

**MAKING THE CITIZENS GOOD: ARISTOTLE'S CITY  
AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE<sup>1</sup>**

*The Problem*

In book three of the *Politics* when Aristotle comes to discuss what the polis, the city, is and how political power is to be distributed, he states that the city truly so called must care about virtue and be such as to make the citizens good (1280b7ff).<sup>2</sup> This remark is made in the context of a dispute between oligarchs and democrats over claims to shares in the city. The oligarchs say they should have an unequal or greater share because they are unequal in wealth, whereas the democrats say they should have an equal share because they are equal in freedom. Aristotle comments that these two are arguing badly and suppose either that because they are in some respect unequal they are altogether unequal, or that because they are in some respect equal they are altogether equal. Neither, however, speaks of the most authoritative thing. The most authoritative thing, which will decide what the relevant grounds for equality and inequality are, can be determined by asking what the city is, or what it is for.

The argument of the oligarchs, explains Aristotle, would appear to prevail if people associated together in cities for the sake of wealth and possessions, for then one's share in the city would be determined by one's share of property. But it is false to suppose that people associate in cities for the sake of what belongs to life alone. The city is not a

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<sup>2</sup> All references to Aristotle are to the *Politics* unless expressly noted.

business contract nor an alliance for mutual defense against wrong-doers. The city exists for the sake of the good life, for living well and nobly. Thus those have a greater share in the city who most contribute to such noble activity, namely those who have greater political virtue. Virtue, then, not wealth or free birth, is the primary claim to political power and rule (1280a25-1281a8).<sup>3</sup>

Aristotle was, of course, well aware that not everyone agreed with him that virtue is what the city is about. He mentions the sophist Lycophron as one who equated the city with an alliance for mutual protection (1280b8-12). Moreover he knew that few, if any, actual cities in his day made any effort towards virtue or regarded this as their primary task. Indeed he admits that only Sparta might plausibly be said to have done this (*NE*: 1180a25),<sup>4</sup> and even Sparta did it badly. For the Spartans cultivated only part of virtue, military virtue, not the whole of it, and they did so not for the sake of virtue itself but for what they thought they could get through virtue, namely empire and despotic rule over others. The Spartans did not, in fact, differ from other cities in what they thought should be pursued, but only in the means they chose to pursue it (1333b5-1334a10; 1334a34-b5; 1338b9-38).

Aristotle's description or definition of the city seems therefore not to be the description or definition of any city that actually existed. Commentators on Aristotle's *Politics* have sometimes remarked that the book is of only marginal relevance to us because it fits only the peculiar conditions of the small cities of ancient Greece. They also remark that Aristotle seems to have been peculiarly blind to what was in fact going on

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<sup>3</sup> There is a good discussion of this passage and its precise meaning in the context of book three by Francis Wolff, 'Justice et Pouvoir (Aristote: *Politique* III, 9-13)', *Phronesis* 33 (1988) 273-296.

<sup>4</sup> The Cretan legislator, and possibly some nameless others, are mentioned favourably elsewhere, *NE*: 1102a10.

around him even in his own lifetime. The heyday of the Greek city had already passed and was being replaced by the great empires of Alexander and his successors. Aristotle could have written something of more immediate relevance, the suggestion seems to be, but his nostalgia or his prejudice got in the way.<sup>5</sup>

Although this sort of criticism is common it is nevertheless false, for it is altogether too mild. As has just been indicated, Aristotle does not seem to have written anything applicable even to the Greek cities he was supposedly nostalgic about. None of those cities were, or even tried very hard to be, anything like what he said a city was. What is more Aristotle was fully aware of this. He was not so much blind or prejudiced, we might conclude, as deliberately perverse.

Or so it might seem. But we should not be so hasty to condemn. There might be some other explanation as to why Aristotle flew in the face of the historical facts, an explanation that is more philosophically instructive and intriguing than the easy charge of prejudice or perversity. To find such an alternative explanation one should naturally begin with Aristotle's own text. For Aristotle does not merely say that the city is not a business contract or an alliance for mutual defense, he professes to give reasons. The reasons that particularly stand out in the context are the following. First, if people come together into cities for life alone and not for good life, then there could be a city of slaves

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<sup>5</sup> Charges of this nature, either mildly or harshly expressed, can be found in: J. Aubonnet, *Aristote: Politiques* (Budé, Paris, 1973), p.cxii; E. Barker, *The Politics of Aristotle* (Oxford 1946), pp. xlvii, lix, 388n.; and, by the same author, *The Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle* (Dover, 1959), p.497; K.C. De, *Aristotle's Politics: a Critical Study* (S. Gupta, Calcutta, 1971), pp. 180-181, 193, 203; J.B. Elshtain, *Public Man and Private Woman* (Princeton, 1981), pp.43, 47; M. Hammond, *City-State and World State* (Biblio and Tannen, NY 1966), pp.28-31; H. Kelsen, "The Philosophy of Aristotle and the Hellenic-Macedonian Policy", *Ethics* 48 (1937) 59 (Kelsen notes that this sort of charge is often made but does not endorse it himself); A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1984), p.159; W.L Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle* (Oxford, 1887), vol.1, pp.88, 477-478; T.A. Sinclair, *Aristotle: Politics* (Penguin, 1962), pp.17-18; Susemihl and Hicks, *The Politics of Aristotle* (Macmillan, London, 1894), p.22. This list of authors and works could be indefinitely extended.

