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Aristotle's *Politics:* Common Good and Forgotten Excellence

All of us, even the least "political" among us, have political opinions. We use the word 'politics' freely and with confidence that others know what we mean. Still, I shall argue that Aristotle's *Politics,* and with it the original meaning of the word we use so freely, is almost beyond the reach of our understanding. For what we in the contemporary west call 'politics' bears little resemblance to the characteristic political activities of ruling and being ruled. In our habits of speech we implicitly claim the descent of our traditions of government from classical political theorists (with of course important modifications), and yet the activities we call political and which affect many aspects of the lives of citizens have lost touch almost entirely with their roots in the *polis.* If my claims in this lecture have any sense to them, this loss should be of vital importance to all of us. For I claim that it is in political activity, the kind of activity that characterizes the *polis* as Aristotle understands it, that the human comes to be.

I take for granted that "the human" is problematic. Human beings are not natural beings, nor are we simply artificial. We are not beasts and we are not gods, and we are capable of recognizing these facts. It is impossible to say anything cogent about what we are without talking about the activities in which we display human characteristics. These activities require that we curb our tendencies to decline into beastliness and to pretend to a divinity we cannot achieve. The characteristically human cannot be seen clearly unless it includes the possibility of human excellence, and human excellence includes public pursuits. The characteristically human activities require the pursuit in common of the good for humans. They require the *polis.* It is disconcerting, perhaps, but it seems to me

true that to see such excellence clearly we need to look at a model different from the liberal regime.

I do not intend to speak about current political affairs here, but I speak with an eye on contemporary politics or rather, on what I see as the lack of true political activity in contemporary America. I will speak rather little about justice, which is the goal of political activity (see *Politics* 1282b 17-18) and unintelligible unless in relation to politics. Justice is only indirectly my topic because I consider that an understanding of politics and of political activity must precede a full understanding of justice. In the *Politics* Aristotle focuses by contrast on the excellence and the happiness of human beings as human beings which is achievable through a shared striving towards the common good. I will argue that this shared striving depends upon the cultivation of the virtue of moderation in the broadest sense. Moderation, I claim, is the virtue that makes possible the pursuit of justice through the shared activity of the *polis*.

I expect some of you at least to agree that the tawdry character of media politics along with our collective societal memory of the evils of totalitarianism cast doubt on the dignity of our character as political beings. But moderation may seem a weak response. Political moderation, where it is evident, does not by itself effectually move us toward a shared life in which the human good or human excellence is manifest. Moreover, if we strive for excellence of any sort, we do so in private, in our reading and thinking for example, perhaps in discussion. In fact, though, the freedoms and the dignity of private life cannot flourish without some sort of coherent public or political life. The liberal approach to this dependence is to devote political activity to taking care of shared necessities – the national economy, defense, road building, etc. – so that "higher"

pursuits, or at least the pursuit of happiness, can go on within the private lives of citizens. The restraint that characterizes liberalism is a kind of moderation. But liberalism, following the lead of thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke, takes human excellence for granted or, at best, acknowledges standards outside itself for the cultivation of the greatest good for human beings. And yet human excellence is not merely a matter of personal choice; the various claims concerning what is best compel rational examination.

In examining the *polis* as Aristotle presents it I have no intention to reject liberalism in practice. The American constitutional form of liberal politics limits the power of factions that claim to merit political power, and the limitations in general serve the common good. For the danger that no faction or group will rule well is real (see *Federalist* #10). And yet, to promote the theoretical understanding of political virtue we require an image of pure political activity, the activity of a citizen body devoted to public pursuit of the common good. Aristotle's *Politics* offers such an image. That image may not have applied easily to everyday politics even when the Greek *polis* thrived, but today, for us, it is surely anachronistic in that the small ancient *polis* is supplanted by an oversized and unwieldy citizen body that can be governed only indirectly, by means of its representatives. Representative government is one of the bases of classical liberalism. Liberalism arose historically from the more or less respectful rejection of Aristotelian politics, and representative democracy was intended to prevent ancient democratic abuses. But Aristotle's discussion of the polity presents a compelling image of the political activity that representation supplants. In the western tradition, Aristotle is the main proponent of the human virtues that develop in pursuit of common ends, of political virtue or practical wisdom (*phronesis: NE* VI, 5, 7-8). *Phronesis* or practical wisdom

(often translated "prudence") is the intellectual virtue that corresponds to the activity in accord with what I am calling true, or political, moderation.

I do not know whether it is possible to cultivate such virtue in our situation. I hope that it is possible through careful consideration of Aristotle's image of the polity to bring into view the character of practical wisdom. If so, it will help us to understand the nature of political activity in relation to the human in general.

I. Moderation as Political Virtue

Moderation is an unexciting quality. Yet it may be the most illuminating of all the Aristotelian virtues, for it is the virtue that makes visible the choiceworthy mean in contrast with the excesses superior men and women avoid. Everyone understands the mean with respect to appetite, the domain of moderation. Still even in this easily accessible context confusion may arise. Although appetites are often better for being small – bottomless stomachs tend to illness and overweening ambition confuses our sense of what is good - when discussing the *Nicomachean Ethics* one must resist the temptation to think of the mean as an indication of the mediocre (*NE* 1106b36-1107a26). Insipid or weak passions are not the stuff of great virtue, although they may leave our minds clear and our options open. The mean, not the mediocre, is the key to understanding ethical virtues, which naturally involve pleasure and pain, and the mean with respect to appetite has a more or less clear analogy with respect to goods other than bodily pleasures (*Politics* 1295a 34-38). The virtue of moderation which entails consistently aiming for the mean facilitates the intellectual virtues. For these virtues require that one recognize things for what they are, avoiding the distortion that our interests and desires tend to

impose upon them. Weakness or indifference does not promote the pursuit of human excellence of any sort (think of greatness of soul: *NE* IV, 2). When we think of excellence we focus on traits that distinguish the few from the many, that make individuals stand out from their compatriots, and the character that both recognizes and desires goods according to their true worth is rare. However extraordinary, a human being with such a character is moderate in a broad sense. To cultivate such men and women is one of the primary goals, for Aristotle, of a good political regime.

