Aristotle: an introduction

M A L C O L M  S C H O F I E L D

1 Politics, the legislator, and the structure of the Politics

Aristotle's Politics does not itself articulate any consolidated account of how the nature and scope of inquiry into politics are to be conceived. For that we need to turn to statements elsewhere in his writings, and particularly at the beginning and end of the Nicomachean Ethics. Adoption of this expository strategy is just one index of the fact that for Aristotle ethics and politics are not two distinct even if connected disciplines, but one and the same subject. The name for this subject is 'politics'; and the systematic, drily analytical treatises which have come down to us under the titles of Ethics and Politics deal with different aspects of it. Politics so understood is a pursuit or a form of knowledge which has as its aim the achievement of the good for human beings – both individually and collectively, in their cities or peoples.

According to Aristotle that good consists in happiness or human fulfilment, which is analysed as 'activity of soul in accordance with excellence', i.e. a life exemplifying the moral and intellectual virtues. Roughly speaking, ethics – as its name indicates – is the subdivision of politics concerned with understanding the habits of character which constitute the moral virtues necessary for human fulfilment. The other subdivision studies politeiai or constitutions, construed as different ways of organizing government in a city or nation; it is presumably viewed as the more obviously or directly political part of politics. Under these rather bare and brute descriptions ethics and politics (in this narrower sense) might seem to have little to do with each other. But on the Aristotelian conception

humans are essentially social animals, and the way the governments of the communities in which they live out their lives are organized may make a huge difference to their prospects of acquiring virtue and achieving happiness.

The key to Aristotle’s conception of politics is the figure of the legislator.² Referring back to the opening two chapters of the Ethics, he writes (EN 1.9, 1099 b29–32):

We stated that the chief good is the goal of political understanding; and it devotes most of its concern and effort to making the citizens be of a certain character, viz. good and capable of fine deeds.

When he turns a little later to the topic of virtue he amplifies the thesis (1.13, 1102 a7–12):

The true politician [i.e. the person possessed of real political understanding] is thought to have put most of his effort into studying virtue. For he wants to make the citizens good and obedient to the laws. As an example of this we have the lawgivers of the Cretans and the Spartans, and any others there may have been with the same concerns.

Aristotle is of course well aware that this is not the way the word ‘politician’ is commonly used (vi.8, 1141 b23–9):

Political understanding and practical wisdom are the same state of mind, but their essence is not the same.³ Of the practical wisdom concerned with the city, the architectonic form is legislative understanding, while the form comparable to particular instances of a universal is what is known by the name common to them both, ‘political’: this has to do with action and deliberation, for a resolution [i.e. of a council or assembly], as the outcome of deliberation, is something requiring action. That is why people say that they [i.e. those politicians involved in deliberation and consequent action] are the only ones engaged in politics, because they are the only ones who ‘do things’ — in the same way that artisans ‘do things’ [i.e. as opposed to architects].

The identification of the true politician as the lawgiver who commands a strategic and directive understanding comparable to the architect’s goes back once again to the beginning of Book 1 (1.2, 1094 a26–b7):

The chief good would seem to be the object of the most authoritative form of knowledge, and the one that is most architectonic. And that seems to be the knowledge characteristic of politics. For it is this which ordains what other forms of knowledge should be studied in cities, and

which each class of citizens should learn and up to what point. And we
see even the most highly esteemed of capacities subordinated to it — e.g.
generalship, household administration, oratory. So since politics [i.e. in
this strategic sense] uses the other forms of knowledge, and since again it
legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to keep away from, the
goal aimed at by this form of knowledge will include that of the others.
Hence it is politics which has as its goal the human good.

These quotations will have explained why for Aristotle ethics as the study
of moral virtue falls under politics: if its object is to make people good, it
will need a proper understanding of the virtues and of the life of happiness
which exemplifies them. But not surprisingly these texts give no sense of
the rationale for the study of constitutions which is the principal focus of
the Politics. Aristotle is nowhere as explicit on this topic as might be
desired. His most helpful discussion of the matter is contained in the last
chapter of the Ethics, which is clearly designed to prepare the ground for
the Politics — or at any rate for a work on constitutions.

The chapter takes as its starting point the observation that ‘where there
are things to be done the goal is not studying and identifying each of
them, but actually doing them’ (x.9, 1179 a35–b2): politics (including eth-
ics) is a form of practical, not (like e.g. mathematics) theoretical, knowl-
dge, even if its practice needs to be informed by theory. Given that from
our exploration of the virtues we now know what goodness is, we still
need to explain how people become good. Aristotle accordingly turns to
the question of how far training can produce goodness, and this issue
leads in turn to the role of law and legislation, as shaping the characters of
those who have the capacity for virtue and deterring those who have not
by the fear of punishment.

