

# Aristotle and the Correct Constitution

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## Abstract

Everyone knows that, for Aristotle, ‘correct’ constitutions, unlike their ‘deviant’ counterparts, aim at the common advantage (§1). But interpreters routinely mistake, or ignore, the conceptual distinctiveness of characterizations of aim or purpose (§§2–3), a distinctiveness that Aristotle himself highlights (§4). This paper brings out the special nature of Aristotle’s thought on constitutional correctness, by emphasizing its *intentional* and therefore *intensional* aspect: a regime’s correctness hangs on its rulers’ practical self-understanding. The favored reading works to unite Books III and V of the *Politics* in an unfamiliar way, and it also unifies the idea of constitutional correctness with Aristotle’s treatment of virtue’s requirements from the *Ethics* (§5). The paper ends by suggesting an attractive but radical way of conceiving of Aristotle’s view as a kind of ‘virtue politics’ (§6).

# 1 A Sketch of the Intentionalist Reading

When the one or the few or the many rule for the common advantage [*pros to koinon sumpheron*], these are necessarily correct constitutions [*orthas anagkaion. . . politeias*]; but they are perversions when they rule for the private advantage [*pros to idion*], either of the one or of the few or of the majority. For those who do not participate either should not be called citizens or ought to share in the benefit [*dei koinōnein tou sumpherontos*].<sup>1</sup> (Pol III.vii 1279a)

Thus begins Aristotle’s famous six-fold classification of *politeiai* (‘constitutions’ or ‘regimes’) from Book III of the *Politics*. But how exactly is this well-known scheme supposed to carve up the relevant expanse of logical space? Its six categories seem to be yielded by two sets of distinctions. On the one hand, there is the *bisecting* distinction between regimes whose rulers aim at the common advantage (or common benefit) and those whose rulers aim instead at the private or partial advantage ‘of the one or of the few or of the majority’. On the other, there is the *trisecting* distinction whose application depends on the size of the ruling class at hand, as comprised alternatively by ‘the one or the few or the many’. And Aristotle evidently takes these two sets of *differentiae* to yield six categories; he makes this plain by immediately going on to describe how particular forms of *politeiai* fall into it (1279a32–b10): we are told that kingship, aristocracy, and polity count—whether accidentally or essentially is here left open—as ‘correct’ or ‘upright’, while tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy count as ‘perverse’ or ‘deviant’.<sup>2</sup> So we have six regime types, and so a six-fold partition of logical space, in virtue of two types of distinction: first, that between correctness and deviance, as given by the kinds of aims that rulers have; and, second, the distinction that concerns the size—albeit vaguely cashed out—of

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<sup>1</sup>Aristotle, *Politics: Books III and IV*, in the Clarendon Aristotle Series, ed. R. Robinson, with D. Keyt (Oxford, 1995). Here and throughout, translations of Aristotle, whether of the *Politics* (=Pol) or the *Nicomachean Ethics* (=NE), are taken with minor modifications either from volumes in the Clarendon Aristotle Series or from *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton, 1995). Unless otherwise noted, interpolations of Latinized Greek are based on the Oxford Classical Texts, either *Ethica Nicomachea*, ed. I. Bywater (Oxford, 1894), or *Politica*, ed. W.D. Ross (Oxford and New York, 1957).

<sup>2</sup>I agree with David Keyt that we are not here required to believe that these six particular constitutions fall into the six-fold scheme in any essential or necessary way; in other words, we are allowed to hold that, while, as it happens, democracies are incorrect, whatever fact that makes that so is not internal to being a democracy. (To glimpse this point, note that, even if it is true that Socrates is essentially a man and that men are always selfish and also that being selfish is essentially being vicious, it does not follow that Socrates is essentially vicious; nor does it follow that men are essentially vicious.) As Keyt notes, the start of Pol III.viii strongly indicates that Aristotle does not take himself to have offered, earlier in III.vii, anything like a ‘real definition’ or an ‘essentialist account’ of these six particular regime types; see D. Keyt, ‘Aristotle’s Political Philosophy’, in *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, edd. M. Gill and P. Pellegrin (Malden, 2006), c. 20. (Moreover, if we remain sensitive to this sort of inferential gap, the closing lines of III.vii do nothing to threaten this allowance. Indeed, the language of III.vii 1279a32ff. mirrors, I think, my parenthetical example about Socrates’s selfishness immediately above.) In line with §§5–6 below, I elsewhere defend, and elaborate on, this point about whether democracies, e.g., are *essentially* incorrect forms of *politeiai*.

the ruling body in any given regime.

But we might already note a puzzling feature of Aristotle's discussion. Read without prejudice, our passage suggests that we are given to see, not a six-fold arrangement, but rather a *twelve*-fold division of logical space.<sup>3</sup> This is because the passage seems to contrast (a) the common advantage with (b) the partial benefit of each of three sets of putative beneficiaries. For instance, to isolate a stark pair of cases, a regime's singular ruler might aim at the common advantage, and so count as ruling correctly, or instead aim at the partial advantage of the many, and so count as ruling in a deviant way. The latter possibility appears to be made available by the fact that Aristotle seems to distinguish three forms of the private advantage. If this is right, then, for each of *three* ways of marking out the size of the ruling class—where rule is exercised *by* the one, the few, or the many—we shall have *four* ways of characterizing the kinds of *aims* a ruler might have. In correct regimes, rulers aim at the common advantage, while, in deviant ones, they aim at the private advantage under one of *three* different descriptions: as that of the one, or of the few, or of the many.

Now, of course, we are not supposed to read Aristotle along these lines. As I said, whatever our starting passage seems to say on its own, Aristotle takes it to pick out a six-fold scheme, since he quickly applies that scheme to six and only six regime types. But, even if we know that we are supposed to end up with six forms of constitution, we might pause to worry whether we have a clear grasp on just how we are to end up where Aristotle clearly expects us to go. In short, we might pause to worry whether we fully understand Aristotle's distinction between a regime's correctness and its deviance. Why does Aristotle describe his scheme in the way he does, if his description suggests something that diverges from how we are obviously meant to take it up? And how *exactly* are we supposed to take it up, anyway?

I want to explore these questions by claiming that many readers have misunderstood what Aristotle means by 'aiming at the common advantage' (§3), and therefore what truly constitutes his distinction between correct and deviant regimes (§5). It will emerge that standard ways of interpreting Aristotle's thought in this area are committed to readings that Aristotle takes pains to exclude (§4). Once this kind of misstep is firmly in view, we will be able to explain more clearly how our starting passage is meant to end up articulating six and only six categories.

For, as we shall see, standard ways of reading the distinction between correctness and deviance

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<sup>3</sup>Or, read slightly less literally, it even suggests greater than twelve partitions, if we are allowed to distinguish three forms of the common advantage—as of the one, the few, or the many—to yield *eighteen* categories. But this is a less literal way of reading our starting passage, since Aristotle does not himself so distinguish forms of the common advantage. Rather, the idea of aiming at the common advantage appears as an undifferentiated notion. Why does Aristotle speak in this way, if he goes on to pick out, presumably by contrast, the idea of the private advantage as a *differentiated* concept? This is one of the main questions of this paper.

will seem to require, against Aristotle’s patent self-understanding, that there be either at least twelve or at most three partitions of logical space. Surely readings that push us in either of these directions must be resisted if at all possible. But what would a satisfying alternative look like?

The present section of the paper hopes to put into place just such an alternative (§1). However, my focus here is less on the six types of constitution that Aristotle introduces than on the *primary* distinction on which his classification from *Pol* III relies: the distinction between the regime types he counts as correct, on the one hand, and the those described as deviant, on the other. What is it that qualifies a constitution as either correct or deviant?<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, Aristotle is less than entirely clear about the meaning of this primary division between the correct and the deviant, though he does at least give straightaway an explicit application of it, which I have already mentioned. But the application here in *Pol* III.vii to specific sorts of constitution is plainly meant to be supplemented by the examples Aristotle gives slightly earlier in III.vi. Taken together, these remarks tell us that rulers in correct constitutions, unlike those in their deviant counterparts, aim at the benefit or advantage of the ruled, just as the physical trainer or the ship captain as such ‘seeks the good of those he directs [*skopei to tōn archomenōn agathon*]’ (1279a5). By contrast, rulers in deviant regimes aim instead at *to idion*—at self-interest, in some sense—in the way of a slave-master, who rules ‘primarily with a view to the interest of the master [*pros to tou despotou sumpheron ouden hētton*]’ (1278b35).<sup>5</sup>

Now this already suggests one feature of how we are supposed to interpret our starting passage. In referring there to *aiming at the partial advantage*, Aristotle means to refer to *aiming mainly at self-interest*. So, when Aristotle appears to give three different descriptions of the private advantage, we are to understand him as giving three different descriptions of the kinds of aim that aiming mainly at self-interest can involve, descriptions which apply variously to the kinds of *self* that are picked out in the intentions of deviant rulers. But what does it mean *to aim mainly at self-interest*?