In Aristotle's *Politics,* the polity emerges as the best possible regime, while its name is the generic name for any regime or rule of law that aims at the common good of the citizens (*Politics* 1279a 36-40; 1289a36; 1292a 32). The deviant regimes, in which one, few or many rule for their own good, deserve the name of regime only insofar as they resemble the good regimes, and tyranny never deserves the name. Polity is the regime that compels our attention. Aristotle shows that the polity is superior to both aristocracy and kingship in that it is accessible to ordinary, not only to the most excellent, humans. Kingship, by contrast, presumes the prior development of marked and obvious excellence in one man. The rule of the one best man whose judgment supersedes law may be best simply, but it requires a citizen body either unable to rule itself or consisting of such virtuous individuals that they recognize already both the virtue of the one best man and their natural, perhaps temporary, inferiority (1286b 8-14). In monarchy, education replaces politics. The virtue of the subjects of a king worthy of the name apparently compels them to defer to the superior judgment of the best for the sake of the whole city. But such virtue is not common, certainly not to be taken for granted. Aristocracy, like kingship, requires a superior ability in citizens to recognize the truly best individuals and

voluntarily to submit to their guidance. While the polity is not the arrangement of the city in which the most stunning virtues manifest themselves, it is the form of government in which the ruled may, sometime soon, rule in their turn, and thus the one in which the excellence associated with political activity may be cultivated (1283b39 – 1284a3). Polity, then, is both the most moderate regime and the regime in which the political virtue of moderation is most visible. It is the regime in which the desires of some for power and for honor are checked by the desires of others, and sometimes even by a commitment to the whole. While not the very highest virtue, the moderation that results is indispensable to self-rule. Moderation (rather than justice) is thus the most political virtue, and polity is the most political regime.

The polity combines oligarchic and democratic characteristics, thus assuring the support, or at least obviating the need for resistance by, the two main factions. Since the claims of the few rich and the many poor are for the most part irreconcilable (1279b 17-20; 1280a 7-25), the polity tends to thrive where there is a middle class, an element neither luxuriously wealthy nor wretchedly poor (1296b 35-40; 1302 a 12-15; 1309a 18-21). Aristotle does not discuss the middle class at length. At first glance, its only importance seems to be that the members of this class possess modest means sufficient to purchase arms so that they can defend their city (1279a37-1279b4). Courage seems to be the virtue most readily cultivated in the polity. But military virtue requires both leadership and commitment to the common defense in addition to raw courage (**guts**). Through serving, soldiers learn to lead others like themselves. The combination of bravery and obedience to appropriate command comprise a citizen virtue that is useful, for it helps to maintain the regime safe and secure. In this broad sense, courage is

necessary to the *polis*, to be sure, and it is no accident that Aristotle considers citizens who possess heavy arms the only fit members of the polity (1297b1). In fact, every regime requires brave and loyal citizens if it is to survive, and even the worst regimes have historically inspired such commitment.

The polity evidently cultivates the virtues that serve itself. In general, the virtues of a citizen in any regime include the character and behavior that help to perpetuate that regime (1282b8-12), and in this respect the polity is, in a certain sense, merely one among many types. But polity, as I said a moment ago, is the most political regime. Where, if not in the polity, may citizens develop the ability to distinguish what is worthy of their loyalty from what is not? True political activity requires that citizens act in conscious pursuit of the common good. Polity is distinctive in that it requires citizens to engage in politics, i.e., they must work together to achieve their own good. But how can citizens rise above interested squabbles to effectively pursue the common good in an environment where, as in this regime, no distinctively superior individuals emerge to lead the city? Just as there is no unambiguous statement of the human good, there is no easy answer to this question. Rather, through membership in the polity citizens must develop the qualities that enable them to choose well. A polity is a city in which political life, or the common pursuit of the good, arises out of ordinary pursuits.

A polity results when the members of a city take on together the responsibility of securing their common ends. They must of course provide for themselves food, shelter, and a common defense, but in fact Aristotle considers these activities, while necessary for human life, mere prerequisites for political action, not part of it (VII. 9). His is not the Marxist view that individual self-expression in all its diversity results inevitably from a

state of satisfaction of necessity (Marx, *German Ideology,* in *Selected Writings*, p. 169). Rather, those who have leisure must *learn* to use it for worthy ends, and that learning occurs at least partly through habituation (*NE* 1103a14-25). Deliberation about appropriate actions for the city to undertake is an essential part of the training that is most needed, especially when the opinions of both of the two major ubiquitous factions can be heard. Let us look for a moment at the character of those factions to see how a polity could begin to emerge.

All cities are graced with and beleaguered by two main factions, the few rich and the many poor. Aristotle makes clear that even in very prosperous cities the rich are always understood to be the few who have more than anyone else (*Politics*1279b 33-38). Neither faction wants to be dominated by the other, and for good reason: The poor would probably rob the rich for their own gain, and the rich faction would disparage and dishonor, even enslave, the poor. It should be immediately apparent that the claims to rule of both factions are alike self-interested and that neither is a matter of abstract principle. It may not be so clear that each, as Aristotle asserts, contains a part of justice or that each claim reflects part of the truth (1280a 6-21). The few rich claim the right to rule because the city needs their money. They are willing to spend it for the good of the city only if they will be honored in turn and if their judgment prevails over that of the majority who constitute most of the city. They wish, of course, to determine how to spend their own wealth. The rich may have access to a more prestigious education but they do not necessarily care most about the polity as a whole. Then again, there are the mass of citizens who wish to be recognized for their sheer numbers. (The expression "cannon fodder" comes to mind. In Henry IV, Part I; IV, 2: ll64-67: Prince Hal says of

Falstaff's troops "I did never see such pitiful rascals." Falstaff responds: "...good enough to toss, food for powder, food for powder; they'll fill a pit as well as better. Tush man, mortal men, mortal men.") These men don't necessarily display any more commitment to the polity as a whole than the rich. For the most part, they simply dislike being pushed around. It seems only fair that the many not be sent to war (or taxed for that matter) without their consent, but at the same time their claim to the right to rule the city, like that of the oligarchs, is suspect. Both oligarchy and democracy are accordingly deviant regimes, in Aristotle's view, precisely because each faction tends when unchecked to rule in its own interest to the detriment of the other, and to the detriment of the whole.

