kind of thing the orators themselves have in mind – is for him, as a type, anything but free. ‘Polity’, then, will stand for that form of government which operates when men are genuinely free, because, in virtue of their (genuine) equality, they rule and are ruled in turn.

This conjecture seems, in fact, to be confirmed by Aristotle himself. In 111.7, after he has made the point about the name ‘polity’, he goes on:

This [i.e. that people should call it by the name politeia] is reasonable enough: it is possible for one individual, or a few people, to be outstanding in virtue; but when there is a larger number, it is hard to expect perfection in relation to all kinds of virtue, but we could most expect it in the virtue required for war; for this does occur in large numbers of people. This is why in this form of constitution the most sovereign group is the group that fights for it, and those who share in it are those who possess heavy arms. (1279a39–b4)

33 Lévy 1993.  
34 E.g. Isocrates Panegyricus 125 (cf. Letter 6.11).  
35 Isocrates certainly means democracies, at least in the first instance; given his preference for election to, and high property qualifications for, office (Areopagiticus 20–7), an Isocratean ‘polity’ might not be so far removed from an Aristotelian one – with the difference that Isocrates will still be happy to classify it as a democracy.  
It is not easy to see what exactly 'constitutional rule' has to do with this explanation of why 'polity' is called what it is. However we can fairly readily reconstruct some sort of argument based on the meaning 'citizen-rule': 'the name is apt for this kind of "mass-rule" in the common interest, because ruling in the common interest implies a certain quality, and the only kind of virtue which we can expect of large numbers is military virtue (courage); but those to whom the constitution belongs – the citizens – in this case are the hoplites'. In the Greek, it will help that the words for 'city' (polis), 'citizen' (polites), and 'constitution' (politeia) are close together in derivation and sound, as only the first two are in English.

6 The absolutely best constitution

Given the view just mentioned, that the idea of citizens 'ruling and being ruled' is somehow inbuilt into the notion of a city, it is appropriate that the (absolutely) best constitution in Books vii and viii should turn out not, after all, to be either a kingship or an aristocracy, but a kind of virtuous form of polity (i.e., a constitution that fits the general description of a polity, but is systematically concerned with virtue in a way that polities are not). But the unsatisfactory nature of the treatment of kingship and aristocracy at the end of Book iii has in any case half-prepared us for such an outcome.\textsuperscript{37} As we saw, these two forms became identified with the ‘absolutely best’ on the tails of the dialectical discussion of absolute kingship; they then slotted in, reasonably neatly but also slightly curiously, alongside polity or 'citizen-rule' on the 'correct' side of the six-fold classification of constitutions. But then in Book vii,\textsuperscript{38} the very kind of situa-
tion as envisaged at the end of vii seems to be set to one side as too unlikely (in a Greek context) to need to be taken into account:

If then the one group were to differ from the rest by the same degree that we suppose the gods and the heroes to differ from human beings, having immediately, first, a great superiority in physical terms, and then also in terms of their minds, so that the superiority of the rulers were indisputably evident to those ruled, it is clear that it would be better for the same people to be ruled and to rule, once and for all; but since this is not easy to conceive, and we do not find anything like the difference Scylax reports among the Indians between the kings and those they rule, it is evidently necessary for many reasons that all should share on the same basis in ruling and being ruled in turn. (vii.14, 1332b16–27)

It is this kind of society – one in which ‘all share on the same basis in ruling and being ruled in turn’ – which is described in Books vii and viii. As we should expect, it is a society which devotes itself, communally and individually, to a life of virtue (probably involving a mixture of practical and theoretical activity); political power is also distributed on the basis of merit, but of course, since all the citizens are trained in virtue, all may expect, at a certain age, to have to take their turn in office. As I said earlier, what is described is remarkably like the city of Magnesia in the Laws. But Aristotle begins again at the beginning. He first embarks on a discussion about the best kind of life, which any constitution claiming to be best would have to aim at, for both city and individual. Having reached the expected conclusion, that it is a life of virtue (though there are also some new points, which are not wholly predictable either from the earlier books of the Politics or from the Ethics), he then asks what kinds of conditions would need to be assumed in order to make such a life consistently possible. Finally, he starts on, but does not finish, a description (largely unremarkable, and largely familiar to readers of Plato) of the kind of education system which would be required by the virtuous city.

7 The ideal and the actual

This virtuous city, we must remember, represents what might occur if the world were as – to use an Aristotelian phrase – it ‘wishes to be’, and if human nature were ‘completed’ to the fullest possible extent. He is, however, perfectly well aware that the world is not like that, and that it will in fact go on being full of democracies and oligarchies, though evidently

with more of the former. There is no commitment on his part to the realiz-
ability of the ‘absolutely best’: it is a purely theoretical construction, 
which reflects above all his view of the best human life. Such construc-
tions, as the programme at the beginning of Book iv suggests, form part 
of the business of the political scientist, its purpose being – so it seems – to 
provide him with a rational standard for judging, and maybe somehow for 
improving, actual political arrangements. The fitfulness with which that 
standard of the best constitution seems to be applied in the ‘empirical’ 
books (iv–vi), and the sheer distance that separates Aristotle’s vision of 
the ideal from the realities of political life, as he himself describes them, 
may ultimately seem to leave Books vii and viii as little integrated in con-
tent as in form into the remainder of the Politics. But there should be no 
temptation to see the description of the ideal state as a kind of Platonic 
appendix; for it is still a constitution on this model – foreshadowed from 
the very beginning of the work – which defines what a constitution prop-
erly is.

If so, however, it is in at least one important respect an unfortunate and 
unacceptable model. As one recent commentator writes,

As it stands, the so-called ideal polis [sc. understood as co-extensive with 
its citizens] is not a political community at all, since it is not self-
sufficient for life, much less for the good life (1252b27–30). Rather, it is 
an exploiting elite, a community of free-riders whose ability to pursue 
the good life is made possible by the willingness of others to forgo that 
pursuit. Even leaving aside the question of slavery, the ‘ideal’ polis is thus 
characterized by systematic injustice.41

Aristotle holds, like Plato, that only certain sorts of occupation are com-
patible with a life of virtue: soldiering, ruling (holding office, sitting in 
court, etc.), and philosophizing.42 This means that his good man is inevi-
tably parasitic on others, and the Politics accordingly assigns all other nec-
essary occupations to non-citizens: slaves, resident aliens, and serfs of 
foreign origin (vii.4, 1326a18–21; 9, 1329a25–6; 10, 1330a25–31). Even by 
Aristotle’s lights this must be unjust, unless the slaves are all so-called 
‘natural’ slaves, and the others selected for commercial and manual tasks 
because they are incapable of anything more; but there is no indication 
that this is the case (rather the reverse).43 There is nothing for it but to 
suppose that it is all a matter of aristocratic prejudice – and a borrowed 
one at that, since Aristotle was himself a resident alien at Athens. If he was 
capable of seeing (as he probably was), in the context of the virtuous life,

41 Taylor 1995: 250. 42 E.g. vi.4, 1319a26–32. 43 Annas 1996.
that even the most desirable activity – ‘theoretical’ – could be combined with less desirable, that is political, ones, why should he not also accept that the good man and citizen might also be a farmer, or a shoemaker (and farmers and shoemakers good men and citizens)? He is at least consistent, for the same attitudes repeatedly surface elsewhere in the Politics (e.g. in the classification of the varieties of democracy in Book vi, and Book iv). Yet the very fact that it is so easy to skirt them, and construct an alternative, and more inclusive, model of an ‘Aristotelian’ political community, perhaps limits the damage that they do to the Politics as a work of political philosophy.