This question constitutes the focus of the present paper, which seeks to give due stress to the

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<sup>4</sup>As we shall see, I will put into place a distinction between Aristotle’s criterion for a regime’s *correctness*—a criterion that applies to the *shape* of rulers’ aims—on the one hand, and his criterion for a correct regime’s *successful* prosecution of its rulers’ aims—a criterion that relies on the *content* of the common advantage—on the other. By the end, I will have said a little about this latter criterion, if only to clarify how future work can build on what is urged here (§§5–6). But, if this paper illuminates the exegetical and philosophical importance of the former criterion, then it will have been successful, even though much more would have to be said—in a project larger than one paper’s scope—about what constitutes the common advantage and about the kinds of action that successfully pursue it. I try to say more on these topics in a different paper.

<sup>5</sup>For a helpful discussion of Aristotle’s employment of *to idion* and its cognates, see R. Mulgan, ‘Aristotle and the Value of Political Participation’, *Political Theory*, 18 (1990), pp. 195–215.

centrality of the nexus of these crucial terms: *aiming—mainly—at self-interest*. Roughly put, the answer whose ingredients will be suggested below is that a regime’s deviance consists in the fact that its rulers act in light of the thought that one’s co-citizens figure as mere *equipment*, and not as political *partners* in a certain distinctive sense (§6). Rival readings fail to grasp the centrality of this nexus of concepts, and therefore obscure the distinction between viewing one’s co-citizens as either equipment or partners; this renders opaque what I think constitutes the real basis of Aristotle’s thought on a constitution’s correctness. That basis is Aristotle’s notion that, in correct regimes, rulers bear special sorts of intentional structures in their thought and action.<sup>6</sup>

At first glance, though, this latter characterization of Aristotle’s notion admits already of two different interpretations. On one tack, Aristotle might just mean to point out a merely *material* or merely *accidental* truth about what arises in correct and incorrect regimes, without yet claiming anything about that in which correctness or incorrectness here *consists: whatever* makes a regime correct, or incorrect, its rulers have such-and-such an aim, or don’t. A parallel claim: ‘If Socrates is snub-nosed, his appearance frightens the light-minded.’ Whatever truth there is in this conditional, it is no part of *what it is* to be snub-nosed or to be Socrates—let us assume—that the light-minded become frightened. And this is so even if the conditional is perfectly true; its truth is supposed to be only material or accidental, not *constitutive*.<sup>7</sup>

But the drift of *Pol* III.vi and III.vii commits Aristotle to more than just a material truth of that kind. Like most commentators, I take Aristotle to be offering an account of what constitutes correctness or incorrectness in *politeiai*:<sup>8</sup> a ‘real definition’, in the ‘essentialist’ sense

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<sup>6</sup>For suggestive and macroscopic views that largely cohere, I think, with the line taken here, see M. Schofield, *Saving the City* (London and New York, 1999), cc. 6–7; D. Depew, ‘The Ethics of Aristotle’s *Politics*’, in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. R. Balot (Malden, 2009), c. 26; J. Cooper, ‘Political Community and the Highest Good’, in *Being, Nature, and Life in Aristotle*, edd. J. Lennox and R. Bolton (Cambridge and New York, 2010), c. 10; and J. Frank, *A Democracy of Distinction* (Chicago and London, 2005), c. 5. For treatments that recognize, as the present paper does, the intentional, and therefore ‘intensional’ (see §3 below), aspects of Aristotle’s conception of constitutional correctness, see W. Fortenbaugh, *Aristotle’s Practical Side* (Leiden, 2006), c. 16; and B. Garsten, ‘Deliberating and Acting Together’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Politics*, edd. M. Deslauriers and P. Destrée (Cambridge and New York, 2013), c. 13. While Fortenbaugh and Garsten adopt more or less in passing some of the core positions favored here, this paper diverges in substantiating, and stressing the peculiarities of, these aspects in greater detail, and in drawing out alternative conclusions; moreover, elsewhere I examine the Aristotelian credentials of Garsten’s favored relation between collective agency and collective deliberation.

<sup>7</sup>But surely the claim about Socrates is meant to be *causal*, and not merely material or accidental? Even if we take the claim about Socrates to be causal, it is still supposed to be no part of what it is to be either Socrates or snub-nosed that people become frightened, whatever the causal laws of psychology turn out to be. Something similar applies, as we shall see (§5), to Aristotle’s discussion of the incorrectness of democracies and oligarchies; recall n. 2 above.

<sup>8</sup>The constitutive view is standard, if at times merely implied. See F. Miller, *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle’s Politics* (Oxford, 2001), cc. 3.4, 5.2, 6.1, 6.5, 7.1; D. Hahm, ‘The Mixed Constitution in Greek Thought’, and S. Forsdyke, ‘The Uses and Abuses of Tyranny’, in *Greek and Roman Political Thought*, cc. 12 and 15, respectively; Depew, ‘Ethics’; R. Balot, *Greek Political Thought* (Malden, 2006), pp. 260–1; Schofield, *Saving*, cc. 6–7; R. Mulgan, ‘Aristotle’s Doctrine That Man Is a Political Animal’, *Hermes*, 102 (1974), pp. 438–45; C. Young, ‘Aristotle’s Justice’,

that everywhere animates Aristotle’s thinking.<sup>9</sup> This view is already suggested by Aristotle’s reference to the *necessity* with which correct, or incorrect, regimes aim at the common advantage, or don’t (*anagkaion*: 1279a29). And it is confirmed in two other ways. The closing lines of III.vi, where Aristotle draws out a concluding summary of his view, show that his interest is fixed on the the generic idea of aiming at the common advantage, in such a way as to stress that, in a quite general and widely applicable sense, correctness hangs on the kinds of aims agents have, whether they are political rulers or craftsmen, husbands or fathers.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the generic idea of aiming is emphasized throughout both III.vi and III.vii, by Aristotle’s frequent use of ‘intensional’ vocabulary: *skopein* (‘looking after’ or ‘targeting’) and *pros* (‘with a view to’ or ‘for the sake of’).<sup>11</sup> So Aristotle’s remarks on rulers’ aims cannot be incidental to the what I’ve been calling his primary distinction. Rather, Aristotle’s discussion of rulers’ aims forms the official—and constitutive—account of that distinction.

There are different senses, then, in which we can call Aristotle’s division between correct and deviant regimes *primary*, as I have. First, the distinction between the correct and the deviant, whatever it comes to, can apply in *abstraction* from Aristotle’s three-fold distinction concerning rule by ‘the one or the few or the many’: one need not grasp that three-fold distinction in order to grasp its two-fold counterpart; nor, therefore, need one grasp what will turn out to be the three particular species of constitution that fall (somehow) on each side of it.<sup>12</sup> Second, the distinction’s relation to the kinds of aims rulers have is *internal* to its meaning: so long as we are to grasp what it means for a *politeia* to be either correct or incorrect, the character of these aims is not a dispensable feature whose grasp can be set aside, as though the relation were

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in *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. R. Kraut (Malden, 2006), c. 8; Keyt, ‘Aristotle’s Political Philosophy’; C.D.C. Reeve, ‘The Naturalness of the Polis in Aristotle’, R. Mayhew, ‘Rulers and Ruled’, and J. Roberts, ‘Excellences of the Citizen and of the Individual’, in *A Companion to Aristotle*, ed. G. Anagnostopoulos (Malden, 2009), cc. 32, 33, and 35, respectively; R. Kraut, *Aristotle: Political Philosophy* (Oxford and New York, 2002), c. 11; C. Rowe, ‘Aristotelian Constitutions’, in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, edd. C. Rowe and M. Schofield, with S. Harrison and M. Lane (Cambridge and New York, 2005), c. 18; and Frank, *Distinction*, p. 75.