If the claim to rule of each faction is partially true, it stands to reason that an arrangement that combines their claims would express more of the truth than either one, but aren't they contradictory? Aristotle does not expect there to be a compromise doctrine that distils the truth from each claim and unites both in a mutually satisfactory compromise. Therefore he details a variety of institutional arrangements in which democrats are placated by being given opportunities to hold office or at least to select officials, and oligarchs are co-opted by being given superior honors and offices sufficiently frequently to motivate them to support the regime (1297a 15-41). Such a polity would be in unstable equilibrium, constantly beset by the members of the two factions who want more and will often settle for less than what they consider their full due. Because the equilibrium is unstable, it must be established over and over again, with each faction ruling at some times and submitting at others. Since neither group is entirely disenfranchised, there is some hope that the best citizens from either faction will have access to power when they are most needed, in crises especially. Part of the merit of the

regime, then, is that the best, i.e., the most virtuous, may rule after all. Unlike in aristocracy and kingship, the best citizens in the polity are not obviously of a different order than the ordinary. Rather, they are for the most part the members of each faction who are moderate in that they are most open to the reasonable claims of the other faction. They listen not out of compassion but out of a broad understanding of self-interest and with a view to the common good.

II. *Phronesis* and the Polity

As I suggested earlier, the polity thrives most when it includes a substantial middle class. Democrats wealthier than many of their fellows and oligarchs who have only moderate wealth are more likely to be open-minded and aware of their need to accommodate the faction that would exclude them. Aristotle does not devote his attention to the means by which a middle class may be cultivated – I suspect he considers it in part lucky accident, in part a consequence of moderate rule – but he is fully aware of the role of economic interest in shaping the views of most citizens. Moderate wealth is choiceworthy not simply because it enables more citizens to enjoy more goods. Rather, those who are most fit to rule are more likely to arise where extremes of poverty and wealth are avoided.

Still, even in a city with an economic middle class or without a radical difference in means between the few and the many, the oligarchic and democratic claims concerning justice are the two major opposing claims: either the rich deserve honors and powers because their wealth serves the city more than the people's numbers or the many, because they comprise the bulk of the city's defense and simply because they are free citizens,

ought to hold sway in determining the city's affairs. In Book IV Aristotle elaborates on the wide variety of compromises that allow each faction to accept the city as its own. The need for compromise attests to the fact that there is no way of fully reconciling the two sets of interests. Moreover, the city needs both, the mass of citizens and those who have distinguished themselves. The polity is a sort of school for learning to recognize and work with the interests of each group, giving each part of what it deserves and reconciling all to the whole that none dominates completely. Similarly, participation in the polity is the model for Tocqueville's art of association, "the mother of all the arts," which makes it possible for men and women to live freely in the United States (*DA* II, ii, 7). But for Aristotle freedom is not sufficient: to live well requires virtuous activity (*Politics* 1323b22-1324a4). Association in a polity gives citizens the opportunity to discern the proper goals of human activity and to pursue them.

The demands of the two prominent factions are akin to the various appetites each of us must manage. Just as by judiciously allaying the appetites individual humans can make room for deliberative sense to govern their lives, so by acknowledging the rich without neglecting the many, the polity in general can begin to deliberate about appropriate actions in pursuit of the good of the city in general. Polity cultivates the true middle class, a class of citizens who recognize that because they are dependent upon others in their pursuit of specifically human goods their own good involves the common good, and that to achieve it requires moderating the factional extremes. These citizens possess enough practical wisdom to allow various claims to rule to prevail when each is appropriate.

Aristotle's answer to the general question, who should rule, is that it is the individuals who possess *phronesis* or practical wisdom. *Phronesis* is an intellectual virtue concerned with what ought to be done or not to be done (NE 1143a8): it is "... a true and reasoned state or capacity to act with regard to the things that are good and bad for man" (1140b4). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle explains that p*hronesis* contains or completes all the ethical virtues, including justice (1144a36; 1145a 1-2). While a good citizen in another regime may not need practical wisdom, if only he allows himself to be governed by those who do, in a polity where in principle citizens "rule and are ruled in turn" (1283b45-1284b4), it is necessary for all citizens. This is a high standard, but perhaps not impossibly high, for practical wisdom is not the highest sort of wisdom (1141a20). It is the characteristic virtue of middling beings. It is concerned with particulars, with human things about which it is possible to deliberate (1141b21), and it issues in action (1142a23). A human life necessarily involves action, and action cannot be done mindlessly, but it can be done in accord with laws or customs which a citizen takes as his guide. Still, practical wisdom must provide the standard for legislation which keeps in view appropriate ends for the city and for the citizens who compose it. Citizens who are simply ruled by the laws or by other men need only practical wisdom of a subservient sort, but truly to rule if not to be ruled in turn citizens must see for themselves the ends of their actions. But we still have not discerned precisely - it is difficult to see - what Aristotle means by the phrase "ruling and being ruled in turn."