and other animals. But there cannot be such a city, for slaves and animals have no share of happiness (or *eudaimonia*). Second, those who live far apart and do not share a common life in one city but use their households as if these were their city, can engage in trade and defensive alliances and even in intermarriage. So trade, alliances and intermarriage, even between people inhabiting the same place, cannot be enough to make a city. These things may be necessary prerequisites but the city is something more than all of them, for it is about living happily and virtuously (1280a31-34; 1280b23-1281a2).<sup>6</sup>

As summarized these arguments are not very convincing. They both seem to beg the question. The first, in assuming that to be a member of the city one must have a share of happiness, already assumes that the city is not for life alone but for good life, since the good life and happiness are regularly identified by Aristotle and that identity is repeated here in this same context (1280b39-1281a2). The second argument assumes that the something more that makes the city is virtue, and also assumes, more crucially, that the city is indeed something more. For those who disagree with Aristotle might very well hold that there is nothing more to the city, over and above an ordinary alliance or a business contract, than sameness of place. Indeed Lycophron seems to have thought this, and the practice of actual Greek cities, by Aristotle's own confession, was not much different. In short Aristotle seems simply to assume what he should prove.

This charge, though plausible on the surface, is in fact unfair. It would be more accurate to say that Aristotle assumes, not what he should prove, but what he has proved, or professes to have proved, earlier in the *Politics*. This is signaled by his mention of slaves as not able to share in good life and of the household as not the same as a city, and also by his repetition of the phrase that the city is a community for complete and self-

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<sup>6</sup> The second of these two arguments is the longer one and the one that is more stressed.

sufficient life. All three recall, and point back to, the argument of book one of the *Politics*. It is to book one, above all, that we must return if we are to understand why Aristotle associates the city and the life of virtue.

### *The City and the Good Life*

Book one seems to be about the household and its parts, and indeed it is, but it is about the household and its parts only because Aristotle's intention is to show that the household and the city are different kinds of community, not different sizes of the same community. This is at any rate what he says about his intention in the very first chapter of the book. For the whole argument of book one, including the famous argument that humans are by nature political animals, is entered into by Aristotle in order to justify his claim about the distinctness in kind of the different communities. The truth of this claim will be seen, says Aristotle, if we break the city down to its constituent parts and observe how the city grows out of them (1252a17-26).

The city turns out to be the term or goal of a natural movement of human beings into communities of increasing complexity. This movement begins with the natural desire, common to animals as well as plants, for procreation and survival (1252a26-31). This desire progressively leads humans into households, villages and then the city. The city is the term of this movement because only the city provides what the movement was aiming at from the beginning, a life provided with all that is necessary, or a life that is self-sufficient. Such life is also identified at once by Aristotle with living well (1252b27-30). In the arguments of book three just examined, living well is identified with living happily, and that in turn with living nobly and virtuously. But the argument so far given

is hardly enough to justify that conclusion. Why could not self-sufficient life mean sufficient for survival and procreation and nothing more, for after all that is what the natural desire was for and what the household and village as such exist for? And why should living happily be the same as living nobly and virtuously? Could one not be happy just with the material goods necessary for life? To answer yes to this last question would be to adopt something like the opinion of the vulgar who identify happiness with physical pleasures and whom Aristotle accuses in the *Ethics* of living like grazing cattle, that is to say of not even rising to the level of humanity (*NE*: 1095b14-22). In the *Ethics*, of course, happiness is identified with a life of virtue and not a life of pleasure because human life, as opposed to merely animal life, is identified as a life with *logos*, reason or speech, and virtue is living such a reasoned life well (*NE*: 1097b22-1098a20). It is noteworthy, though perhaps not surprising, that the same argument is given in the *Politics*. Human nature differs from animal nature, Aristotle proceeds to say, because of the presence of *logos*. Indeed it is only because of *logos* that humans may be said to be naturally political in a way that other herding animals are not. Animals have voice and perceive only pleasure and pain; humans have also *logos* and perceive the good and the bad, the just and the unjust (1253a7-18).

Aristotle's argument about the naturalness of political life is, one must confess, somewhat disingenuous.<sup>7</sup> That argument really turns on *logos*, not on the natural drives

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<sup>7</sup> According to D. Keyt, Aristotle's argument, or arguments, in the opening chapters of book one are simply fallacious, 'Three Fundamental Theorems in Aristotle's *Politics*', *Phronesis* 32 (1987) 54-79. Keyt's provocative article deserves a more detailed reply than I can give it here. However, in addition to what I say later in this article, I ought at least to say the following. First, if one is going to get anywhere at all in making sense of Aristotle's claims that the city is natural and humans naturally political, one must give to the term 'nature' a meaning which includes, not excludes, the artificial. Keyt supposes, mainly on the basis of what Aristotle says in other works, that the natural and the artificial are always opposed to each other. But it may be that in the *Politics* Aristotle is intending to employ a sense of nature where it is precisely not so opposed. Merely because he has not introduced any such sense of nature elsewhere (though in fact I

for procreation and survival. Those drives may indeed bring humans into close communal living and to the level of the city, but the city must exist for something beyond them (1252b29-30). If the city were just for the sake of survival it could not differ in kind, because it would not differ in purpose, from the household or the village, and if human life were just for the sake of survival, it could not, for the same reason, differ in kind from the life of herding animals. But if this is not so, and if the natural human life is the political life in the sense of a life of logos lived in company with others living a life of logos, then the claim Aristotle makes in book three, that virtue is the point of the city, follows without further ado. For the life of virtue is the life of logos lived as well as possible.