<sup>9</sup>For remarkably illuminating and revisionary discussions on how to understand Aristotle’s ‘essentialism’, see M. Boyle, ‘Essentially Rational Animals’, in *Rethinking Epistemology*, vol. 2, edd. G. Abel and J. Conant (Berlin, 2012), pp. 395–428; and M. Boyle and D. Lavin, ‘Goodness and Desire’, in *Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good*, ed. S. Tenenbaum (Oxford and New York, 2010), c. 8. Both discussions draw on provocative remarks in M. Thompson, *Life and Action* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2008), parts I–II; and on the more exegetical treatment in J. Moravcsik, ‘Essences, Powers, and Generic Propositions’, in *Unity, Identity, and Explanation in Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, edd. T. Scaltsas, D. Charles, and M. Gill (Oxford, 1994), c. 10. And Thompson’s view can be helpfully described as a development of themes from Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford, 2001); and from G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, in *Virtue Ethics*, edd. R. Crisp and M. Slote (Oxford and New York, 1997), c. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Importantly, for reasons we shall discuss (§4), the only form of authority that Aristotle here mentions whose correctness does not hang in this way on aiming at the common advantage is the slave-master’s; if anything, correctness in that kind of relationship hangs precisely on forbearing to aim at the common advantage, whatever that might be.

<sup>11</sup>See §3 below, for more on the ‘intensional contexts’ given by Aristotle’s language of aims and purposes.

<sup>12</sup>*Somehow*: See above, n. 2, for an explanation of the parenthetical.

merely material or accidental. The character of rulers' aims is primary insofar as the distinction between the correct and the deviant is itself constituted by differences in that character.

These considerations underscore the importance and urgency of what it means, for Aristotle, to aim at the common advantage. To ask about a constitution's correctness just is, then, to ask about its rulers' aims. *But what does it mean to aim, or to fail to aim, at the common advantage?* Commentators have issued different interpretations of Aristotle's thought in this area, and it is this question that is my paper's main topic. In the hope of eventually issuing a fuller defense, I now enlarge on a type of interpretation that appears to have fallen, either explicitly or at least implicitly, out of favor in recent decades.<sup>13</sup>

Still, almost all commentators on the *Politics* do *seem* to take at face-value the reading that follows; it is hard to avoid recording what appears to be Aristotle's official treatment of what makes for a constitution's correctness. But, having paid little more than lip-service, they often implicitly reject that account in what they go on to say about how to understand Aristotle's distinction between correct and deviant *politeiai*. Importing a phrase used by Cora Diamond in the context of Wittgenstein scholarship, I want to say that, in exploring the radical nature of the reading I favor, most commentators 'chicken out' by the time they're done reflecting on Aristotle's thought on constitutional correctness.<sup>14</sup>

Now, on its face, the language of aiming—as suggested by *skopein* and its cognates, and by *pros*, terms I've already emphasized—points in the direction of political rulers' intentional states. But what is it about such states that constitutes a political system's correctness or deviance?

To take the case of perverse *politeiai*, the idea would be that it is fundamentally the shape of the intention one has in ruling a political community, albeit a perverse one, that marks out one's form of rule as deviant, as when, in a non-political case, a ship captain, like the slave-master, aims primarily (*ouden hēton*: 1278b35) at his private advantage, and not at the benefit of his ship and its crew. Read in its most unvarnished form, this view suggests that a constitution's status shifts from incorrect to correct just in virtue of a change in its rulers'

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<sup>13</sup>In his contribution to the Clarendon Aristotle Series, Richard Robinson registers what I will call below the *intentionalist* reading, though he dubs it the 'concrete' interpretation. But, while he admits that the concrete interpretation seems licensed by the text, he goes on to complain that it saddles Aristotle with an odd fixation that appears neither normatively nor philosophically central. For Robinson, if the intentionalist is right about Aristotle, then this marks a *regression* in Aristotle, from Plato's more plausible classification of regime types in the *Statesman*; see his commentary in Aristotle, *Politics: Books III and IV*, pp. 21–2. Below, I go on to discuss (§2), and then hopefully defuse (§§5–6), this sort of complaint. At any rate, it is perhaps generous of me even to have suggested that my favored reading has ever enjoyed anything like wide consideration.

<sup>14</sup>For C. Diamond's views on Wittgenstein, see her 'Throwing Away the Ladder', *Philosophy*, 63 (1988), pp. 5–27; and the illuminating discussions throughout *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life*, ed. A. Crary (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2007).

intentional orientation. Of course, not just any old change will matter. The relevant change will have to be constituted by a specific shift from aiming at one's own advantage in one's political actions, on the one hand, to aiming in such actions at the common benefit, on the other. That is what is supplied by Aristotle's appeal to the kinds of aims that mark out a constitution as either correct or deviant. But the distinctive implication is nonetheless that the shift from deviance to correctness consists merely in a way of bringing, in one's own thought, one's political actions under a conception of the common advantage. (*Mutatis mutandis*, for changes from correct to incorrect regimes.) To change one's aim in this way is to change one's application of certain concepts.

But it bears noting that the relevant sort of change in the application of concepts is distinctive; the shift must be expressible along *purposive* lines, as a change in *motivational* orientation or *practical* thought. A correct ruler's intention in acting as he does must be expressible as 'I am  $\phi$ 'ing in order to promote or realize the common advantage', where  $\phi$ 'ing is an exercise of the ruler's political authority. For one is not acting with a certain aim in view, if one acts with the merely passive recognition that some action happens to fall under a concept; I am not  $\phi$ 'ing in order to  $\psi$ , if thought about the relation between  $\phi$ 'ing and  $\psi$ 'ing figures in some merely incidental way to my  $\phi$ 'ing. And so a ruler might not be ruling *for the sake of the common advantage*, even if he knows, or just merely thinks, that he is in some sense effecting the common advantage. What's needed is that one's representation that some action falls under the concept of the common advantage itself motivates or otherwise characterizes the action, in such a way as to cause or explain what one is doing. In a word, the character of an action as bearing a certain kind of aim is given by facts about its agent's intention in action: by facts about the kind of concept-application that is *internal* to acting on an intention. To adopt the idiom of contemporary philosophy, we can say that the relevant stretch of concept-application must be 'practical' in this sense, *qua* 'action-guiding'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>The relevant form of concept-application will be—in terms familiar to sympathetic readers of G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, second ed. (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2000)—practical and productive and creative; for these readers, it must be an exercise of Anscombean practical thought, an exercise of the kind that can contribute to making true the description 'I am  $\phi$ 'ing because I am  $\psi$ 'ing'. (See A. Ford, 'Action and Generality', and F. Stoutland, 'Anscombe's *Intention* in Context', in *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, edd. A. Ford, J. Hornsby, and F. Stoutland (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2011), pp. 1–22 and 76–104, respectively; D. Lavin, 'On the Problem of Action', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 61 (2013), pp. 357–72; and S. Rödl, *Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2007), c. 2.) But, even to those quasi-Humean readers less sympathetic to Anscombeans' distinctive moves in this area, the point should still be plausible: to speak of aims is, at least in part, to speak of desires; and so, if I do not desire to  $\psi$ , then I will not be  $\phi$ 'ing in order to  $\psi$ , even if I know that  $\phi$ 'ing will contribute to  $\psi$ 'ing. In such a case, I will not be aiming to  $\psi$ . (See Boyle and Lavin, 'Goodness and Desire'.) Beyond *Intention*, the Aristotelian provenance of something like the reading urged here is explored in G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Two Kinds of Error in Action', *Journal of Philosophy*, 60 (14), pp. 393–401; her 'Thought and Action in Aristotle', in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1981), c. 7; and her 'Practical Inference', in *Virtues and Reasons*, edd. R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence,



Now this view should seem quite radical. In principle, such a change can obtain—the change either from incorrect to correct forms of constitution, or from correct to incorrect—no matter whatever else might be true of the orders rulers issue, the actions they undertake, and the bits of knowledge they purport to possess.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, on this interpretation, the relevant change need not map on to some change in efficiency or effectiveness at securing whatever it is that is one’s aim; for the ruler of a correct regime need not be any better than would be his deviant counterpart at, say, bringing about the common advantage, nor any worse at, say, securing his private interest—whatever the common advantage and the private interest turn out really to be. Indeed, the ruler of a correct regime need not have any substantive knowledge about what constitutes the common advantage over and above whatever knowledge his deviant counterpart might possess. Nor need the deviant ruler be somehow more knowledgeable about his private interest. Richard Robinson helpfully points out Aristotle’s divergence in this neighborhood from Plato: ‘In dividing constitutions, Aristotle makes no use, here or elsewhere, of Plato’s distinction between constitutions where the rulers know, and those where they do not know, what is really good and right’.<sup>17</sup> The crucial factor is rather the *shape* of rulers’ aims and intentions—not what they cause or do under some non-intentional description, nor even what they happen to think comprises success in their aims.<sup>18</sup>

We can bring out this fact by noting a peculiar feature of purposive explanations of intentional

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and W. Quinn (Oxford, 1998), c. 1. And, of course, in speaking of ‘practical thought’, I do not here mean to rely on Aristotle’s own technical notion of *praxis*; our more quotidian concept of *intentional action* suffices.