The simplest means for achieving an arrangement that fits this description would be for all citizens to be promoted by lot to important offices in the city for short periods of time. Aristotle considers such a system (see *Politics* 1300a 33-38) but it is obvious

that it is fraught with danger, if only from frequent turnover in the government. An arrangement Aristotle endorses whereby older citizens hold office after having spent their youth as soldiers could also be disruptive if all older citizens must acquire positions by a certain age (1329a 5-16). Instability alone may produce injustice, to say nothing of the risk that external threats to the regime may not be met in a timely way. The rule of law would help to make government more stable, and Aristotle gives strong support to the rule of law, arguing that it embodies reason without the passions that characterize humans and can undermine good government (1287a, 29-33; 1292a, 31-35). But which law (or laws)? There is no natural law for Aristotle. Rather, oligarchs tend to frame self-serving laws that neglect the needs and demands of the many, while the many tend to frame laws that favor themselves and neglect or exploit the wealthy few. A polity must bring the two factions together in the attempt to design laws that more or less satisfy both factions. A mere tug of war is not likely to produce a coherent legal system. In fact, it would seem to require a political genius to reach compromises and to hammer out language that would not provoke either faction to rebel in anger. And yet, at any given time in any city no such genius may be at hand (Cf. enlightened statesmen ...) In a polity the few and the many must make do with the skills and diplomacy they have in order to preserve the regime in which both are interested because, if they fail, either group and maybe both will suffer. When the laws command the respect of both factions, citizens rule themselves in accord with the laws. The rule of law, then, is one meaning of the phrase "ruling and being ruled in turn."

If the claims of oligarchs and democrats are each based in some truth, the polity is the regime in which the laws are most just and the citizen is least likely to be trapped in a

partial view. Rather each can hear and consider opposing arguments made by those who genuinely believe what they say. In the polity, the defective claims of both oligarchs and democrats are moderated. The tendency to moderate extreme claims makes of the successful polity the regime in which a true middle class, citizens characterized by moderate demands who consider themselves neither rich nor poor, is most likely to develop and to elevate the continuing conflict between rich and poor to a debate about the common good. Even where individual citizens do not hold office their ruling ideas are acknowledged. This is a sort of ruling while being ruled and it may serve any moderate regime. Only to the extent that the deviant regimes come to be less partial and in so doing resemble polity are they legitimate regimes at all. Such regimes are characterized by the rule of reasonable, not partisan, law. Polity is both a standard and the name for regime in general because it represents such moderation.

Phronesis in the narrow sense of being able to take care of one's own interests can arise anywhere, and is more natural to some humans than to others, but even in this narrow sense it involves ends which "...conduce to the good life in general" (1140a26-29). *Phronesis* or practical wisdom in the larger and more precise sense develops among citizens who make do with the skills and the understanding they have to achieve the common good. It is in a polity that such human virtue has the most opportunity to develop. Such a development is, of course, hardly inevitable, and many regimes composed of both factions must limp along from compromise to compromise with a minimum of good will. Middle class interests may produce a kind of moderation. Still, that is no guarantee that a strong and numerous middle class will excel at discerning their own good. Fortunately, it is not necessary to know the good simply to strive to govern

well; one begins by avoiding neglect of reasonable claims and common interests. A truly moderate class would have to be not only middling in wealth but also prudent in a way that such political activity may promote.

Phronesis or practical wisdom is human virtue. It is not concerned with the highest good simply, but it is concerned with the discernment of the highest good for man and the attempt to attain that good. Aristotle does not neglect to emphasize that man is not the highest being (1140a20), but we are the beings who are capable of recognizing our ignorance of what is simply highest as well as of recognizing what is good for ourselves. The *polis* of the best possible sort allows those citizens who know they are human and not divine to govern themselves. The polity promotes political activity in which citizens recognize their interests as partial and come to recognize the common human good as their own. In the polity citizens have the opportunity to develop practical wisdom.

III. **Life in Common as the Good of Citizens**

It is popular today to demote politics. Scientists and scholars emphasize our similarities to other animals in intellect and in moral behavior as well as in our appetites. Still we like to distinguish ourselves. And yet neither our similarities with other natural beings nor our truly exceptional characteristics provide us with an understanding of ourselves as humans. In the largely economic society we live in, the goods we strive for tend to separate us from one another – the fruits of a competition that keeps others in view as rivals and even potential threats. But it is as humans who share a distinctively

human good that the citizens of a city live together. To decry the common good as a delusion is tantamount to denying that there is such a being as the human. And our way of life, in which politics is submerged by identification with various special interest groups, implicitly denies the common good. Finally it implies that there is no politics, only power.

The common good, that is the common pursuit of human goods, requires a context. The *polis,* or political life in general, is not merely an appropriate context, but the most appropriate context, for humans striving to live well, as no beast can. The city alone allows for the pursuit by ordinary humans of distinctively human goods. Citizens develop a life in common not only to provide a safe environment in which they can pursue personal gain (Hobbes), but to discern and to secure goods like community and culture, honor and justice. In a deviant regime, as Aristotle sees it, one might wonder whether there is a real common good, or rather whether leaders aim to dupe others into acknowledging the existence of a common good to manipulate them and render them subservient. In practice, false regimes surely obscure the common good and therefore the humanity of their subjects. In a true regime, by contrast, citizens can pursue better lives than they could without the city because they can pursue goods available only to men and women who recognize their partiality. Such citizens willingly recognize themselves as, in some sense, parts of a political whole. Identity politics by contrast requires that we recognize differences and ignore or take for granted the partiality of the various groups. We have forgotten (or we have consciously rejected) the possibility of the human simply. The distinctively human good comes into view in cooperative striving although it may begin in competitive strife. The *polis* transforms strife into striving by allowing the

questions concerning justice to arise and to supplant (at least in part) questions concerning varying interests and individual pleasures.