In proposing a general study of legislation he indicates two distinct
sorts of reason for undertaking the enterprise. First, successful lawgiving,
and the ability to assess the merits of particular legislation, are largely
matters of experience: just as people learn to be skilled in medicine not by
reading the textbooks, but by practising as doctors. Nonetheless collec-
tions of remedies and suggestions about how different sorts of patients
should be treated are thought to be useful for those with the relevant
experience. Similarly collections of laws and constitutions could be useful
to those who have the ability to study and judge what is good or bad in
them, and what provisions suit what sorts of city. Even those who lack it
might perhaps come to comprehend these things better. Second, Aristotle

4 Cf. Rhet. 1356 a26–8, 1359 b10.  5 Gauthier and Jolif 1970, Bodéan 1991a, ch. 3.
6 Cf. Pl. Pit. 294–301, with the discussion by Rowe in Ch. 11, section 3 above.
complains that his predecessors have left the field of legislation uninvestigated. It is time for a proper examination. Without it philosophical inquiry into things human will be incomplete.

Anybody who has waded through Plato's *Laws* may be forgiven for feeling some surprise at this claim about previous work on the subject. Its rationale may be conjectured from other remarks Aristotle makes here and elsewhere. Commenting explicitly on the *Laws* in Book II of the *Politics*, he observes that it consists mostly of laws, i.e. proposals for legislation, but does not have much on the constitution.\(^7\) His own view is that laws must be framed with a view to the constitution. This implies a methodological point: discussion of the constitution is the prior, more general, and theoretically more important task, the devising of particular laws a secondary matter, and one which requires constant reference to the constitution.\(^8\) Aristotle seems to have this point in mind in our *Ethics* passage, for the proper treatment of legislation he plans will be about that 'and indeed about constitution in general'. His predecessors may have useful things to contribute – and these he will review – 'on particular topics', but not on legislation viewed in the light of general issues relating to the comparative merits of different constitutions.\(^9\)

Implicit in Aristotle's complaint about his predecessors is another criticism. Their approach to the topic of legislation was insufficiently empirical. His will be based on 'the collected constitutions'. We know what he had in mind. The ancient catalogues of Aristotle's writings list such a collection, consisting (according to the more reliable versions) of accounts of the constitutions of 158 cities. These are generally presumed to have been the work of his school, even if he had a hand in preparing some of them. Only one of the 158 survives, the *Constitution of the Athenians*, preserved more or less intact on papyrus rolls acquired for the British Museum from an Egyptian source in 1888–9. It contains a history of the changes to which the Athenian constitution had been subject from the earliest times to the restoration of democracy in 403 BC, followed by an analysis of the constitution in the author's own day.\(^10\) The assumption underlying the massive research project required to compile the collection was apparently that only by this means would it be possible to acquire the evidence needed for solid explanations of what makes a constitution successful or not. For Aristotle says that he will try to use the collection 'to study what

\(^7\) *Pol.* II.6, 1265 a1-4. This seems tendentious of Aristotle.


\(^9\) 'Constitution in general': 1181 b14; review of predecessors: 1181 b15–17.

sorts of things preserve and destroy cities, and likewise the particular kinds of constitutions, and what causes some cities to conduct their political life well, others badly' (EN x.9, 1181 b17–20).

The *Politics* does in fact contain material corresponding precisely to what this passage promises. Book v is a treatment of what causes the preservation and destruction of constitutions; and it makes frequent reference to practices and incidents in a wide range of Greek cities (and among non-Greek peoples too). The last chapter of the *Ethics* concludes with a statement of the ultimate destination to which such a causal account will lead (x.9, 1181 b20–2):

> When we have studied these matters we will perhaps get a better overview of the question of what sort of constitution is best, and how each should be organized and what laws and customs it must use if it is to be at its best.

The intention is thus to return in the end from study of constitutions to the architectonic project of legislation which is the prime function of the true politician.