<sup>16</sup> *Whatever else*: When a form of rule moves from deviant to correct, or from correct to deviant, *some* predications of rulers’ orders, actions, and thought change, namely, those which purposively or practically or productively involve their conceptions of the common and the private advantage. But, in principle, there might be no other changes.

<sup>17</sup> See Robinson’s commentary in Aristotle, *Politics: Books III and IV*, p. 22. As we shall see (§§3–5), commentators regularly import into their picture of Aristotle what Robinson rightly holds out as a mere accretion. And I wish to set aside, as irrelevant to this discussion, the separate question whether there is some *different* sense in which deviant rulers must lack knowledge of ‘what is really good and right’. To the extent that Aristotle adopts the kind of ‘motivational internalism’ suggested by Socrates’s slogan that virtue is knowledge, deviant rulers may seem to lack a kind of knowledge; but what they lack is not, I think, well described as knowledge of ‘what is really good and right’; see J. McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1998), cc. 2–3. (Recall that, in the *Ethics*, Aristotle is concerned to underscore that both the akratic and the enkratic agent, though surely short of full virtue, can in some sense possess knowledge of ‘what is really good and right’; see *NE VII*. Also see, in line with §§5–6 below, *Pol V.ix*, where Aristotle implies that, in lacking political virtue, democratic rulers do not thereby lack knowledge of the common advantage.) The irrelevance of the question of Aristotle’s motivational internalism is anyway consistent with Robinson’s point: the kind of knowledge that deviant rulers lack need not be possessed by correct rulers; and so Aristotle’s treatment of constitutional correctness does not hang on what Plato instead found to be salient.

<sup>18</sup> For the sake of exposition, I leave aside certain complications that will only much later come prominently into view (§§5–6); these complications concern whether it is anyway right to speak, on Aristotle’s behalf, of somehow *unintentionally* or *accidentally* promoting or effecting the common advantage. I will suggest below that, in a word, the common advantage might be something whose realization itself requires aiming at it—consider examples like *promise-making* or *joke-telling* or *lying*; or, better, in an Aristotelian idiom, *acting virtuously* or *speaking grammatically* or *healing doctoringly*—with the effect that it might be wrong to hold that deviant regimes can ever promote the Aristotelian common advantage. But the wrongness would stem, not from the unimportance or irrelevance of rulers’ intentional states, as standard interpretations assume (§§2–5), but rather from their fundamental role in Aristotle’s conception of the common advantage as a special—collective—kind of *eupraxia* (‘acting well’).

action. If a ruler is  $\phi$ 'ing in order to promote the common advantage, it does not follow that he is, after all, truly promoting it. The claim 'I am telling a joke in order to amuse this friend' can be perfectly true, even if 'I am amusing this friend' is false. Indeed, it isn't even required that some concrete or particular stretch of joke-telling be actually conducive to—let alone constitutive of—friend-amusing.<sup>19</sup> (It is a sad but familiar fact that many jokes fall flat.)<sup>20</sup> Instead, all that's needed for our initial claim (of course, in addition to a real act of  $\phi$ 'ing) is that its subject represent his  $\phi$ 'ing in a certain way, in a stretch of what we can loosely call productive and practical and creative thought about the common advantage. Of course, the subject must have *some* conception of what promotes or constitutes the common advantage, if thought about it is to figure at all in his intention; but it is hardly necessary either for that conception to be thoroughly correct, or for the content of that conception to approach some kind of concrete realization. For these reasons, it is not necessary that a purposive act of  $\phi$ 'ing *in order to*  $\psi$  express, or anyway instantiate, a correct conception of what properly constitutes, or conduces to,  $\psi$ 'ing. So a correct ruler can act in order to promote or realize the common advantage, without thereby possessing or deploying much in the way of knowledge about what truly or properly promotes or realizes the common advantage. A purposive explanation of action, or, equivalently, a purposive intention in acting, is invulnerable to these significant forms of error or defect.<sup>21</sup>

This conception of what makes a *politeia* either correct or deviant focuses, then, on one dimension or aspect of the aims that rulers have—or, better, take themselves to have—with no weight on the question whether their actions or thoughts actually succeed at securing or capturing what their intentions represent as their goals. Rather, the weight is entirely on the kind of *intention* they have in acting as they do. We can therefore call this interpretation of what constitutes a *politeia*'s status as either correct or deviant an *intentionalist* conception.

After all, a ruler's intention is where one is to look for his *politeia*'s status as either correct or

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<sup>19</sup> *Concrete or particular*: While some *specific* purposive act of  $\phi$ 'ing *in order to*  $\psi$  might not require an act that, as it happens, truly promotes or realizes  $\psi$ 'ing, I think it is plausible that, for certain substitutions, there must be a *generic* relation that binds together  $\phi$ 'ing and  $\psi$ 'ing. E.g., if I am drinking water in order to quench my thirst, then, even if my water-drinking does not *here and now* go far at all in the way of thirst-quenching, my act is of a type that *generally* quenches thirst. In such a case, what is true of the type need not be true of all its tokens, though the tokens require that certain distinctive things be true of the type. (I take it that such generic relations constitute the core of Aristotle's form of *teleological explanation*.) For more on these complexities concerning so-called 'Aristotelian categoricals', see M. Thompson, *Life and Action*, part I; his 'Apprehending Human Form', in *Modern Moral Philosophy*, ed. A. O'Hear (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 47–74; Boyle, 'Essentially Rational Animals'; and Boyle and Lavin, 'Goodness and Desire'.

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to [Friend1] for suggesting this sort of example.

<sup>21</sup> This kind of equivalence constitutes, I think, one of the central insights of Anscombe's *Intention*; and it is discussed by Rödl, *Self-Consciousness*, c. 2; and by Lavin, 'On the Problem of Action'. The compossibility of intentional action and these sorts of error or defect is trenchantly explored by M. Thompson, 'Anscombe's *Intention* and Practical Knowledge', in *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, c. 7; see also his *Life and Action*, part II.

deviant.

The space that the intentionalist interpretation leaves open can be underscored by raising a more mundane case—an unsurprising strategy, in light of Aristotle’s own procedure in *Pol* III.vi.

Consider a game such as baseball. We might say that someone is playing the game ‘incorrectly’ insofar as he wants, as he steps up to the plate, not to score a base hit, but rather to make the gratifying sound that accompanies solid contact with a bat’s ‘sweet spot’. If this is right, the location of his error—his playing baseball incorrectly—is to be found precisely in the content of his aim. And that will be so even if his behavior is otherwise *identical* to that manifested by the expert player who *does* want to score a base hit. Even if both sorts of player miraculously score base hits and round the bases in the same kinds of circumstances, the first is playing the game incorrectly insofar as his behavior, unlike the expert’s, is not motivated by, or does not bear, the right kind of intention.<sup>22</sup> And so a ‘deviant’ bit of baseball-playing need not be an otherwise bad or unsuccessful stretch of it. Relatedly, nor need a ‘non-deviant’ or ‘correct’ stretch of baseball-playing, with respect to this evaluative dimension, be an otherwise good or successful bit of it. (Seen from a distance, both players might appear locally indistinguishable, with equally impressive, or unimpressive, player statistics.) Now, were some *third* previously idiosyncratic player to adopt and therefore bear the favored kind of aim, namely, to score base hits, she would thereby count as playing baseball correctly, at least along the relevant dimension. To repeat, this would be so even if this third player were to go on lacking almost all technical knowledge about how reliably to secure base hits. Although lacking skill and knowledge about baseball, and therefore potentially awful at it, she would still count, along this dimension, as playing baseball correctly.<sup>23</sup> The difference in the phases of our third baseball player’s changing aims would be akin to that between trying to play trick pool and trying to play pool *simpliciter*, a difference that need not be locally captured in terms of divergent behavior, or divergent rates of success at bank shots, or divergent cognitive states about the physics of billiards.

