

## **Aristotle and Justice – Part II** **(From Book III of the *Politics*)**

### **I. Preliminary Comments**

In the previous week, in the main text and the Professor's Notes, we already noticed that Aristotle sees an overlap between ethics and politics. In fact, in the second section of Book I of his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle elaborates his thoughts on this matter. (And he actually returns to some of these considerations in this excerpt of the *Politics*.) Aristotle argues that the master end of all human actions and activities is happiness (eudaimonia). What this means is that everything we do, we do under the impression that it leads to the development of a fully formed soul. Aristotle, however, knows that as humans we might be mistaken about what we might think leads to eudaimonia. I might be under the impression that robbing a bank is a good way of pursuing eudaimonia, insofar it provides me with the financial support I need to become the philosopher that I'd like to be. However, Aristotle would say that I am being blind about the detrimental consequences of robbing a bank—if caught I'll be imprisoned, or perhaps I might be killed if the robbery goes wrong (say, by a security guard or an armed citizen), or perhaps I won't be able to rob all the money I need in only one robbery (forcing me to eventually live a life of theft). Aristotle would say that I have the *wrong* impression if I think I will become virtuous and happy by robbing banks. Ignorance, he would say, has blinded me. For Aristotle, ethics, as a philosophical discipline, has at least two clear purposes: 1) It provides us with a theory (which is hopefully true) about what is the master end of human action (eudaimonia), and how it is relevant to being human (it is the product of being virtuous and rational). 2) However, this theory should also—at least ideally—encourage us to put this knowledge into practice. In fact, Aristotle believes that even though I can possess theoretical knowledge of the moral virtues, I cannot really know what they are until I practice them. It is only through the practice of courage, generosity, justice, and temperance, that I will be able to actually *become* virtuous, and eventually possess eudaimonia.

On the surface, Aristotle's general interest in ethics seems to concern only individuals. However, Aristotle also argues that the pursuit of happiness (eudaimonia) is something that concerns society as a whole. This is why any ethical examination, for Aristotle, always ends up being also a political examination—or at least should lead to a political examination. The question, then, for Aristotle, is how can a group of people—for example, the citizens of a *polis*—come

together in order to pursue eudaimonia. Under the conditions of the “agreement” of union that is a city, or a nation, or a city-state, the pursuit and practice of a virtuous life which leads to the possession of eudaimonia is not merely an individual affair, but a concern of the whole community. This is why Aristotle remarks that “a state exists for the sake of the good like [i.e., for the sake of eudaimonia], and not for the sake of life only” (page 18 of the excerpt). He believes that the very reason humans come together to form a state, is to pursue eudaimonia together. With this in mind, Aristotle realizes that he must revisit his notion of justice, but this time more explicitly related to the state.

## II. Politics and Justice

Some of you might be acquainted with Aristotle’s classification of the different political orders or systems and their deviations. Since he mentions some of them in both parts of excerpts it is good to have some idea of what he has in mind. Aristotle believes there are at least three possible political orders (and different groups of people will prefer one over the others). Aristotle knows that in practice different cities or nations might incorporate different elements of each system, but, at least in theory, his classification might be helpful. He thinks that the three main political systems humans organize into are: monarchy (or kingship), aristocracy, and polity.

1. Monarchy is the rule of only one, thus, what he has in mind is something like the rule of a king. (The word ‘monarchy’ comes from the Ancient Greek, ‘mono’, which means ‘alone’, and ‘arkhein’ or ‘archon’, which can be translated into English as ‘ruler’ or ‘commander’. Aristotle argues that a monarchy gone wrong deviates or transforms into a tyranny. The word ‘tyranny’ comes from the Ancient Greek ‘tyrannos’, which means ‘absolute ruler unlimited by law or constitution’, and thus its current meaning in English is not too far away from its original meaning in Ancient Greek.<sup>1</sup>
2. An aristocracy is the rule of those who are considered to be the best in a society. The word comes from ‘aristo’ which means ‘noble, brave, virtuous’, and ‘kratos’ which means ‘power’ or ‘rule’. In Aristotle’s mind, those who are ‘aristo’ are the most excellent, that is, the most virtuous individuals in a society. They possess all