The later books of the *Politics* do in a sense work out the prospectus Aristotle offers in the statement just quoted. This may indeed explain why they are placed as they are at the end of the treatise, after the treatment of what preserves and destroys constitutions in Book v. Book vi discusses how democracy and oligarchy can be constructed for greater stability, and Books vii and viii what conditions and provisions would be needed to achieve the ideal city and to produce for it an ideal aristocracy. The later chapters of Book vii and all of the incomplete Book viii are specifically concerned with the laws and customs necessary for educating its citizens for virtue. While Book vi may be construed as exploiting the considerations argued in Book v about the connection between political instability and perceived injustices in the distribution of public goods, links between Book v and Book vii are perhaps not so obvious. But Book v warns of the difficulties caused by disproportionate increases in the population or by a territory not naturally adapted to political unity, and these are precisely the sorts of issues Book vii addresses at the outset of its discussion of the ideal city.

Aristotle's prospectus speaks of 'a better overview' of the question of the best constitution. This should not suggest that empirical study of con-

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11 Books vii and viii are often thought to represent a stratum of the *Politics* earlier than Books iv–vi, even though the developmental story in which this conjecture originally belonged (see Jaeger 1948) has been abandoned in most respects. For discussion of the compositional problems of *Pol.* see briefly Ch. 18 below, and more fully Rowe 1977 (1991).
stitutions and reflection upon them is all we need if we are to achieve this understanding. The point is rather that this way we will improve on the comprehension of the issues we have already got from more abstract and theoretical discussions of what a constitution is and what are good and bad, suitable and unsuitable constitutions. Theory is indispensable, but needs to be enriched and extended and applied in the light of empirical inquiry. In our Politics the more theoretical discussions of these matters occupy Books III and IV, and supply the conceptual framework presupposed in the later books. Book II surveys earlier theoretical attempts to delineate the ideal city, and actual constitutions which approach the ideal; and it adds a postscript on notable legislators of the past. It offers the kind of review of his predecessors' contribution to the subject that is promised at the end of the Ethics. Book I, on the fundamental nature of the city and its relation to the household, serves as a preface to all that follows.

Scholars have sometimes suggested that the last paragraph of the Ethics simply does not supply a 'recognizable synopsis' of the Politics. Some have concluded from this that Aristotle there looks forward to a new version of the Politics, in the event never realized, or to a different kind of treatise altogether. It seems better to suppose that the remarks he makes at the end of the Ethics are intended not as a synopsis, but as a characterization of the Politics we actually have from a particular point of view—one which explains the focus on the later rather than the earlier books. It is presented as analogous to a medical textbook: offering general but practical guidance, based on case studies, to the practitioner—the politician conceived as lawgiver.

2 Sitz im Leben

Aristotle's identification of the true politician with the architectonic lawgiver—responsible not for isolated pieces of legislation but for implementing a whole constitutional scheme—reflects a common Greek understanding of how their political institutions were and indeed should be created, which is reflected, for example, in popular conceptions of the work of Lycurgus and Solon, in the role actually assigned to lawgivers in the foundation of colonies, and not least (despite Aristotle's strictures) in the legislative project of Plato's Laws. More unusual—but again borrowed from his Platonic inheritance—is his proposal that the ultimate object of legislation is the moral education of the citizens. He notes that only at

12 Burnet 1900 ad loc.  
13 E.g. Bodeüs 1991a: ch. 3.
Sparta and one or two other places does the lawgiver 'seem to have devoted concern and effort to questions of upbringing and suitable forms of activity' (EN x.9, 1180 a24–6).

None of this should be surprising if one recalls the salient features of Aristotle’s biography. Born the son of Philip of Macedon’s court physician in 384 BC, at Stagira in northern Greece, he joined Plato’s Academy in 367, where he stayed until Plato’s death twenty years later. Then he left for Atarneus in Asia Minor and the court of Hermeias, another former member of the Academy, whose niece he married. After moving briefly to Mytilene on Lesbos he was summoned back to Macedon by Philip in 342 to be tutor to the young Alexander, in the event for only two years. On Philip’s death in 335 he returned to Athens, to teach and pursue his encyclopaedic researches, in the area of the popular gymnasium called the Lyceum. He remained until Alexander’s death in 323, when apprehensive of anti-Macedonian sentiment he retired to ancestral estates at Chalcis in Euboea. There he died of an illness the following year.