So too with Aristotle’s physical trainer and ship captain from *Pol* III.vi. As such, they have aims that can be captured, both of them, in a general net: *ruling for the sake of those whom they rule*. Of course, if some particular trainer and captain falsify such a characterization, they

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<sup>22</sup>I do not mean to claim that bearers of knowledge or skill might be *universally* or even *generally* behaviorally indistinguishable from those who lack the relevant powers; all that’s meant here is the utterly sanitary thought that, in *local* contexts, such bearers might be so indistinguishable. I thank [Friend2] for pointing out the significance of this qualification.

<sup>23</sup>*Almost all technical knowledge*: Presumably, she must meet some minimal epistemic threshold for it to be true that she’s playing baseball *at all*. But this threshold can be quite modest; she may need to know some core of the basic rules, which team she’s on, how to move her limbs, etc. What seems unnecessary is anything approaching complete technical knowledge about, say, how properly to strike a bat’s sweet spot, or how reliably to score a single.

should count as deviant forms of their kinds, where falsification consists in a false statement about the shape of their aims. But, notably, Aristotle declines to say that such craftsmen, whether correct or deviant, must succeed or fail at their aims, or that they possess or lack the relevant sorts of gymnastic or nautical knowledge. After all, a correct ship captain and a deviant one might issue identical orders in some identical circumstances, with the same share of merely technical expertise, though only the former issues his orders with a view primarily to the good of his crew; perhaps the latter aims mainly at his sailors' subjugation and humiliation.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the correct ship captain, in this sense, need not himself have much knowledge about what constitutes the right way of making good on his aims; although he *aims* at safety, he might be quite poor at *securing* it.

And so too with Aristotle's distinction between forms of correct or incorrect *politeiai*. To summarize, since a constitution's correctness consists in its rulers' bearing a certain kind of aim, an incorrect constitution's rulers need not be thereby defective at securing the common advantage, nor good at securing their private benefit. Nor need they possess a generally incorrect conception of what the common advantage might be. For the same reason, a correct regime's rulers need not be reliable at securing the common advantage, nor defective at securing their private benefit. Nor need they so possess a generally correct conception of the constituents of the common benefit.

Of course, in particular cases, rulers might in fact be better or worse at securing their aims, and might possess or lack correct conceptions of the common benefit and the private advantage. But the question of a constitution's correctness does not by itself settle these matters. Rather, these other issues are so far left open by Aristotle's official treatment in *Pol* III.vi–vii of a *politeia*'s status as correct. Throughout these chapters, Aristotle's appeal to the intentional, and therefore 'intensional' (§3), terminology of *aiming* suggests that facts about whether rulers truly promote or effect the common advantage, or possess the relevant sorts of knowledge or skill, are quite incidental: as incidental to a regime's correctness as the dispositions of the light-minded are to Socrates's status as snub-nosed.

## 2 Reasons for Resistance

I said above that the intentionalist interpretation has fallen out of favor among most commentators on the *Politics*. This was generous. The disfavor the intentionalist reading unfortunately

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<sup>24</sup>Our deviant captain need not be entirely unconcerned with his crew's safety, of course: the longer they live and work, the longer he can dominate them. But it is domination that is his *primary* aim; on the relevant sense of 'primary', see §4 below.

enjoys is usually merely implicit; in most cases, the full force of the position is not so much as even countenanced. Or, when it is explicitly entertained, it is often cavalierly dismissed or silently abandoned. At any rate, most commentators seem to adopt interpretative strategies inconsistent with the kind of view I've been rehearsing. But that view is not only quite radical but also Aristotle's own, as we shall see.

There are at least two general reasons for this neglect, and we are now in a position to survey them.

The first sort of complaint is that the intentionalist's stress on the character of rulers' aims seems to leave unaddressed exactly what is supposed to be of evaluative interest to those concerned with political life. For, if we are concerned with the normative credentials of various political arrangements, then facts about rulers' aims should matter much less than whether such arrangements in fact cater to the common benefit—presumably, a valuable thing, however it is supposed to be specified. As Robinson puts it, with characteristic acuity:

Whether a constitution is likely to secure the common advantage is probably the most important question to ask about it [...]. On the other hand, [Aristotle] asks whether a constitution 'seeks' the common advantage, which is not quite the same question. The important question about rulers and constitutions is what they actually produce rather than what they seek to produce. Furthermore, acting according to law is a great means of securing the common advantage [as Plato, unlike Aristotle, underscores]. Again, whether rulers are acting according to law can be determined much more objectively than what they are seeking.<sup>25</sup>

Now Robinson, for his part, considers the intentionalist reading to be an exegetical option warranted by the text; but he thinks that it comes with significant philosophical costs. For, if the intentionalist reading is correct, Aristotle will appear preoccupied by what is philosophically unmotivated. He will appear oddly concerned with something like the interior condition of rulers' souls, a topic both relatively unimportant and incorrigibly elusive, by Robinson's lights. So, crudely put, what pulls against the intentionalist reading is what I've already emphasized as its radical and open-ended shape, a shape that might seem, interestingly enough, either unsatisfying or alternately incautious. Unsatisfying: Since that reading leaves so much open, something as crucial as what is claimed to be suggested by the terminology of 'correctness' and 'justice' (1279a17–21)—seems hardly illuminated by Aristotle's apparent insistence on the centrality of rulers' aims. Incautious: Notwithstanding what appears to be Aristotle's official

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<sup>25</sup>Commentary in Aristotle, *Politics: Books III and IV*, p. 22.

account in *Pol* III.vi–vii, something *more* must be part of the picture, since the intentionalist view seems to say so little about what is supposed to be of crucial interest.

At this point, the complaint might just conclude, as Robinson’s does, with an admission: *Too bad for Aristotle*. But, for many recent commentators, the principle of charity suggests that Aristotle could not have been himself so fixated on what seems to be a mere side-show, at the expense of what surely must have been, for him just as for us, the ‘most important question’. So, if the text can support an interpretation different from the intentionalist’s, all the better.

In fact, many commentators go farther, and this is the second reason for neglect, or general sort of complaint. Aristotle’s readers often deploy passages and issue interpretations that seem to push against, or at least obscure, the intentionalist reading, despite the language of aims and purposes that everywhere marks *Pol* III.vi–vii. On this kind of tack, rejecting the intentionalist reading will come to seem *forced*, not merely by the principle of charity, but also by other of Aristotle’s commitments.<sup>26</sup>

There are different passages that scholars have so marshaled. But an easily recognizable line of thought stands out as representative. In most cases, interpreters in effect assume, more or less transparently, that certain alleged implications of the intentionalist position must themselves make hash of Aristotle’s distinction between correct and incorrect regimes. The first implication—alleged, but rightly—is that, as I’ve said, correct and incorrect rulers might be, in a familiar sense and in certain familiar respects, behaviorally and even cognitively indistinguishable. But it is then claimed that an allowance of this kind renders Aristotle’s thought on constitutional correctness incoherent, since the allowance somehow infects Aristotle’s distinction between aiming at the common advantage, on the one hand, and aiming at self-interest, on the other, with a fatal instability. Or so the allegation goes, but wrongly.

To sketch a familiar example. If the ‘common advantage’ is glossed in some apparently plausible way—as that which benefits the citizen class, where being a citizen just is to enjoy certain legal powers to rule—then, in David Keyt’s words, ‘a constitution that looks to the common advantage would look only to the rulers’ own advantage, and the distinction between correct and deviant constitutions would collapse.’<sup>27</sup>

But how exactly does *looking to the common advantage* reduce, as is here supposed, to *looking to the rulers’ advantage*?<sup>28</sup> Keyt’s idea might be taken up in two different but related ways.

On the one hand, what is claimed to warrant the reduction is some fact, if it is a fact, about

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<sup>26</sup>In other words, if these standard readings are right, then, even with respect to exegesis, it is not really supposed to be a tied game after all, *pace* Robinson.

<sup>27</sup>D. Keyt, ‘Supplementary Essay’, in Aristotle, *Politics: Books III and IV*, p. 134.