This seems a strong argument but is it enough? For even if logos has been shown to be part of human nature, has it yet been shown to be for its own sake? Might not logos be merely a tool or instrument for securing survival, so that the point of human existence

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think he has) does not entail that therefore he cannot consistently introduce it here. According to this sense, those things could be called natural which, whether brought about by nature or by art, fill properly and well the natural need they answer to. It is this sense that Aristotle must be using when he calls the best city, as opposed to bad or defective cities, a city according to nature, a point that is in fact made in the *Ethics* (1135a5). The same sense of nature would also be found in natural slave and natural wealth-getting, for both these are in some way products of art (the slave has to be trained to function well as a slave and wealth-getting requires skill and art, as I point out below). The aim of art (as well as education) is, after all, to fill up the deficiencies of nature (1337a1-3; cf. also *Metaphysica* A, 980b25-28 and *Protrepticus*, frag. 11 Ross). Of course, according to this sense of nature, an artifact like a shoe could be called natural when it does what a shoe should do, that is to say when it is a good shoe, and not natural when it does not do this and is a bad one. I can recall nowhere where Aristotle expressly says this (though cf. 1257a5-13), but it is nevertheless an Aristotelian thought. Second, this sense of nature, while allowing the city to be understood as something artificial, will not give any support to Hobbes' claim that civil society is artificial, contrary to one of Keyt's main contentions in his paper. For Hobbes' civil society is artificial by opposing nature. As Hobbes seems to take delight in stressing, nature "dissociates man" (*Leviathan*, ch. 13; something Keyt is aware of without appreciating its significance in this context). Aristotle's city, by contrast, is artificial by fulfilling and following nature, and so it is natural at the same time. Since one can argue (as some of the sophists seem to have done) that because the city is brought about by art and convention it is therefore unnatural in the sense of being contrary to nature, whereas in fact, however artificial in these respects, it could still very well be a fulfillment of nature, Aristotle has to expose this sophistical reasoning in his *Politics* and to indicate that the natural and the artificial or conventional need not necessarily be opposed to each other. Keyt's comments therefore, and the assumption on which they rest, seem to miss precisely what it is that Aristotle is up to. For further remarks on this topic see my 'Politics and Human Nature', *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 31 (1986) 79-96, esp. 87-95.

would not be the activities of *logos* proper, but the survival which those activities help us to secure? We are forced to ask this question, not only because the idea was around in Aristotle's day,<sup>8</sup> but also because later thinkers who have greatly influenced us, notably Hobbes, did teach something rather like this. Besides Aristotle seems to be aware that as it stands his argument is not quite sufficient. He repeats the claim of those who say the household and the city do not differ in kind and treats it as raising a question still in need of an answer (1253b14-20; 1255b16-18). To provide such an answer is indeed the reason he gives for undertaking the extended analysis of slavery that immediately follows, and the same reason will also explain the extended analysis of wealth-getting that follows that.

Aristotle's discussion of slavery has provoked an enormous amount of controversy. I do not intend to enter much into those controversies here. What I wish to do is to give a description of what Aristotle means by a slave, or to be more precise, the natural slave, and to show how this relates to the question of what the city is for. Natural slaves do not differ very much from domestic animals, as Aristotle first indicates by saying, in reference to a quotation from Hesiod, that for the poor an ox takes the place of a servant (1252b12). Natural slaves do not possess reason of themselves but have to follow the reason of another. The best that can be got from them is the use of the body, and, like domestic animals, their value is that they provide bodily assistance for the necessities of life. In fact they differ as much from free persons as the body from the soul, or as wild animals from human beings (1254b2-31; also 1254a13-15). They exist, in other words, like other animals, only on the level of the bodily and only for the needs of

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<sup>8</sup> It is forcefully expressed by Thrasymachus, and then by Glaucon and Adeimantus, in Plato's *Republic* and also by Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*.



the body. In this context, in fact, it is not insignificant to notice that when Aristotle criticizes those who devote themselves to bodily pleasures, while he may not call them slaves or animals, he does call them slavish and beastly (*NE*: 1095b19-20; 1118a23-25; b25).

Of course human beings do not wish to be slaves. Nor is this surprising. Slavery is subhuman and Aristotle is well aware of the fact. If we ourselves find something abhorrent about slavery it is because we are in agreement with Aristotle on its subhuman character. Of course what we also find abhorrent is that Aristotle could have thought anybody was a natural slave or should be treated like one. But for the purposes of the present argument<sup>9</sup> we need not go this far. We can, if we like, regard the natural slave as a sort of idealized limit-concept, indicating that projected point where the properly human gives out.<sup>10</sup> We do not have to suppose that any beings, who seem otherwise human, are actually at or beyond that point. What we do have to notice, though, is how Aristotle has identified the slavish or subhuman as the merely animal and bodily, and as the concern with merely bodily needs and pleasures. If humans have no better goal than procreation and survival, if *logos* is for the sake of such survival and not for its own sake, and if the city is therefore no different save in size from the household or village which as such<sup>11</sup> have no end but survival, then no human being at all rises above the level of slavery as Aristotle understood slavery.

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<sup>9</sup> And even, I am inclined to argue, for the *Politics* as a whole. At least it is not clear to me that Aristotle does not ultimately intend to suggest through his discussion of slavery that there are in fact no natural slaves at all even though the city seems to need slaves in order to perform its job properly. But this is a long argument that I cannot go into here.

<sup>10</sup> For the possibility of this interpretation consider 1253a27-29.

<sup>11</sup> I say "as such" because at least the household, once it has become part of a city, can take on some of the functions of education in virtue proper to the city; 1253a18, and compare also *NE*: 1180a18-21, 29-35.