---

<sup>1</sup> All the word etymologies in this document have come from <https://www.etymonline.com/>, which is a very helpful online resource to check word etymologies.

the right virtues in the right amount. An aristocracy that goes wrong, deviates or transforms into an oligarchy. An oligarchy is the rule of only a few (more than just a single monarch). The word comes from ‘oligos’, which means ‘a few’, ‘small’, or ‘little’, and, again, ‘arkhein’ or ‘archon’, which means ‘ruler’ or ‘commander’. An oligarchy, in Aristotle’s mind, means a group of only a few, but not necessarily the best. The deviation is born, perhaps, out of the fact that those who are excellent are already only a few in society (or at least this is a commonly held opinion). Thus, when those few become corrupt, or are replaced in the same quantity by those who are not excellent, then the system begins to deviate away from an aristocracy.

3. Finally, a polity, is a form of government which is grounded on the diversity of a group of people. For Aristotle, this diversity is unlike our contemporary notions of diversity—what he has in mind is that a polity is governed by larger group of people (not a monarch, not a small group of aristocrats) that pretty much composes the whole of the citizenry of the polis. It includes the virtuous, and the not-so-virtuous, the wealthy and the less wealthy, the strong and the weak, etc. (It does not, however, include women or slaves—these, for Aristotle, are never entitled to citizenship.) The word ‘polity’ comes from the Ancient Greek ‘politeia’, which means ‘state, administration, government’, and which itself comes from the very word that means ‘city’ in Greek, ‘polis’. Curiously for us, a polity gone wrong, according to Aristotle, deviates into a democracy. The word ‘democracy’, comes from the Ancient Greek ‘demos’ which means ‘common people’ and ‘kratos’ which means ‘power’ or ‘rule’. In Aristotle’s mind, a democracy is ruled by the masses of the poorest citizens, in the context of the Greek polis. As we can see, much of Aristotle’s political conception is grounded on the differences between economic classes in the polis—as a general rule he thought that those who were less than wealthy, were also deficient in other ways, less virtuous, less educated, less rational, etc. (an association we might find misguided); whereas the wealthier classes has a better chance at being virtuous, more educated, more rational, etc. (although this was not the case in all instances, as Aristotle himself points out).

Aristotle never really expresses explicitly which of these political systems he prefers. However, he does seem to lean towards a combined system between an aristocracy and a polity—a system

that is not necessarily limited to only a small group of rulers (like a strict aristocracy, perhaps), but one that must certainly include the most virtuous, learned, and wise in society. He seems to believe that this sort of government might guarantee some political stability.

Returning to the topic at hand, Aristotle does suggest that different political systems will have different ways of conceiving justice—which is something that he isn't too comfortable with. His inclination is to tread with caution, and explicitly point out that, although in general the word 'justice' invokes both versions of justice examined in his *Nicomachean Ethics*—the broad understanding of justice as a moral virtue that leads to eudaimonia, and the narrower understanding of justice as a form of fairness that serves as the ground for proportional merit—most humans think of justice as a matter of equality and inequality. Thus, since justice as equality takes a more concrete role in the functioning of a state, *and* since it seems to require a different sort of specificity than the one than can be achieved under its conception as a moral virtue, Aristotle points out that we must ask about what sort of equality we are requiring justice to regulate: “*Equality or inequality of what?*” (page 19 of the excerpt; my emphasis). Since justice, in practical and political terms, is thought of mostly as a matter of equality that must take into account a certain amount of inequality, the balance between equality and inequality must be about the measurement of something. (In very concrete terms, in the first half of the excerpt, we saw that it has to do mostly with wealth, and a citizen's contribution of his wealth to the state.) What Aristotle is trying to defend is his own preference for a political system that guarantees a certain amount of political stability. Thus, the question about what sort of equality or inequality justice addresses depends on the group of individuals that form a state. For some groups of individuals, it might be convenient to think of everyone as being intrinsically equal—which means that anyone and everyone deserves to take a part in the rule of the state. Democracies benefit from having very broad conceptions of equality. On the contrary, for other groups of individuals it might be convenient to constraint justice as equality a lot, so as to wrest political power away from those who are not like them. A very narrow conception of equality might be convenient to a monarchy. For Aristotle, the best form justice as equality is somewhere in the middle between a very broad conception and a very narrow conception.