<sup>28</sup>Given, of course, some candidate specification of *to koinon sumpheron*.

the complex of benefits and beneficiaries that comprises the common advantage. But, since what comprises the common advantage is also just what is picked out in references to the ruler's advantage, actions which bear some favored relation to the one also bear that relation to the other. Presumably, on this line of thought, the favored relation is something like *promotion* or *production*. (If water just is H<sub>2</sub>O, then, if I am producing clean water, then I am producing clean H<sub>2</sub>O.) But, if two rulers are indistinguishable with respect to this relation, there will not be, it is claimed, the right basis on which to distinguish them; and so Aristotle's thought on constitutional correctness will seem to lack application to the kinds of cases that are supposed to be central. (If some special fact about producing H<sub>2</sub>O is true of two agents, then they obviously cannot be distinguished in terms of that fact.)

On the other hand, what is claimed to warrant the reduction is some alleged fact, not necessarily about what constitutes the common advantage, but about what agents *think* (or perhaps even *know*) the common advantage involves. If two rulers share particular beliefs about a certain complex of benefits or beneficiaries, a complex that both rulers hold to implicate the common advantage, then, in aiming to provide those benefits to those beneficiaries, our two rulers are both supposed to be aiming at the common advantage. (If two agents both believe that seltzer happens to be refreshing, then, in aiming to drink seltzer, they both aim to drink something refreshing.) But, to the extent that they share these beliefs, they cannot be distinguished with respect to the dimension scoped by Aristotle's thought on constitutional correctness: if our rulers share these sorts of beliefs, then they will share the property of aiming at the common advantage.<sup>29</sup>

So the constitutive difference between correct and incorrect regimes must come to something other than what the intentionalist takes it to be. It must instead consist in *actually* benefiting different classes of citizens, owing to some kind of behavioral divergence between our types of rulers. Or, failing that, it must consist in a particular kind of mental or cognitive divergence, a difference given by the fact that only correct rulers possess certain special *beliefs* about complexes of benefits and beneficiaries, no matter whether their behavior can be locally distinguished from that of their deviant counterparts.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>We shall see below how these two ways of glossing Keyt's thought amount to forms of the so-called 'extensionalist fallacy'. The first is an instance of a violation of the *general* 'intensionality' of *thought*. The second is a more *particular* instance of a violation of the 'intensionality' of *purposive* thought; recall n. 15 above and its home in the main text. In §4, it will become plain that Aristotle is quite alive to these sorts of fallacy.

<sup>30</sup>In order to frame what follows, I have endeavored to describe, with only minimal violence, Keyt's views as open to two different construals. This is perhaps overly permissive, since, as we shall see (§3), he means only to entertain the former. In fact, the latter construal seems hardly even in view; Keyt is in ample company in this respect. But lines of argument schematically similar to the latter construal will also be examined below (especially in §4).

Either way, the intentionalist’s allowances—what I’ve been stressing as features of its radical open-endedness—seem destined to foreclosure. On pain of incoherence, the intentionalist is supposed to concede either that a regime’s correctness hangs constitutively on what is effected or actually promoted, regardless of rulers’ intentions; or that it instead hangs, not on a distinctive sort of purposive representation, but rather on significant divergences in states of thought or knowledge about what the common advantage happens to involve. Each concession robs the intentionalist position of its special force.<sup>31</sup>

Keyt’s sort of complaint is a common one, even standard in the literature. But, for reasons I explore in §3 below, this kind of objection, like others I shall examine, fundamentally misunderstands the intentionalist reading; in particular, it misunderstands the kind of *philosophical* ground that it occupies, ground captured in the philosophical idiom of ‘intensionality’. Moreover, if the intentionalist reading is kept firmly and clearly in view, Aristotle’s thought is rendered, even on a merely textual basis, more coherent, not less (§4).

There are other lines of thought that implicit opponents of the intentionalist interpretation often make out. But what seems to be a common conclusion of these rival views is that Aristotle’s distinction between correct and incorrect regimes must consist, less in the different shapes that rulers’ aims bear with respect to their purposive commitment to the common advantage, but more in some *other* complex of differences or defects (§5). Commentators say, for instance, that what really—and constitutively—distinguishes the incorrect from the correct constitution is that the former’s rulers lack generally correct substantive conceptions of the virtues (§5.2); or even that they do not aim at the human good (§5.1), nor, equivalently, at *eudaimonia* (‘happiness’) or *eu prattein* (‘acting well’).<sup>32</sup> These suggestions come to different construals of what constitutes Aristotle’s primary distinction between regime types: for instance, a substantively incorrect conception of *to dikaion* (‘what is just’ or ‘the just thing’); or a disposition not to aim at living well. But, of course, these kinds of differences or defects are supposed to be left open by

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<sup>31</sup>And each also rides against Robinson’s construal: the former discounts Aristotle’s stress on what rulers ‘seek’, in favor of a stress on ‘what they actually produce’; the latter glosses constitutional correctness in terms of knowledge ‘of what is really good and right’, assimilating Plato and Aristotle on this score.

<sup>32</sup>I here take it for granted that these equivalences are some of the main lessons of *NE I*; see J. McDowell, *Mind*, part I; his *The Engaged Intellect* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2009), cc. 2–3; and his ‘Response to Irwin’, in *McDowell and His Critics*, edd. C. Macdonald and G. Macdonald (Malden, 2006), pp. 198–202. Also see—for what I take to be some of the best treatments of Aristotle’s conception of the human good—G. Lawrence, ‘Reason, Intention, and Choice’, in *Modern Moral Philosophy*, pp. 265–300; his ‘Human Excellence in Character and Intellect’, in *A Companion to Aristotle*, c. 26; his ‘Human Good and Human Function’, in *The Blackwell Guide*, c. 2; his ‘Is Aristotle’s Function Argument Fallacious?’, in *Socratic, Platonic, and Aristotelian Studies*, ed. Anagnostopoulos (Dordrecht, 2011), c. 20; and his ‘The Function of the Function Argument’, *Ancient Philosophy*, 21 (2001), pp. 445–75. While the Aristotelian nature of these lessons may seem obvious to many, I argue elsewhere that interpreters routinely ‘chicken out’ on this score, too, in failing to recognize that the human good is supposed to consist quite simply in the self-conscious exercise of special powers, the powers (partly) captured in talk of the characterological excellences as capacities for self-knowledge, capacities whose exercises just are, in a technical sense, Aristotelian *praxeis*.



Aristotle's distinction between the correct and the incorrect regime, if the intentionalist is right.

I think the textual evidence in support of these rival conclusions is very hard to come by. At the very least, such evidence as appears to support the anti-intentionalist case in these ways is hardly dispositive, as Robinson admits. If this is so, the intentionalist reading should be allowed to take the field, enjoying the presumption that the drift of *Pol* III.vi–vii yields, as I have already suggested.

Indeed, I hope to show that the intentionalist view enjoys even more than mere presumption; for there is little reason to saddle Aristotle with the view that deviant rulers generally manifest either substantively incorrect conceptions of the virtues or a disposition not to aim at the human good. Rather, contrary to what these commentators claim, Aristotle's deviant rulers do not often bear these defects, even in a merely material sense. So these alternative construals should be rejected, because they fail to be, not only *constitutively* correct about Aristotle's primary distinction, but also *materially* correct about it. Rather, what might appear to be plausible reconstructions of Aristotle's thought on constitutional correctness will amount instead to mere accretion. Or so I shall argue in §5.<sup>33</sup>

A plan for what follows. What remains is to undermine what has been sketched in this section: the case against the intentionalist reading. The rest of this paper prosecutes the task in a number of ways: by pointing out how likely objections stem from a misunderstanding of the intentionalist's philosophical commitments (§3); by defending the favored reading on the basis of the dialectical context in which Aristotle's treatment arises (§4); and by challenging those rival interpretations that suggest that Aristotle takes deviant regimes to be defective in the ways just rehearsed (§5). At that point, the paper will have addressed what I picked out above as the *second* of readers' general sorts of complaint against the intentionalist.

Now what about Robinson's worry—the *first* sort of complaint—that the view urged here speaks, at best, to a topic merely peripheral to 'the most important question' concerning political life? In §§5–6, I cast doubt on what I take to be a few arguably intuitive but evidently disputable presuppositions, presuppositions (whether textual or philosophical) that appear to make attractive Robinson's sort of complaint. Once these boulders are dislodged, and once Aristotle's stress on ruler's aims is placed against its proper background, the intentionalist's view will hardly constitute anything like an odd fixation on a side-show.