In this context, in fact, it is worth noting that the presence of slavery in Aristotle's thought is one of the chief reasons why he could not have accepted the political doctrine of Hobbes or Locke. For to admit, with them, that the point of civil society is mutual preservation and the protection of property would be to abolish the distinction between slave and free, not indeed by abolishing slaves but by abolishing the free.<sup>12</sup> In contrast with Hobbes and Locke, we might therefore have to say, paradoxical though it may sound, that Aristotle had too high a vision of human nature to be able to dismiss the idea of the natural slave from his political thinking.

Similar conclusions to those I have just drawn from Aristotle's discussion of slavery follow also from his discussion of wealth-getting. The getting of things necessary and useful for life through hunting and farming is natural and proper, and so is exchange of such things where exchange will fill up the needed self-sufficiency. While the original form of exchange was barter, exchange through the medium of money quickly came in because of its greater ease and convenience. Money and the exchange it facilitates are, notes Aristotle, inventions and elaborations of *logos* and art (1257a31, b4). They represent, in other words, an instrumental use of *logos*: *logos* in the service of survival. Now there is, according to Aristotle, nothing objectionable or unnatural about this kind of wealth-getting, but there is something objectionable and unnatural about what he calls *kapelike*, or what we can call trade and commerce. Nevertheless Aristotle is not opposed to trade or commerce insofar as these are understood as the necessary exchange of goods for self-sufficiency. What he objects to is the divorce of trade and commerce from such self-sufficiency and its redirection towards the accumulation of money without limit, that

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<sup>12</sup> Seen in this light Hobbes' remark (intended to be a condemnation) that the distinction between master and slave is the foundation of Aristotle's *Politics* is not all that far from the mark, *Leviathan* (Everyman, London 1914) ch.15, p.79.

is towards profit pure and simple (1256b26-1257b10). His objection to this is twofold. First such a practice appears absurd. Money is not true wealth, for one can have an abundance of it and starve to death like Midas. Money is not for its own sake but for the sake of the consumable goods it can buy. To reverse this order is to fall into nonsense, though it is what those end up doing who identify wealth-getting with the limitless accumulation of money (1257b10-39). But, secondly, Aristotle says there is a deeper error lying behind this. The proponents and practitioners of this kind of wealth-getting are more serious about life, about enjoying to excess the things proper to life alone, than about good life. So they pursue to excess the money that they suppose will bring them this excess (1257b40-1258a8). Such people pursue wealth beyond its natural limit, because they pursue life beyond its natural limit. But the needs of life are not infinite: there does come a point where one has enough to satisfy them.

Aristotle's point here in this discussion is, I think, more than the mere charge of unnaturalness, more than the mere charge that such people overstep the limit of natural needs. There is also a suggestion in what he says that there is something paradoxical, even inconsistent, about their attitude. For by devoting themselves to the pursuit of things necessary to life, these people are in effect choosing to live at the level of the bodily or the physical. But, then, having made this choice and having, so to speak, defined their existence accordingly, they at once go on to contradict this choice by refusing to accept the limits that the bodily life commits them to and choosing, not the satisfaction of need, but excess and indulgence instead. They have, in other words, put themselves in the position of making and unmaking the same choice at the same time.

One might be tempted to reply that this does not necessarily follow. One could understand the choice these people make as a choice of pleasure. For while the pleasures they choose are the pleasures of their bodily needs and existence, these pleasures carry on being pleasurable even after the strict requirements of need are met. So they do not have to limit themselves to natural satisfaction alone because the pleasures they pursue are not limited in this way. This reply might seem to get one out of the paradox but for Aristotle, I think, it would only lead one back into it by another way. Pleasures are not beings or existences that are separable, or indeed separately identifiable, from the activities that are pleasant. The pleasures are in fact just the activities understood as unimpeded and perfected.<sup>13</sup> To choose the pleasure is therefore to choose the activity. So to choose the pleasures of the body, as we are supposing is what the indulgent do, is to choose the activities through which the body's needs are satisfied, and so to choose activities whose nature and measure are determined with respect to those needs. But this amounts to choosing to live at the level of those needs and their satisfaction after all. Hence we are back where we were before, and the indulgent, whether their choice be described as focusing on bodily needs or bodily pleasures, still end up choosing and not choosing the same thing at the same time.

I have elaborated on this argument in a way that Aristotle himself does not do, but I have done so only because I think it brings out an element of his thinking that is at least implicit in the text. There is another subsidiary argument that I think is also implicit and that is also worth stating here. The indulgent life is, besides being paradoxical, inhuman in addition. Not because it reduces humans to the level of animals, but because it reduces

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<sup>13</sup> I unite here the two discussions of pleasure in the *Ethics*; the two accounts of what pleasure is seem to me to reduce to the same thing anyway: *NE*: bk.7, ch.12; bk.10, ch.4.

them to a level beneath the animals. As Aristotle notes earlier in book one, human beings, when perfected, are the best of the animals, but when separated from justice and virtue are the worst of all, the most savage and the most unholy, and the worst with respect to food and sex (1253a31-37). And again as he notes later in book two, the greatest injustices are committed out of excess, not because of necessary things. No one, he observes drily, becomes a tyrant in order to get out of the cold (1267a12-14). In other words, the life of excess and indulgence, or the desire for it, leads to the worst and most bestial crimes.

The significance of all this for the argument about the city is that it brings one to the same conclusion as the discussion about slavery. If people who choose to live at the level of the bodily cannot in the end succeed in doing so, because in fact they end up choosing excess, and if the choice of excess also leads to the worst and most inhuman crimes, this means that, for human beings, bodily life or survival cannot be enough. There must be something more. This something more must be at a different level of existence, at the level of logos and not the body, and at the level of logos understood as for its own sake, not as instrumental to the needs of the body. This level, the level of living with logos well, is, of course, the level of virtue. Therefore, properly understood, the life of human beings is naturally a life of virtue, not survival, and the city, as the perfect or complete human community, must naturally be for virtue as well.