Three points relevant to Aristotle’s conception of politics stand out. First, Stagira was and no doubt prided itself on being a Greek polis (it was a colony of Chalcis and Andros), and much closer in size to Aristotle’s ideal than the Athens he came to study in. He never seems to have doubted that being Greek and living in a small polis was the supreme form of human existence, nor that study of the polis was worth the investment of huge intellectual resources over a long period. Second, in living all his adult life away from his native town he never had even the opportunity for involvement in the daily hurly-burly of politics as ordinarily understood. He did have the chance to witness Athenian political life in action, however, and seems to have regarded it as a theatre for demagogues, exhibiting many of the features of the worst kind of democracy. He compares the claims of the political or practical life and the life of study both in the Ethics (Book x) and the Politics (the beginning of Book vii), and awards the palm to study and contemplation.

Third, while the Academy in the period of Aristotle’s membership was a forum for philosophical controversy, not the home of doctrinal orthodoxy, his intellectual formation well into his maturity was shaped within a broadly Platonic mould. Thus in metaphysics he early on rejected Plato’s theory of Forms, and with it the transcendent status of the good. More important is that he continued to share the conviction that philosophy is the search for unchangeable first principles. In politics he is highly

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critical of the collectivist proposals of the *Republic*, and construes the point of political life as the creation of an environment in which individuals perform fine deeds. Yet Plato’s political thought continued to provide much of the detailed problematic of Aristotle’s own work in this area, as well as much of its overall intellectual framework. And he agreed with Plato in both the *Republic* and the *Laws* on the perciepence of the Spartans in viewing politics as in essence legislation designed to mould the behaviour of citizens by education and regulation.

At no point is the gulf between Aristotle’s political ideals and those implicit in Athenian democratic ideology wider than it is here. To judge from the fourth-century orators, the rule of law on which Athenian citizens harped continually was valued above all because it represented freedom from the intrusions characteristic of arbitrary autocratic government. And in the competitive processes of litigation and the decisions of the courts law was standardly interpreted in accordance with the perceived interests of the *demos*: it was in their control, not they in it. Aristotle no doubt interpreted this as the lawlessness typical of extreme democracy.

It might have been thought that someone who had spent considerable time at the court of Philip of Macedon would have been more interested in the imperial ambitions of absolute monarchy, and its impact on the independence of even the most powerful Greek states, and less preoccupied with the cultivation of moral wellbeing in a small-scale community. Claims to have found indirect evidence that the *Politics* does reflect such an interest have not withstood criticism. This goes for the detection, for example, of a covert reference to Alexander the Great in Aristotle’s discussion of the hypothetical person qualified to exercise monarchical rule because his pre-eminence in virtue so overshadows the attainments of all other citizens. At one point he suggests that if the Greeks could become one *politeia*, then by virtue of their qualities of mind and temperament and their excellent political institutions they would be well qualified to rule over everyone else. This too has been seen as an allusion to Macedonian hopes for a Panhellenic conquest of Asia, echoed in Plutarch’s anecdote (doubtless apocryphal) of how Aristotle tried unsuccessfully to persuade Alexander to behave as a leader towards Greeks, but as a master towards barbarians. But on Aristotelian principles the suggestion must be counterfactual: Greece *could* not be one *politeia*. What is

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19 Aristotle is credited with works entitled *On Monarchy and Alexander*, conceivably composed in the period 342–335: D.L. v.22.
much clearer is that Aristotle thinks absolute monarchy by and large a rather primitive institution, suitable for communities where virtue and intelligence are not as widely distributed as he implies they have been in Greece for some centuries.\textsuperscript{20}

3 Aristotle’s analytical models

At its most general and fundamental level Aristotle’s analysis of the polis is a highly abstract exercise in rational choice theory. He envisages a community of persons who associate because of their need to make a living, but who have as their goal the good life, i.e. a life of fulfilment exemplifying the characteristically human virtues. These persons are assumed to be free and equal: naturally free, that is, capable of determining strategies for living, and so (on his view) entitled to a status enabling them to exercise that capacity; and equal, in that their capacities for strategic thinking are all roughly equal. How should such a community govern itself? The form of rule appropriate to it is what Aristotle calls political rule, in contradistinction from despotic rule (suitable for the direction of slaves or naturally slavish persons) and monarchy (the right way to run e.g. one’s household).\textsuperscript{21}