It is worth pointing out two things here: 1) Aristotle seems to be fearful that democracies are far too lenient when it comes to justice. In his mind, only those who are equals in a very defined sense are politically equal, but they will also be unequal to others. A more concrete example might

go something like this: His fear is that in a full-blown democracy, those who are unwise might believe themselves to merit an equal share of power as those who are wiser than them. Aristotle would perhaps cringe at this thought, and argue that those who are less wise are unequal to those who are wiser, and thus must have less political power than the wiser. However, in contrast, Aristotle also fears that in a very strict aristocracy, or even worse, an oligarchy, the rulers will determine that anyone who is not “excellent” in the way in which they (the rulers) are “excellent” is not entitled to any political participation. 2) As we saw in the last set of Professor’s Notes, Aristotle’s insistence that there is a type of justice that is about fairness and equality leads inevitably to thinking about issues of merit and desert.

In this sense, the question of “Equality or inequality of what?” is meant to point out that, when it comes to the order of the state, some relations of equality and inequality have no bearing on the political voice and power of the citizens, while others—at least for Aristotle—do. If those who rule the state are going to be shaped by some amount of equality, then it has to be the sort of equality of traits and attributes that have some bearing on their capacity to rule. How good-looking, or how tall, or how fit, an individual is, has no bearing on an individual’s capacity to rule. Thus, saying that only those who are equally tall, or equally good-looking, are the ones that deserve to rule, is the wrong criteria to use. A state guided by *that* sort of criteria of equality would be an unjust state. However, perhaps being equally courageous, or equally generous, or equally wise, (all of these regardless of how good-looking someone is), might be more appropriate traits to take into consideration when defining who deserves to rule and who doesn’t. Aristotle, of course, is not without his own biases—he still points out that being wealthy seems to be a necessary thing to gain political participation, although it is not the only criterion to take into account.

The crucial thing to notice is that: 1) Aristotle compels his audience (us) to think through what justice is about. Even if he seems to be sure about what he is talking about, sometimes, his skepticism is an invitation to reevaluate what we mean by justice and how it works in our current political system. But it is also an invitation to reevaluate *his*—Aristotle’s—conception of justice (which is not always clear and easy to understand). 2) Furthermore, he represents something of an advancement beyond the limits of his teacher Plato, of what it means to *philosophically* think about justice and the accompanying issues of merit and desert. Remember that Plato ultimately boils down justice to whatever it is that his philosopher-rulers figure justice to be, and that the general correction for any sort of injustice is mostly education. As well-intentioned as Plato is (and, I

admit, as a philosopher and an educator, I want to support Plato in this respect—although he fails in many, many other ways), Aristotle opens the notion of justice up to all sorts of nuances and details that Plato is blind to. If we return briefly to the excerpt that comes from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we can notice that Aristotle is already thinking that not all deviations from justice require the same type of correction or even punishment. For example, he seems to want to suggest that assault, murder, and robbery, don't fall into the same category of injustice as, say, financial or monetary forms of injustice. (Although, admittedly, some parts of the lists he provides on page 17 of the excerpt are altogether confusing.) Nevertheless, and regardless of the deep differences we might have with Aristotle concerning justice and politics, he certainly calls for a more detailed examination of justice.