Summing up the results of the discussion so far, we may say that Aristotle's argumentation about the nature of the city reduces to something like this. It is the nature of human beings, like that of several other kinds of animals, to live communally with others of their own species. This communal living is initiated at the level of physical or

biological needs but if it were to stop there an element of human nature would either be left undeveloped and waste or distorted into subhuman perversions. This element, the element of logos, is moreover the decisive or determinative element because it is what makes human beings to be human beings and hence specifically different from other animals. If this element of logos is to be properly developed, that is if human beings are to realize their natural perfection, they must choose a life of logos for its own sake, not for its incidental advantages, and their communal living must advance to the level of the city understood as something distinct in kind and purpose from either household or village on their own. The city is the perfect community as far as human beings are concerned because it is there that the life of virtue, the perfect life of logos, can be fully realized. It can be fully realized there because the proper concern of what is meant by the community called the city is the virtue of the citizens; its express aim is to make them good.

We can also introduce here the argument of the final chapter of the *Ethics*. This will not only strengthen what has just been said, but will in addition show how close the connection between the *Ethics* and the *Politics* is supposed to be (a point that is seldom stressed as much as it ought to be). This final chapter constitutes the transition from the *Ethics* to the *Politics* and it begins with the question whether the study undertaken in the *Ethics* has at last been completed. The answer is no because in practical matters the end is not merely to know but to act, not merely to understand virtue but to become virtuous (*NE*: 1179a33-1179b4). The *Politics* is clearly going to be the book in which we learn how to become virtuous or how to make others virtuous. The reason for this is that virtue is primarily a work of the laws, and to know how to generate virtue is to know how to be

a good lawgiver. Virtue is a work of the laws because, except perhaps in the case of really exceptional people, virtue cannot be attained without a long and sustained training and education that goes on from youth up. If this training is to be effective it has to be backed up by force or compulsion. For we are all too prone to follow our passions and what is pleasant rather than what is good, and if we are actually to overcome the enormously attractive seductions of pleasure and follow the good as we ought we need force. Only the city can be relied on to have the necessary force, or to secure the necessary obedience (*NE*: 1179b11-1180a24). Aristotle leaves us no room to be starry-eyed or easy-going about how most of us are likely to acquire virtue and hence happiness. There is something of Nietzsche about him here. Or, to be chronologically accurate, Nietzsche is one of the few modern thinkers to repeat the ancient teaching about the necessary connection between high human achievement and severity.<sup>14</sup>

At any rate it is to the force and severity of the law that Aristotle looks in order to realise virtue. If, however, the laws do not perform this task because the actual cities pay no attention to training the citizens in virtue, then we can, says Aristotle, try to achieve

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<sup>14</sup> See in particular *Beyond Good and Evil*, parts five and nine. One might raise the objection that force and compulsion, as opposed to reason and persuasion, cannot generate virtue because virtue in the proper sense has to be voluntary. For, after all, even Aristotle recognizes that virtue is an *elective* habit (*NE*: 1106b36). Barker makes this criticism, *The Politics of Aristotle*, pp.li-lii. D.J. Allan quotes it and offers a reply in 'Individual and State in the *Ethics* and *Politics*', *La Politique d'Aristote* (Fondation Hardt, Entretiens vol. XI, Geneva, 1965) 55-85. I am in basic agreement with Allan's reply (which it would be too long to repeat here), but I would stress in particular that what primarily seems to concern Aristotle in this context is the problem of getting people to the position where they can start choosing virtue, and start choosing it for its own sake. This is a problem because the passions (to say nothing of already existing bad habits), which most people are slaves to, will not listen to reason and persuasion. The passions have to be subdued first before reason can have its proper effect. And since, *ex hypothesi*, reason is incapable of doing this subduing, all that is left is force (*NE*: 1179b11-18). Besides, uncontrolled passions and bad habits prevent one from seeing certain moral truths (*NE*: 1151a15-27). That is why for the young, whether young in age or young in character, discourse on ethics is useless (*NE*: 1095a2-11; 1095b6-13). Those, however, who are already well disposed towards virtue will be much improved by such discourse. Hence legislators will work upon them, not by fear and punishment, or in general force (which they will, however, use as regards the rest), but by shame and exhortation. Shame and exhortation are indeed instruments fit to generate or improve an elective habit (*NE*: 1179b7-10; 1180a5-12).

this for our own children and friends on our own. But since to do this is in effect to become a lawgiver in one's own home, one can only achieve it properly by becoming in effect a lawgiver altogether.

One might wonder here why Aristotle mentions friends as well as children. Are we supposed to be like lawgivers to our friends and train them in the way of virtue as well as our children? The answer clearly seems to be yes as far as we can. Nor is it hard to see why. The truest form of friendship is friendship in virtue, and it is one of the properties of such friendship that friends care for and promote virtue in each other, since this is indeed what they love in each other (*NE*: 1166a1-33; 1165b13-36; 1170a11-13; b7-14). Moreover Aristotle also notes that the city is more held together by friendship than justice, and that legislators concern themselves more with friendship than justice (*NE*: 1155a22-28). As Aristotle sees it, the highest achievement of human beings will only or best be secured when they are stretched towards virtue to the uttermost, that is when the pressure and severity of the laws, the city, their friends and their families work in this direction ceaselessly and throughout their lives.