Aristotle's claim in the *Politics* that man as a political animal is somewhere between beast and god (*Politics* 1253a, 28) points more obviously to the distinctive character of human life than his emphasis on the mean, although they are fully consistent. We like to think that we are part god even while we recognize ourselves as part beast, and we think that possessing both intellect and passions we merit a distinctive place in the world. It is not obvious, perhaps, that the distinctive place we merit is the city, but that is what I am arguing. By allowing moderation in the broad sense to develop, the city provides the context in which our middling character between beast and god can appear. Virtually all human beings fall within this range, and it is when the character of both boundaries, beastliness and divinity, are commonly recognized that the distinctive qualities of humans come into view. Such qualities both develop and are seen for what they are only in a community educated to seek the common good. The similarities of citizens allow them to see the distinctive qualities of some of their members. The peculiar qualities of the best men and women, in particular intellectual qualities that develop over against their place in the *polis* and compete with the virtues of citizens, usually require the support of the city in their development. The conventions that habituate men and women to a level of decency that promotes mutual respect can help citizens to acknowledge the best among them. This is not to deny the obvious fact that citizens often err in their judgments. But even the exposure and correction of errors in citizens' judgments of one another occurs most naturally within the city. The gadfly who challenges contemporary political standards owes something to the education the city

offers, even if it is little more than an opportunity to criticize that education. Even, or rather especially, Socratic philosophy arose within the city, not in the untamed wilds.

A city that closes itself off from disputes about its conventions isolates itself as a false, or a deviant, city to the extent that it suppresses controversy. At the same time, no city can be simply open to perspectives that undermine its coherent if limited views. The tension between conventional opinion and openness to challenge is enhanced by the fact that the common good of a city can be sought only to the extent that the good of humans as humans, with all its ambiguities, comes into focus. It is paradoxical, perhaps, that to see the good of humans as humans we must first see ourselves as members of this or that nation, city, or community. But is it not obvious that when we find ourselves in too large a society we must retreat into smaller groups, like our families or this College, to see ourselves and one another clearly? The limited size of the *polis* is crucial to the development of cooperation and mutual understanding of fellow citizens and of citizens of different *poleis.* The city, then, is the context in which we can emerge as fully human beings.

Aristotle alludes to this character of the *polis* most explicitly in Book I, where he makes the distinction between expressions of pleasure and pain and speech about justice. This is also where he discusses the justice of slavery. In permitting to a body of citizens a life in common, the polity facilitates the move from expressions of pleasure and pain to speech about justice (1252b28-1253a18). The *polis* permits its citizens to raise themselves above the natural slavery to passion and to necessity and thus to become self-governing beings. The *polis* requires that citizens willingly live in accord with the regime and the laws, that they govern themselves in accord with the regime. It allows individuals

to see themselves both as parts of a larger whole and as separate beings. All this is possible only when humans pursue common ends in common not merely because they are forced to do so but because they see the common ends as their own, even when to secure them requires real personal sacrifice.

In Shakespeare's *Richard II,* John of Gaunt testifies against his son, the future Prince Henry IV, who refuses to accept the death of his uncle at the hand of Richard's supporter, the Duke of Mowbray, and has challenged him to a duel. Once the King has pronounced Henry's sentence of exile John of Gaunt laments:

> O had't been a stranger, not my child,
> To smooth his fault I should have been more mild.
> A partial slander sought I to avoid, and in the sentence my own life destroyed.
> (I, 3; 240-243)

Richard's failings do not annul the nobility of John of Gaunt's sacrifice, which movingly displays his recognition of the precedence of the claims of king and country over his personal loves and hates. Nobility requires the recognition of such claims as well as a sense of one's own needs and vulnerabilities. In these, humans are in general fairly similar. Recklessness, perhaps, but no real virtue is possible in complete ignorance of common human qualities. Even the great-souled man, who sacrifices little, is not an isolated or independent being, although he may forget at times his dependence upon others. And a prudent human being understands the ways in which he or she is akin to fellow citizens (NE 1124b 12-15). Prudent actions transcend the ordinary but do not lose sight of it.

In making the claim that individual virtues depend upon the cultivation of the common good I am asserting that human beings are first of all common beings. This

claim can surely be contested, or radically limited. Hobbes, for example, saw a common need for self-defense but no foundation for a common way of life, no justice, but by convention. From the Hobbesian perspective the example from *Richard II* appears not as nobility but as gullibility and perhaps a kind of vainglory. By contrast, Aristotle maintains that humans ordinarily need to live in community with each other to move beyond our slavery to necessity and to make choices that allow us to live well (*Nicomachean Ethics,* 1103b, 6-26). Even the greatest virtues or excellences of which humans are capable may require a basis in common life, for can one grasp the divine things without first seeing them over against the human? The tension between the common and the excellent characterizes human rather than bestial or divine being. The life of contemplation Aristotle outlines in Book X of NE is not likely to arise in a context where that tension is not visible. While the human individual who contemplates may not fit naturally into any city, I do not think he or she is likely to come into being without civilized interaction with others. In any case, as Aristotle makes clear, contemplative virtue, the activity of the most divine part of us, is somewhat at odds with other more simply human excellence. It challenges even friendship. The love of truth which presumably motivates contemplative activity has an ambivalent relation to the *polis,* but at least Aristotle's (like Plato's) pursuit of truth does not lead him to abandon the city for long.

Humans are partial beings. Even when Rousseau describes the peaceful isolation of the original, natural beings from which he imagines us descending, he never suggests that humans as he knows them could survive in such a state. It is natural, although by no means inevitable, that we live in communities. When they function well these

communities live in accord with law, which provides a standard for the behavior of citizens toward each other, although perhaps not the highest standard. Because law aims for the common good it aims too low to provide a standard for the best members of the community, but the standard that it enforces ought not to exclude their virtues entirely. Socrates' Athens was an imperfect regime, although surely not the worst. Cities in general are imperfect, and as Plato's *Republic* shows, perfect justice is not manifest anywhere. The city that is open to being educated, to improving its laws, must then be the best we can hope for.