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<sup>33</sup>In other words, were it true that incorrect regimes, or their rulers, generally have the defects just mentioned, such a claim might be merely material, just as was our claim about the snub-nosed Socrates from above: even if particular rulers or regimes have those defects, *that* fact is no part of what *incorrectness* consists in. But I shall go on to suggest that, for Aristotle, it is quite unnecessary for a deviant regime to manifest even in a material sense some or all of these defects. (Note that, while not all material truths are constitutive, all constitutive truths must also be material.)

The paper ends by pointing in the direction of a distinctive and provocative sense in which one can speak of Aristotle’s political thought as a kind of ‘virtue politics’: a conception of political life that takes seriously the idea that living *well* hangs in a special way on a peculiar conception of living *together*, where the right way of living together hangs in a constitutive way on agents’ *aiming* to live together and thereby to live well. If this closing tack is attractive, then, contrary to Robinson’s worry, nothing less than Aristotelian *eudaimonia* itself will seem to depend on what ‘rulers and constitutions [...] seek to produce’. What is then made available is the thought that Aristotle’s *Politics* forms a kind of ‘virtue politics’, in the sense in which his *Ethics* is a kind of ‘virtue ethics’. For, just as the Aristotelian human good in general consists, at least in part, in the intentional exercise of the characterological excellences, the Aristotelian *political* good might consist in the exercise of powers whose actualization cannot but be intentional. In a word, the common advantage might be such as to constitutively require, for its realization, that a *politeia*’s rulers aim at it: to take away the aim is to take away its reality.<sup>34</sup>

### 3 Extensionalizing Correctness

Anyone who encounters Aristotle’s official treatment of the primary distinction between correct and incorrect regimes in *Pol* III.vi–vii cannot help but be struck by its emphasis on rulers’ aims. That treatment centers on the idea that correct regimes aim at the common advantage, while incorrect regimes aim instead at their rulers’ private interest. At this point, though, it becomes natural to wonder anyway about just what the common advantage is, as commentators standardly do. In §§3.1 and 3.2 below, I examine more closely two of four general strategies that prominent scholars have adopted in trying to yield an answer; the remaining strategies will be explored in §5. But what unites the four strategies is that, if they are allowed to seem plausible, the intentionalist reading may seem, at best, entirely dispensable. However, as we shall see, there is good reason to doubt them.

#### 3.1 Beneficiaries

The first general strategy asks about the class of people whose benefit is supposed to constitute the common advantage. Again, this is a natural move, since Aristotle’s account seems to ask

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<sup>34</sup>Recall n. 18 above. And, for incisive discussions of this point concerning the thought-dependence of certain sorts of object, see Rödl, *Self-Consciousness*, c. 2; and J. McDowell, ‘What Is the Content of an Intention in Action?’ *Ratio*, 23 (2010), pp. 415–32.

us to distinguish between the *common* and the *private* interest. And so the examination begins by holding in place the concept of advantage or benefit, shared by both sides of Aristotle's distinction, so as to focus on what is *not* shared: an examination of the difference between benefits that are common and those that are private. Presumably, that difference consists in the scope or extension of a *politeia*'s beneficiaries. If this is so, then it will seem attractive to hold that a constitution's correctness hangs fundamentally on whether its rulers seek to advantage various classes of beneficiaries, contrary to the intentionalist reading.<sup>35</sup>

Commentators have made heavy weather of this question. They note that Aristotle fails to specify explicitly what group of residents is supposed to be advantaged in a correct constitution, and so they undertake relatively complex processes of reconstruction in the hope of clarifying just who is and who isn't included in the target class. Keyt's discussion is typical:

But whose advantage is the common advantage? Aristotle does not give a straightforward answer. The common advantage is not the advantage of every inhabitant of a given city. The common advantage does not include the advantage of slaves. Nor apparently does it include the advantage of resident aliens or foreign visitors. Aristotle seems to equate the common advantage in a city with the common advantage of its citizens.<sup>36</sup>

But the process of reconstruction cannot be so simple, Keyt says, since this quick restriction to the class of citizen-rulers burdens Aristotle with what appears to contradict the hallmark of a correct constitution: that its rulers aim to produce benefits that apply more widely than just—privately—to themselves. On this view, avoiding the tension requires that different subclasses of citizens and inhabitants be posited, often with an emphasis on those typically dubbed 'second-class':

If this is so, we can see the importance of the concept of a second-class citizen for Aristotle's analysis. For first-class citizens all belong to households headed by a full citizen. This means that on the assumption that a man's own advantage is closely tied to that of the household he heads, the advantage of the full citizens of a city will be the same as the advantage of the totality of its first-class citizens. But by Aristotle's definition of a full citizen, the full citizens of a city are its rulers. Hence, if the common advantage of a city were the advantage of its first-class citizens only,

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<sup>35</sup>Recall that, for the intentionalist, correctness hangs neither on *what* constitutes the common advantage nor on what agents merely happen to *think*—non-purposively—about that. It hangs, rather, on specially purposive, practical, and productive forms of concept-application; again see n. 15 above.

<sup>36</sup>Keyt, 'Supplementary Essay', p. 133 (partially quoted already, in §2 above); Keyt's citations omitted.

a constitution that looks to the common advantage would look only to the rulers' own advantage, and the distinction between correct and deviant constitutions would collapse. The distinction thus implies that a city contains a body of second-class citizens whose advantage is included in the common advantage.<sup>37</sup>

And C.D.C. Reeve takes up a similar strategy but disputes Keyt's solution:

Correct constitutions aim at 'the common benefit'; deviant ones at the benefit of the rulers. [Aristotle's] explanation is not very helpful, however, because he doesn't specify the group, G, whose benefit is the common one. [...] When we try to provide the missing information, moreover, we run into difficulties.

A natural first thought about G, for example, is that it is the group of unqualified [i.e., Keyt's 'full'] citizens, those who participate in judicial and deliberative office. But if G is restricted to these citizens, the common benefit and the private one coincide, since only the rulers participate in these offices. Moreover, even the deviant constitutions aim at the benefit of a wider group than that of the unqualified citizens, since they also aim at the benefit of the wives and children of such citizens.

Perhaps, then, G consists of all the free native inhabitants of the constitution. No, that won't do either, because now even some correct constitutions, such as a polity, will count as deviant. For the common benefit in a correct constitution is a matter of having a share in noble or virtuous living. Hence a polity will not aim at the benefit of its native-born artisans, tradesmen, or laborers, since there is no 'element of virtue' in these occupations.<sup>38</sup>

Now, for our purposes, we do not need to adjudicate this dispute in all of its details. What's important here is the way in which this strategy, whether taken in Keyt's or Reeve's form, assumes that the question of the common advantage's beneficiaries depends on the question that has been our focus: the distinction between aiming at the common advantage and aiming at rulers' private interest. Keyt and Reeve both appeal in their analyses to the schematic claim that, if the common advantage were glossed as 'X', then, in Fred Miller's words, 'the distinction between correct and deviant constitutions would collapse'.<sup>39</sup> Since that would make nonsense of what is surely of great interest to Aristotle, various specifications of 'X' are supposed to be

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<sup>37</sup>Keyt, 'Supplementary Essay', pp. 133–4. See also D. Keyt, 'Aristotle and Anarchism', *Reason Papers*, 18 (1993), pp. 133–52; his 'Aristotle's Political Philosophy'; Cooper, *Reason and Emotion*, c. 16; Miller, *Nature*, pp. 212–3; and Reeve, 'Naturalness'.

<sup>38</sup>C.D.C. Reeve, 'Introduction', in Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis and Cambridge, MA, 1998), pp. lxxvii–lxxviii; Reeve's citations omitted.

<sup>39</sup>Miller, *Nature*, p. 212.

rejected.

However, from a merely philosophical point of view, this interpretative strategy comes to a blunder. Generally, claims about those to whom the common advantage applies bear no obvious relation to whether rulers either aim or fail to aim at it, and so no relation to the question of a regime's correctness. For instance, someone might indeed be *aiming* at the common advantage, even if that at which she aims, under a more definite description, is not *actually* what constitutes or promotes it—just as an archer might be aiming, here and now, at a target's bull's eye, though she is quite wrong about where the target is, let alone its bull's eye. Of course, in such a case, we will likely say that she is aiming *poorly*, but that cuts no ice against the claim that she is, after all, *aiming at the bull's eye*.<sup>40</sup> Phrased abstractly, the question of what truly constitutes something at which one aims is largely orthogonal to the issue of whether one has a certain kind of aim, as we emphasized above in describing the intentionalist reading: the claim that I am  $\phi$ 'ing in order to  $\psi$  is not threatened by the fact that I am, after all, failing to  $\psi$ . Of course, were I to come to appreciate such a fact, our initial claim will probably cease to be true, since a different specification of  $\psi$ 'ing will have come into view. But, for all that, the bare fact poses no threat.