But how does one become a lawgiver? Partly by experience and partly by study and learning. As far as study and learning go, this requires an examination and investigation of the laws and the regimes which express and support the laws, and especially of the best regime and the best laws. The *Politics*, which studies all these things, is meant to provide this kind of knowledge and this kind of training in lawgiving. The *Politics* is therefore the natural and inevitable sequel of the *Ethics* and one has not completed one's study of ethics, or of the philosophy concerning the human things (1181b15), until one has gone on to the study of politics.



Let us return then to the *Politics* and to Aristotle's argument about what the city is. As a result of all that has so far been said, we can draw the following conclusions. Aristotle's identification of the city as that community whose job it is to educate the citizens in virtue is a discovery he has reached as a result of his analysis of human nature and the movement and requirements of that nature. For nature points to such a community as the proper place for the adequate and effective development of virtue or human perfection. Such a community exists by nature because the place for such a community exists by nature. Nature, as it were, has marked it out beforehand, and determined its character and function, not by reference to any historically existing communities, but by reference to the objective needs of human perfection. In this sense one may even regard the term 'city' as a sort of place-holder, as just the most handy term available to designate this naturally demarcated space. From this point of view, indeed, any other term, even a specially invented one, might do as well. There need not even, as far as this goes, be any connection at all with those associations of ancient Greece historically called cities. 'City' could be an equivocal term.

Instructive and attractive though this last suggestion may be for highlighting one important strand of Aristotle's thought, it nevertheless goes too far. For Aristotle clearly meant there to be a connection between the city as determined by nature and the city as actually existent in ancient Greece. Otherwise he would not have dealt with actual Greek cities in his *Politics*, nor accused them of failing in their proper task. For whether they knew it or not, and whether they liked it or not, actual Greek cities were de facto occupying the place marked out by nature for the true or natural city, the virtuous city. They were, in all the places they were found, the authoritative communities for the

citizens who lived in them. Whatever goods the citizens could or did realize they realized in and through their cities. Those cities did not leave aside any space for any other community, at least any other community not subordinate to them.<sup>15</sup> The life of the city and the life of the citizen were in some sense the same. To live as if this were not so was regarded as virtually the same as being an enemy of the city. The fates of Socrates and Alcibiades are, one may say, the sublime and ridiculous illustrations of this. In other words actual Greek cities left no room for any other community, least of all for a community that claimed to deal with the most authoritative and most comprehensive of human goods, the life of virtue. Aristotle's natural or virtuous city, if it came to be, would have to replace some actual city. It could not exist alongside or within it.

So actual Greek cities were standing in the way of the natural city; they filled the place the natural city was supposed to fill. But that is all one as to say they were professing to be natural cities, or that they were claiming to be the communities in which human beings could realize their fullest potential. Since in fact no actual city was true to this claim, all the cities were defective cities; they were all failing to be what, because of the place they occupied in human life, they ought to have been. This is what explains, as well as justifies, Aristotle's contentions in book three of the *Politics* that the true city is for the sake of virtue, despite the fact that hardly any Greek cities were actually like this. For the surface facts about actual Greek cities do not refute or overwhelm the deep facts about human nature. And Aristotle's thought is founded on those deep facts, not the surface ones. It thus has a truer and better foundation than any professedly more empirical thought that is founded on those surface facts. For the facts of nature are

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<sup>15</sup> See in this regard P. A. Rahe, 'The Primacy of Politics in Classical Greece', *American Historical Review* 89 (1984) 265-293.

permanent and unchanging, but the facts of history are fleeting and insubstantial. To argue that there is something wrong with the *Politics* of Aristotle on the grounds of its disregard of the historical facts, whether the facts of declining Greek cities or the facts of rising Greek empires, is to be guilty oneself of disregarding what Aristotle is really saying. For if Aristotle is wrong, it is because he is wrong about nature, not because he is wrong about the march of history.

### *The Contemporary Relevance*

But surely, we may be tempted to say, Aristotle is wrong about nature. For, to leave aside other arguments, what relevance has all this to us? How could even Aristotle's natural or virtuous city, which after all is supposed to be the same size as, or smaller than, actual Greek cities, be of any guidance to the huge and sprawling nation-states of today with their teeming masses of millions of citizens? Would not this total irrelevance of Aristotle's *Politics* be pretty decisive evidence that he must have got human nature wrong?

There are two ways of replying to this. First, Aristotle's city might still be the best place to realize human perfection, and the fact that modern conditions have rendered its re-emergence impossible would only give us the most compelling reason to bemoan our fate, and to cling to the hope, however faint, that at some time in the future the conditions might change and make Aristotelian cities again a real possibility. Secondly, we should remember that even Aristotle's virtuous city never existed in his own day. It was, like Plato's city in the *Republic*,<sup>16</sup> less an attainable reality than a sort of model or paradigm to furnish us with a standard for judging the relative goodness of actual cities by, and to tell

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<sup>16</sup> *Republic*, 592a10-b6.

us what direction to go in if we wanted to improve rather than worsen existing arrangements. It might still somehow serve this its original role for us as well, despite the vast changes that separate our day from Aristotle's.

The hard question, of course, is to say how it might do so. The difficulty is made especially acute by the nature of our modern liberal democracies, or at any rate by our modern liberal democratic theory. It is not supposed to be the job of such democracies to concern themselves with the supreme end or ends of human existence. That is a private affair to be decided by each for themselves. The job of the state is to secure those conditions that allow everyone to pursue their own ideals as they wish, provided of course that they do not interfere with others' pursuit of the same thing. It is, in other words, not the job of the state to make the citizens happy, to say nothing of making them virtuous, but only to provide them with the conditions for the pursuit of happiness (to quote the *American Declaration of Independence*). The question of happiness or the highest human good is not indeed denied by this political theory, but it is declared politically irrelevant and removed from the public sphere.