Political differs from despotic rule in that (i) rule is exercised in the interests primarily of the ruled, not the ruler, and (ii) there is ruling and being ruled by turns.\textsuperscript{22} Aristotle says little to explain or defend (i), but its rationale is obvious: given the basic objects for which the community exists, the point of government must be to enable its members to achieve them. On (ii) he is more forthcoming. It would be better for the same persons to rule always, if that were possible - because ruling requires specific skills and virtues, and as in other spheres where this is true specialization is likely to be more efficient and produce better results. But given the hypothesis of the natural equality of all the citizens, and assuming it to be impracticable for them all to be in office simultaneously, justice (i.e. fairness) requires that all should rule, but taking turns - with everyone out of office, at any rate, in the same boat for the time being.\textsuperscript{23} This constitution, i.e. system of allocating offices,\textsuperscript{24} requires adoption of a norm: the princi-
Aristotle explores what he presents as a problem with this conception of political rule. The merit of political rule is that if government is conducted in the interest of the governed, all have the opportunity to develop and display the moral virtues – courage, moderation, and so on. The difficulty is that only a person holding office at a given time is in a position to exercise practical wisdom, or at any rate to exercise it in its most important sphere, for the good of the whole community. So it appears that the system of political rule does not after all enable citizens to achieve the good life, or at any rate not as fully as possible: the good citizen is not identical with the good human being. In Book vii Aristotle in effect offers a solution to this problem, by making all the mature citizens of his ideal aristocracy perpetual rulers, once they have served their apprenticeship in the subordinate positions naturally appropriate to younger men. This is an ingenious attempt to rework both democratic principles and the egalitarianism traditional in Greek aristocratic ideology into a single pattern. 26

But things do not stay so simple. The abstract model of what Aristotle calls the ‘political community’ gets elaborated by a variety of complications, which have the effect of making it much more nearly a model of the historical Greek polis, and at the same time of diluting its egalitarianism. The complications come in two main varieties. First, the issues of who should be admitted to membership of the citizen body and how participation in rule should be organized are in practice much contested. This comes about for reasons Aristotle connects together in an analysis which effectively involves the introduction of what we would call classes – primarily economic classes, but as well as the rich minority and the poor masses the well born (i.e. the hereditary landed aristocracy) and the virtuous (i.e. the true moral elite) are sometimes made parties to the argument. 27

The rich, for example, will say that they are not on an equality with the poor, and that their worth (axia) is such that they deserve more of the ruling positions or honours (timai) than them. The poor, for their part, will typically counter that the free (in this context the free-born) status common to all the citizens does or should make them equal in everything. And they foment unrest when they perceive an inequality between what they

27 111.9–13, iv and v.
own and what the rich do — for while honour, the traditional goal of the 
political life, motivates the educated elite, what the masses are interested 
in is gain. Aristotle himself sees merit in these and many similar conflict-
ing contentions about what he calls 'worth' or 'merit', but which we 
might diagnose as arguments about status and the claims to participation 
in rule they are designed to advance. And he suggests that it would be pru-
dent for oligarchies to introduce more egalitarian features into their con-
stitutions, and for democracies to restrict eligibility for some offices to 
those who satisfy a certain property qualification, or to allow such posi-
tions to be filled sometimes not by lottery but by voting.

Aristotle has here enriched his model by considerations drawn from a 
fairly elaborate, if often schematic and stereotyped, political sociology. The 
other main complication in his theory is introduced by a functional 
analysis, derived in its basic approach from Plato in the Republic, of what 
makes the polis — now interpreted as the society as a whole — a self-
sufficient unit. The crucial distinction Aristotle draws is between the 
integral parts of a political community and functions that are merely nec-
essary for its existence, although also important is his anti-Platonic idea 
that the city is made up of households, a sphere — below the threshold of 
political discourse proper — to which women and chattel slaves are rele-
gated. The distinction between parts and necessary conditions is a shaky 
one, but Aristotle's point is that political deliberation and the exercise of 
jurisdiction are activities intrinsic to the pursuit of the good life, namely 
to the basic aim of political association, and a military capacity is clearly in 
the public interest. But farming and labouring, marketing and the prac-
tice of artisan crafts are neither — they simply supply the economic needs 
of the individuals who live in the polis. In his ideal aristocracy Aristotle 
would accordingly bar from citizenship those involved in subsistence 
farming, crafts and trade. These occupations make people small-minded 
and give insufficient leisure for political activity and the acquisition of vir-
tue. They have no proper place in the exclusive club of the leisured 
exploiters of their labour which constitutes the citizen community. No 
wonder Aristotle's political philosophy both attracts and repels, combin-
ing as it does penetrating insight into both first principles and the dynam-
ics of political struggle with proposals born of crude class interest.

30 Cf. e.g. Wood and Wood 1978. 31 The material in section 3 has appeared in an expanded version in Schofield 1999: ch. 6.