One of the great strengths of liberal democracy is that it allows for revision of the laws in pursuit of greater and greater acknowledgment of the needs of the people. The modern nation state, however, does not directly facilitate the community of citizens. In the mass society of the contemporary United States, such community is well nigh impossible. The liberal understanding of politics does little to illuminate the partial character of humans that leads them to need one another not merely to live but to live well. But humans are no less partial in modern times than in ancient Greece. In this respect Aristotle's understanding of politics is superior to the modern understanding and more illuminating of our own condition. Of course, a liberal regime would not likely prosecute a philosopher for challenging the common beliefs of citizens, for it insists on precious little but adherence to laws. In the case of the current U.S., it even tolerates at times, and even in public figures, their violation. The corruption of the young may be practiced unimpeded in liberal regimes, and is even celebrated as art as well as free speech. Liberal politics requires that roads, something like freedom of trade and a common defense be supported at the level of the state, leaving real human life and human

virtues to the private realm. In our society or a society like ours, Socrates might have been labeled a flake or a madman, but he would have conversed unimpeded. It seems to me that he would have improved or taught proportionately (maybe even numerically) fewer Americans than ancient Athenians. For our regime fails to reflect that problematic and ambiguous character of humans which Socrates helps his interlocutors to see. By not pretending to raise its citizens to virtue, our regime fails to indicate the need to clarify what human virtue is. Ironically, freedom, for all its merit, neglects the ends for which freedom is choiceworthy. Our polity, such as it is, does not reflect the whole human being, nor does it provide an image of human virtue to focus our admiration or provoke our dissent. The Aristotelian polity, by contrast, at least in its best version, is an image of human excellence as pursued in common by a citizen body. It exemplifies the virtues of real, if rather ordinary, human beings.

IV. The polity as image

In Book VII of the *Politics*, Aristotle explicitly addresses the role of excellence in the city, insisting that the best way of life for the city must be the same as that for the individual. One might expect him to argue that a city that pursues the best common way of life also facilitates the highest pursuit of the superior, nearly self-sufficient, individual, namely philosophic activity. Instead he argues that the city too aims at self-sufficiency, its activity directed not towards the larger world but within the community of citizens (*Politics* 1325b 16-31). Earlier in Book VII, Aristotle acknowledges the importance of defense. Cities must ordinarily devote a great deal of attention to maintaining peaceful relations with other cities or to waging war, but these are not the activities that Aristotle

sees as the end of the polity. Aristotle instead presumes an improbable set of circumstances in which the focus of the activity of the citizen body is on pursuits that are praiseworthy in themselves (see 1325b 16-31). With respect to the composition of the city, too, it is not clear that this polity is the same as the polity described in Book IV. For here there are apparently no narrow factionalists and no class of citizens whose lives are largely devoted to the fulfilling of base necessities. All the real work must be done by slaves, who live within the city but are not part of its composition. There are good reasons to doubt that everyone would consider this arrangement desirable. Aristotle cannot claim that the ordinary citizens of most successful cities have in mind the image he presents. Still, in a sense the polity of Book VII must be the sort of city all polities aspire to be, the polity in which citizens knowingly pursue together their common good

As in the *Republic,* in which philosopher-kings must replace ordinary rulers and everyone over the age of ten must leave, the conditions for this city are in principle possible while highly unlikely. The emphasis on internally directed activity suggests diversity within the citizen body. But the wholeness of this city is hard to reconcile with the existence of different factions that all but reject each other's views. It is unclear that the sort of city that could be described as a coherent whole could have more than a single intellect governing its behavior. In fact, it is unclear whether any city, as contrasted with the image of a city comprehended by a human mind, could be a whole. Is Aristotle's best possible city after all, not a model of a true city at all, but rather a model for the life of the individual? Or has he forgotten about the democratic aspect of the polity and instead embraced in Book VII a sort of governance that resembles the rule of a philosopher king by another name, one who so impresses the citizens with his superiority that they forget

their divergent interests and characters? Neither of these apparently plausible suggestions seems to me correct.

Plato's *Republic* aims to persuade the most ambitious readers, like Glaucon, to direct their most vehement efforts toward the perfection of their souls. The most ambitious, potentially the most excellent, individuals might otherwise seek tyrannical power and engender the worst sorts of cities. Aristotle's *Politics* in general aims at a different end. While Aristotle too discourages tyrannical ambitions, he promotes the development of practical reason through political activity. He does not require that those who engage in politics first emerge entirely from the cave of the city to engage in pure philosophy. The task of the politically active citizen, like that of the complete human being, is to pursue the noblest ends of an embodied soul, a middle sort of being who possesses an intellect that does not simply override the appetites but rules them "politically," i.e., by acknowledging their place in a whole human soul (1254 b2-6). Human excellence is the excellence of an individual who has much in common with those who lack excellence, and therefore not only understands but shares their interests and desires. At the same time, he or she helps keep the highest aims of human activity (cf. *Republic* 501b) in view of the city as a whole. But there is a problem here: to manage to strive for the highest things while maintaining one's humanity seems an elusive goal when the highest things include the contemplative use of the intellect. It might be simpler to think of the Aristotelian *polis*, in its best form, as an image of the highest things which can be pursued in common, to be sure, but only by a very few. But it is central to Aristotle's understanding of human virtue that the city is in fact such an image available to a wide array of citizens, maybe even ultimately to slaves capable of

earning their freedom (*Politics* 1330a 30-32). While Aristotle is no advocate of pure democracy, his best possible city is an image that is indispensable to human happiness in general, not merely to the happiness of an extraordinary few. For all who are capable of self-rule must strive to act in accord with virtue. An ordered and healthy city responsible for actions that reflect the careful deliberation of its citizens is a model of such virtue as well as a context in which it can be displayed. Such a city is harmonious but not simple; rather it is constantly at work reconciling the tensions that characterize even a body of good citizens and, in general, good human beings.