The modern democratic state is, in fact, in many respects rather like what the sophist Lycophron said the city was: an alliance for mutual defense and protection, and a guarantor of rights. There is this difference, however. The modern democratic state, both because of its much greater size and because of its express or methodological agnosticism about the good life, does not, or at any rate need not, compete with the city for space. The state need not be understood as standing in the way of the city. Indeed if the city is a community devoted to the good life, the state should not be so understood; the state is supposed to leave this space free. That is why communities of all shapes and sizes,

devoted to all sorts of goods and all sorts of views about the good, can exist, and indeed are encouraged to exist, within its limits.<sup>17</sup> Moreover such communities seem to get on very well like this. So why could not Aristotle's natural or virtuous city be viewed as such a community within the state? Of course as so viewed it could not be much like any actual Greek city. Most, if not all, actual Greek cities were bent in some way or other on empire over others, either over opposing factions within the same city or over opposing cities. This kind of predatory activity would be outlawed and suppressed by the modern democratic state, for the job of the state is to protect all the parts and not let one part enslave or dominate another. But there is no reason why the more properly domestic activities of the city would have to be stamped out like this. These domestic activities would include, of course, such things as commerce and business. But they would also include education, especially moral and intellectual education, education to and in virtue. The democratic state is not supposed to engage in properly moral education; at any rate it is not supposed to determine what the good life is and then use the laws to force everyone to live that life. Now the consequence of all this, interestingly enough, is that while the democratic state would have to exclude most of the activities of actual Greek cities, it would not have to exclude the activities of Aristotle's natural or virtuous city. Or at any rate it would not have to exclude the essential activity of Aristotle's virtuous city. For that essential activity, as we learn from books seven and eight of the *Politics*, is education. Indeed one of Aristotle's chief complaints about actual Greek cities is that they were too taken up with conquest over others and paid no attention to education in virtue. Aristotle

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<sup>17</sup> None of this, of course, will apply to modern totalitarian states. These do impose, or try to impose, a single vision of the good life on everyone. They would, therefore, very much get in the way of the Aristotelian city.

wanted to reverse this emphasis and his description of his virtuous or best city is an illustration of how to do it (1324b22-1325a15).

Now one might say that this idea of locating Aristotle's city, in the form of a community devoted to education in virtue, within the modern democratic state, while it accords to some extent with what already goes on in such states (religious communities are the obvious instances), is so far removed from anything Aristotle might have thought about that it represents something wholly unaristotelian.

A first reply to this is to say that, unaristotelian though it may be, it is nevertheless an unaristotelian use of Aristotelian ideas, and so represents one way in which genuine Aristotelian political thought can be fitted into our very different modern conditions. However, I am not in fact convinced that this use of Aristotle's ideas is after all so very unaristotelian. As is well known Aristotle had close ties with the Macedonian kingdom which established the rising Greek empire. His ties were probably closer in fact to Philip, Alexander's father, than to Alexander himself. One of the effects of Macedon's dominance over mainland Greece, under both Philip and Alexander, was to put an end to a lot of Greek squabbling, both internal and external.<sup>18</sup> This was, of course, the great problem of the classical age in Greece, that the cities could never live in peace with each other or indeed with themselves.<sup>19</sup> The external peace imposed from outside by Macedon had the effect, or at least could have had the effect, of finally enabling the actual cities to make real strides towards becoming something like Aristotelian natural or virtuous cities.

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<sup>18</sup> J. R. Ellis, *Philip II and Macedonian Imperialism* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1976), pp.204-210; also Barker, *Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle*, p.497.

<sup>19</sup> This is made particularly evident by contemporary histories. Herodotus tells us how, even when the Greeks faced the common threat of the Persian invasion, it was only with difficulty and after much disputing that they finally managed to unite long enough to secure victory (*Historiae*, bks. 7-9). Thucydides, in his account of events in Corcyra, tells us how Greek cities suffered all the worst horrors of civil war (*Historiae*, bk.3, chs.70-85).

There is in fact a passage in the *Politics* where Aristotle seems to hint at precisely this possibility, as well as at Philip as the leader in Greece who did or could have realized it.<sup>20</sup>

The Greek world of Greek cities living at peace, internal and external, a peace imposed, guaranteed and preserved by the unrivalled power of the Macedonian empire, would not only give Aristotle what he wanted for the actual realization of his virtuous city, it would or could also constitute a sort of early model for a modern liberal democratic state. For we could regard such a modern state, like the ancient Macedonian hegemony, as a judicious mixture of Aristotle, Lycophron and Philip: the community devoted to the good life and virtue, the union of such communities in an alliance for mutual defense and protection, the guarantee and enforcement of the conditions of this alliance by a powerful sovereign set over them all.