The goals of a city unified enough to engage in leisured activity for the good of all its citizens must be compelling for the more or less ordinary human beings who are citizens in a polity. The habits sensible laws inculcate prepare citizens to recognize as their own good the city that includes their opponents' faction as well as their own, for there will still be richer and poorer citizens. The very moderateness of these people, Aristotle indicates, enables them to forego widely recognized dominance over other cities for the health of the city they together compose (VII, 3 & 4). The state in which such a polity persists must be very fragile, depending on lucky external accidents as well as upon a remarkable similarity of its members. For us as for Aristotle's contemporaries it is unlikely to serve as a pattern for many political structures.

As I have already indicated, the best polity, the polity of Book VII, is an image, but of precisely what? I say that the polity is Aristotle's image of the best possible community of diverse parts, congenial to the development of a complete human but not absorbable into a single human whole. It is an image, not of a complete city ruled by one who knows or even of the best way of life for a complete individual human being. To

treat it as such an image is to deny the partial character of humans. It is, rather, an image of the common good of a naturally diverse community of human beings. If there is no such common good, Aristotle's model polity is fantastical. If there is a common good, if it is even likely enough that the human good is common to merit our seeking it together, the polity is the standard against which all real political communities and all possible human ways of life must be measured. An examination of the rhetoric of tyrants shows that even they give lip service to the common good as the end of their regimes.

To say that the polity is an image of the common good or that it is an image of the best possible community of diverse human beings is not to deny that it is a possible, if rare, political regime (*Politics* 1296a35-37; see also 1325b 38-41). No regime can maintain itself without taking shape in the minds of those who participate in it. For most citizens, the regime is defined by a set of laws, and these laws govern the process by which leaders are chosen and authority is exerted. The validity of laws and the standard of justice they embody may be taken for granted by citizens in general, but the best citizens articulate the laws for themselves, judge in accord with them and work to modify the laws to render them more fully reflective of the ends at which they aim. The legislator at least, if not the judge and the all-round excellent citizen, must be able to encompass the laws in a single view and, through them, to view the community of citizens as a whole diverse in its parts and yet coherent.

The city is not a mindless machine, carrying on its work unbeknownst to its subjects, but a work of embodied minds. It is an intelligible arrangement of parts made coherent by the understanding of the citizens who grasp its character. While it is natural and appropriate that citizens live together in a community that aims at "living well," it is

far from inevitable. Citizens do not fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. If they fit together at all it is in pursuit of a shared image or idea of happiness. Polity comes into being to the extent that this image is shared and understood.

While Aristotle does not invent the polity in articulating its character, he gives it being in the minds of his readers. The image he develops of a diverse whole with the common end of human excellence contains the unresolved tension between the excellence of each citizen and the excellence of the whole. Even in a good city, the excellent citizen is not always a simply good man (1278b1). Aristotle does not provide a theoretical account in which these tensions are resolved. Rather, he calls to the minds of citizens the practical, though difficult, task of improving and preserving their more purely oligarchic or democratic regimes by moderating them. For surely Aristotle hoped by articulating the character of the regime to have an influence for the good on existing regimes. This practical goal, it seems to me, encompasses his manifest design to describe the character of political life and to clarify the middling character of the beings who take part in it.

The polity is an image in speech of the political whole which no existing regime perfectly embodies and which allows us to recognize the character of each *polis* or regime. It allows us also to recognize the character of the humans who compose *poleis* as middling beings, neither beast nor god. To be human is to share with one's fellow citizens the common endeavors necessary to life that we cannot pursue successfully as individuals and at the same time, and even more importantly, to aspire to nobility and excellence for its own sake. Just as the city is the context in which this striving occurs, polity in particular is the image of the active middleness that characterizes human beings.

As such, it allows us to see ourselves more clearly than we otherwise could and to pursue the excellences that belong to us as humans. The polity of Book VII is the image of moderate virtue and of practical reason (prudence).

The likeness of the successful polity to a coherent community of human beings, along with its falling short of the wholeness of a single human being, together indicate the truth that what is graspable by the intellect cannot ever fully be put into practice. The image points out the true aim for the life of the city, but most citizens are unlikely to take that aim simply as their own. The problem is not merely the division between oligarchic and democratic factions. Rather, the polity confronts the deeper human problem that the activities of recognizing what is and of justly ruling are in principle different and sometimes even at odds. Yet Aristotle's *polis* must be open to the truth: nothing must permanently and rigidly hinder its recognition of the character of the individuals who compose it or the recognition that to rule justly requires that the truth about those individuals guide the distinctions the city makes. It is difficult for partial and self-interested citizens to share in this recognition – they will never do so fully and consistently. Justice then is never fully achieved. In contrast with the enduring truths that provide the objects of contemplation, the truth concerning human beings lies precisely in the movement between what can be seen with the mind's eye alone and what we must take into account around us in pursuing an excellent life. But how can a political regime allow for the movement between the variety of conditions in which humans find themselves and what is recognizable and unambiguous, all while maintaining order and stability?

The liberal response to this conundrum is again the one with which we are most familiar. It is to reserve space for the philosophic way of life, for the pursuit of what is one and simple, in the private realm as long as that pursuit does not threaten the satisfaction of the common and at the same time diverse needs of society in general. The liberal regime does little to promote the pursuit of philosophic activity but it does almost as little to inhibit it, just as it reduces reliance upon great statesmen without, one hopes, eliminating them. The greatest risk in liberal democratic regimes for philosophy is that the passion to pursue it is rare and anything rare tends to be weak (Tocqueville, *DA* II, i, 1). Aristotle's response is different, and in its difference it addresses the difficulty of pursuing the sort of virtue that is specifically human. Through constant efforts to reconcile the two main factions, the polity provides a context in which the ever elusive goal of justice can be consistently pursued by a citizen body composed of people capable of weighing the different claims and thus learning to recognize the limitations of their own (*Politics* IV, 9; 1303b14-17; 1334a 32-34). In other words, the polity provides a context for the cultivation of practical wisdom (prudence). The political activity of the citizens of a polity in turn enables the city itself to be a sort of image of the elusiveness of truth, for it consistently encourages its members to pursue the goal of justice it never fully embodies. The simply best man could make a home for himself here, for he is not confronted with a rigid dogma in conflict with the truth he seeks and recognizes. And yet, other citizens may not feel compelled to follow his judgment in their common endeavors.

There is no single end for human activity, and no single simply virtuous way of life, but there are in Aristotle's view at least two serious candidates for the position, the life of the statesman and that of the philosopher (1324a 23-35). If the polity represents

the openness to the truth that characterizes the good city, as I claim, it must have room for citizens who respect and pursue these two most excellent ways of life. If the philosopher is truly self-sufficient and unambiguously superior to the other members of the polity, however, he cannot be part of the polity. He is at best a kind of resident alien, friendly to the regime he shares with his fellow citizens perhaps, but living in accord with his own city in speech.

Because the polity must be made up of more or less similar citizens, capable of recognizing one another's views without being compelled to recognize any as simply superior to their own, the polity, just like the inferior regimes that in some sense resemble tyranny, engages in a kind of ostracism. The presence of the one best individual, fully recognized for what he is, would destroy the polity as a polity (1284 a 4-15), and as long as he is not so recognized he is in a certain sense alienated. Polity represents the truth insofar as it can be commonly acknowledged, but in itself it is at odds with the perfection of human virtue. Its moderation leaves room for the simply best only as a goal or at best in the form of an individual privately acknowledged for his peculiar virtue. Insofar as it is at odds with the best simply, polity points both to the activity of practical wisdom in improving the common endeavors of its citizens and beyond practical wisdom to theoretical wisdom. This is what it means to be merely an image. The polity must be open to the truth, but it does not, indeed cannot, embody that truth in itself. Like any actual political regime, the polity filters the truth according to its own character and conventions.

Slaves are necessary in the best possible regime to provide for necessities. Moreover, their existence reminds citizens of the difference between the necessary and

the choiceworthy. Without an understanding of the character of human being as embodied, one may indeed aspire to develop the best part of human being which is most godlike, but to aspire is not necessarily to achieve. In focusing on what is most excellent one runs the risk of neglecting those characteristics the human shares with his fellows and abandoning self-knowledge. Similarly, without the highest activity in view, even ordinary human activities become distorted. Practical and theoretical wisdom are not one but neither are they two separate and unrelated pursuits of individuals who happen to possess different talents, each of whom has a place in the larger, diverse community of women and men. It is precisely the difference between these two aspects of wisdom that illuminates what it is to be a human and thus a political being, ambiguously suspended between, and often drawn to, both beastliness and the divine. In the fullest, and that is the political, sense, moderation involves the recognition of irreconcilable extremes. It is an excellence that belongs exclusively to human beings.

V. Conclusion

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle completes the account in the *Politics*, for it is in the *Ethics* that both the excellence of an individual and the excellence necessary for a common pursuit of the good life are discussed. In another sense, though, Aristotle continues and completes in the *Politics* the discussion of virtue he began in *Nicomachean Ethics.* He does this by demonstrating how the virtues arise among humans who shape for themselves a life free from domination. One excellent human being may develop spontaneously with little or no support from his fellows and provide an example others

strive to emulate. In general, though, the process by which humans develop the excellence most proper to them is barely intelligible without the city.

When rich and poor, each desiring to oppress the other, confront each other and negotiate, a kind of political moderation develops. Whether or not politically active citizens acknowledge it, humans are characterized both by free self-moved bodies and by the desire to set themselves apart by whatever means they have available. Such an understanding points beyond the grudging tolerance of a political group that would like to dispense with its opponents, but foregoes this pleasure in order to benefit from their strengths. It is through moderating the excessive and therefore mistaken claims to justice that a true understanding of the human and a true concern for justice can arise among ordinary humans. In striving to achieve the common good, citizens cultivate practical wisdom and with it the peculiar excellence of a human being (*NE,* 1140b 20-30). The excellent human being must recognize that no city can be perfectly just even while striving for the most complete happiness for himself and others capable of sharing in it. His or her wisdom is not of the highest sort but it is true apprehension (1442b32-35) of the human as a political being, neither beast nor god but something in between. The moderation that allows humans to recognize these extremes makes possible the pursuit of an excellence that lies between beastliness and godliness, a peculiarly human excellence.

Unlike other creatures which have a natural end, humans must be seen in light of their potential excellences, excellences that come to light in political community. The *polis* brings together citizens who are partially human into a whole that presents an image of humanity. The *polis* is the context in which the human is recognizable as human, even while it forms its citizens in ways that distinguish them from citizens of other regimes. In

the context of a *polis,* the potential humanity of citizens is never completely realized, but it is always evident.

It would be comforting to think that the modern liberal regime is in a deep sense akin to the *polis* but with a distinctly modern flavor, that liberal political life allows for a no less human but merely a more open way of life. Surely the freedoms that characterize modern liberal democracy are attractive and not necessarily bestial. Some of you may wish at this moment to remind me that I, being a woman, would not have had the opportunity in an Aristotelian *polis* to stand before my fellow citizens or my colleagues and express my views. But however attractive the freedoms that characterize modern liberal regimes (and I do appreciate them), they do not provide the possibility of a real political life. Our freedoms allow for the exhibition of extremes and inhibit the most moderate, the most human activities. Politics, however, is natural to human beings in the sense that it enables potential human beings to become fully human. For all our freedoms, I believe there is no full humanity under contemporary liberalism, and still less under illiberal regimes. The sacrifice of the possibility of the human is a very great price to pay for the kind of openness we enjoy. I am tempted to say that contemporary liberalism tends to supplant the openness to truth with an openness to ideology, and thereby makes itself a friend to the enemies of truth. I leave you to consider whether this accusation is just.