Too good a coincidence to be true? Maybe. But I would at least want to claim this. If what I say is correct, then Aristotle was not so blind after all to the developments going on in his own day as some have charged he was. He saw full well what was happening in Macedon. But what he also saw, and what his critics have failed to see, is

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<sup>20</sup> I first came across this suggestion in Carnes Lord, *Aristotle: The Politics* (Chicago, 1984), pp.6-8, though, as Lord notes, it goes back at least to W. Oncken, *Die Staatslehre des Aristoteles* (Leipzig, 1875), II:267. The passage in Aristotle is 1296a32-b2, and in Lord's translation it reads: "Those who have achieved leadership in Greece have in either case looked to their own regime in establishing either democracies or oligarchies in cities, having in view not what is advantageous for the cities but rather what is advantageous for themselves. So for these reasons the middling regime has either never arisen or has done so infrequently and in few cities. For of those who have previously held leadership, one man alone was persuaded to provide for this sort of arrangement." This one man, it is suggested, was Philip and the one who persuaded him was Aristotle himself. There have been a host of other suggestions of who this one man was. A masterly survey of them all is given by R. Weil, *Aristote et l'Histoire* (Klincksieck, Paris, 1960), pp.412-415, who finally concludes himself that Philip is by far the most plausible candidate. Still if we make this identification and suppose that Aristotle had some success in this regard with Philip, he seems to have had less success with Alexander. Aristotle was, however, on good terms with Alexander's deputy in Macedon, Antipater, and may have had better success persuading him to follow the example of Philip (see A-H. Chroust, *Aristotle: New Light on his Life and Some of his Lost Works* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1973), pp.155-176 in general and pp.168 and 176 in particular). There were, in addition, a number of people after Aristotle's death who, when they were in positions of political power in particular cities, tried to impose the sort of moderate regime that Aristotle argued for (see P. Aubonnet, op. cit., pp.cxx-cxxii).

the potential the Macedonian empire had, not for destroying the Greek city, but for bringing it at last to its proper perfection. The heyday of the Greek city was not over; on the contrary it might just be beginning. All the more reason therefore to seize this chance while it lasted. All the more reason therefore to write and teach the Politics as well as the Ethics, not only to students in the Lyceum, not only to the politicians and potential politicians of the day, but also, and perhaps especially, to Philip and Philip's son, Alexander.<sup>21</sup>

I would further want to claim, and here my claim is more controversial, that the modern liberal democratic state might also, without too much strain, be viewed in a similar light to Macedon's hegemony over Greece: not, I think, just in the form of a federation of fifty states, but quite possibly in the form of a federation of lots of smaller federations, perhaps a thousand federations of a thousand cities each (just to borrow a number from President Bush). I see no compelling reason, at any rate, why we could not try to think of the modern democratic state in this way. We might, of course, start changing our minds as a result about what it is good to do, and come to consider different things as worth preserving or promoting and as worth removing or discouraging.<sup>22</sup> But

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<sup>21</sup> It has been suggested by some that Aristotle's really best city is not the aristocracy analyzed in books seven and eight but the absolute kingship discussed in book three (1287b36-1288a32). This might be best, at least for philosophers, because it would free them from concern with political matters and allow them to concentrate instead on the study of philosophy. The suggestion is further made that the Macedonian royal family, and perhaps Alexander in particular, was Aristotle's choice for such absolute kingship. So Kelsen op. cit.; P. van der Waert, 'Kingship and Philosophy in Aristotle's Best Regime', *Phronesis* 30 (1985) 249-273; and also S. M. Stern's intriguing essay, *Aristotle on the World State* (University of South Carolina Press, 1968). These suggestions are well worth considering but to deal with them would take me beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>22</sup> What might be some of the things on which our minds would change? First of all there would be more stress on moves towards devolution. Smaller groupings within modern states would be given greater autonomy to run their own domestic affairs without reference to, or interference from, the central government (K.C. De, despite his otherwise negative comments mentioned in note 4 above, was nevertheless sufficiently appreciative of the goods realizable in Aristotle's city to suggest greater devolution as a way in which modern states could try and recapture them, op.cit., pp.193-196). Accordingly there would, secondly, be in our political thinking a greater stress on community rights (as opposed to individual



after all there is nothing new or strange about that. Political philosophers and political activists have always tried to change our minds and our actions, and they have often succeeded too. Besides, if Aristotle is right about virtue and human nature, and if I am right about the possible application of his views, then we should try to change our minds and look at the modern democratic state in the way I have suggested. If we did, the *Ethics* and *Politics* of Aristotle would take on, if not indeed a new lease of life, then certainly a wholly new significance.

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rights) than there has generally been up to now. One may note in this respect that the courts in the United States are already prepared to recognize that religious institutions in particular have rights, within their own confession at least, to discriminate against certain individuals who are protected from such discrimination otherwise (as, for instance, in the case of the Roman Catholic Church against homosexuals and dissident theologians). This would give to the theory and practice of the democratic state a rather different character from that given to them by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford, 1972), but I do not know whether the result would be less in conformity with the convictions embedded in the institutions and practices of actual democratic states, or in the hearts and minds of their citizens (cf. Rawls himself on this point, 'Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (1985) 223-251) Thirdly there would be two kinds of political philosophy, not just one: the type that examines the nature of the democratic state insofar as it is an alliance for mutual protection and defense, and what rules should govern it (which would be the sort of thing that Rawls and other theorists of the modern democratic state are engaged in); and the type that examines the nature of the communities united in the alliance and what rules should govern them (and this is the sort of thing that Aristotle and most pre-modern political theorists would be engaged in). But the latter will in some sense give the measure to the former, for the alliance must be such that it allows and encourages the flourishing of the allied communities. The alliance is for the sake of the allies and not vice versa. Hence there will be a feedback from the latter to the former.

I do not claim to have thought these suggestions through in any detail. I make them here only to give some idea of how our thinking and practice might change if we took my proposal about "aristotelianizing" the modern democratic state seriously. Of course, it might be that the modern democratic state, for reasons I have not sufficiently weighed, is simply incapable of being aristotelianized in my sense. Well, if that can be shown, so be it. My intention here is, after all, only to suggest a thesis for discussion, not to propound one definitively for acceptance.