Similarly, two archers of equal competence might both have been pointed at the same target, and indeed both might have caused the same bull's eye to be struck. But, in such a case, it does not follow that they possessed shared aims. While one might have been aiming at the bull's eye, the other might have been aiming instead at a patch of red cork. And this can be true even if that patch of red cork really was the bull's eye. For the red cork at which our idiosyncratic archer had been aiming need not have entered into her purposive thought under a certain description: *as the bull's eye*. What's more, even if she *had* registered such an identification in her thought—that the red cork is the bull's eye—it still might not be true that she had after all *aimed at the bull's eye*. That description of the red cork—*qua* bull's eye—need not have been the description that mattered in her conception of what she sought to achieve. It may have figured for her as merely incidental, as no part of her aim, however knowledgeable she might be about what bull's eyes are like. Just so, one's passive recognition that  $\phi$ 'ing will yield a stretch of  $\psi$ 'ing fails to put into place the claim that one is  $\phi$ 'ing in order to  $\psi$ . What's needed is a motivating—and so purposive, practical, and productive—representation of some specific relation between  $\phi$ 'ing

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<sup>40</sup>That one is poorly  $\phi$ 'ing entails that one is nonetheless  $\phi$ 'ing. Of course, there must be a limit to the kinds or degrees of error we can credit; if someone appears to be in *wholesale* error, then that should undermine the plausibility of the claim that she is engaged, even poorly, in any particular kind of project. Wholesale error amounts to no error at all. See L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, fourth ed., edd. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and J. Schulte (Malden, 2009), §§241–2; and D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, second ed. (Oxford, 2001), c. 13.

and  $\psi$ 'ing.<sup>41</sup>

In short, the issue of whether two people share an aim cannot be settled just by appealing to whatever specific truths characterize that at which they aim, nor by appealing to whatever specific thoughts characterize two particular agents: not even when such truths are themselves constitutive or essential, and not even when their thoughts purport to pick out such truths. Nor need claims about such truths be subject to the general descriptions that either capture or divide people's aims.<sup>42</sup> We can make this patent by scrutinizing some simple and tempting inferences:

- (i) Jones and Smith want to elect the best person for the job.
- (ii) The best person for the job is in fact Roberts.
- (iii) [Therefore:] Jones and Smith want to elect Roberts.
- (iv) [Therefore:] Jones and Smith want to elect the same kind of person.
- (v) Smith and Jones know that the best person for the job is the daughter of a powerful billionaire.
- (vi) [Therefore:] Jones and Smith want to elect the daughter of a powerful billionaire.

At this point, it should be clear that there are number of problems in these alleged inferences. Claims (i) and (ii) purport to ground the conclusion in (iii), about the desire to elect Roberts; but of course (iii) does not follow: Jones and Smith might not know, or even think, that Roberts is the best person for the job, and so they need not desire to elect her. Indeed, Jones and Smith might have quite different desires, under more fine-grained specifications, about what kind of person is 'best for the job', in opposition to a specific construal of (iv), even if, as (iii) says, they both want to elect Roberts. Perhaps Jones thinks that being 'best for the job' comes to 'being clever', while Smith thinks that it comes to 'being eloquent'. In that respect, (iv) seems quite false: they do not want to elect the *same* kind of person. But we should also note that this way of denying (iv) poses no threat to the unity captured in (i), a unity available at a more abstract or general level of specificity than that suggested by (iv). The possibility of such differences in levels of specificity allows for the compossibility of (i) and certain ways of denying (iv). Moreover, even if Smith and Jones do share knowledge about that at which they aim, as (v) suggests, (vi) does not follow, since the fact that a certain candidate is related to a powerful

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<sup>41</sup>The two main points of this paragraph map on to the two ways of reading Keyt's sort of complaint, from §2 above; also see n. 35 above. *Mutatis mutandis*, the first point attacks the assumption that a fact about what constitutes the bull's eye warrants the thought that our two archers share an aim; the second point attacks the assumption that certain facts about what our archers believe about bull's eyes are enough for such a thought. Both assumptions are mistaken, and Aristotle helps himself to neither, as we shall see in §4.

<sup>42</sup>In technical language, we can say that talk about beliefs and desires, including aims, sets out *intensional*, or *nonextensional*, contexts.

billionaire might not figure as a salient specification of the content of their aims, no matter how perfectly true (v) might be. After all, in wanting a tasty Coke, I might not desire to ingest hundreds of calories of a nutritionally useless liquid, though I *know* that that is what a serving of Coke comes to. The same goes for Smith and Jones: that someone bears the property of being related to a billionaire need not figure as part of the content of their desires, contrary to (iv); and they might not care about that property at all, even if they know it applies, contrary to (vi).

Now, of course, if someone has an aim of some kind, there must be *some* general description under which she falls that makes true the claim that she has some sort of aim; it is the availability of that general description that makes it correct to say that two people share an aim. (If a claim like (i) above is true, presumably something must make it so.) But a description of this kind can be very general indeed: if it's true that each of two archers is aiming at the bull's eye, then they must know *something* about, say, how longbows work and what targets generally look like; and must desire, say, to launch arrows and to direct them in certain ways by moving their limbs; and must have general thoughts, say, about the layout of the physical environment. Among these states—of knowledge, desire, and thought—the relevant sorts can be quite abstract and minimal; what's needed is just enough knowledge, desire, and thought for us to say that they share a certain aim, under some very general description. Questions about whether they are aiming well or poorly can be left entirely open, and so can whether they share particular sorts of beliefs about that at which they are aiming. Not all descriptions of what constitutes the object of one's aim matter; quite generally, most are irrelevant.

To leave our archers and return to Aristotle, then. Keyt, Reeve, and Miller all take Aristotle's thought on rulers' aims to work as a kind of lever against certain candidates for understanding the common advantage and its beneficiaries. But, if we keep firmly in view what I've called his official treatment, Aristotle's thought on constitutional correctness can play no such role. That treatment poses no threat to rival specifications of the common advantage exactly because claims about rulers' aims are, as I've said, largely orthogonal to claims about what the common advantage substantively is.

To think otherwise is to commit an error that, in the context of conceptions of happiness, John McDowell long ago warned against:

Aristotle himself has a specific view about what kind of life constitutes *eudaimonia*. He certainly does not hold that everyone aims to lead *that* kind of life. But [...] [i]t would be a mistake—a missing of the nonextensionality of specifications of aim or

purpose—to think one could argue on these lines: *eudaimonia* is in fact such-and-such a kind of life; there are people who do not have that kind of life as their aim; therefore there are people who do not have *eudaimonia* as their aim.<sup>43</sup>

Read generally, McDowell’s point is that fine-grained or substantive specifications of what really constitutes happiness need not affect claims about whether any two people aim to live a happy life.<sup>44</sup> The gap opened up by recognizing that one can aim to live such a life while failing quite miserably at it, and even while having a generally incorrect conception of what that life is like, allows for the availability of true generalizations about *different* agents and their *shared* aims, generalizations that nonetheless capture both the failing and the successful agent. In other words, certain facts, or alleged facts, about the *extension* of the concept *eudaimonia* need not threaten claims about the *role* that concept plays in agents’ thoughts and actions—in their aims and purposes. That role is given by an *intensional* context, a context that resists straightforward *extensional* substitution.<sup>45</sup>

As is now obvious, this gap also puts into view a different application of the ‘nonextensionality of specifications of aim or purpose.’ McDowell emphasizes how claims about the constituents of happiness need not work to *falsify* claims about whether two agents aim to lead the same kind of life: a happy one. A different application of that feature shows that claims about the constituents of happiness need not work to *verify* whether two agents aim to lead a happy life, either.

But Keyt, Reeve, and Miller all make an error of precisely this shape, though their concern is the common advantage, not happiness. In outline, each presents the following kind of argument as valid:

- (1) All and only correct regimes aim at the common advantage.
- (2) The common advantage is the benefit of *such-and-such* citizens.
- (3) [Therefore:] All and only correct regimes aim at the benefit of *such-and-such* citizens.
- (4) Incorrect regimes aim at the private advantage.
- (5) The private advantage is the benefit of *such-and-such* citizens.
- (6) [Therefore:] Incorrect regimes aim at the benefit of *such-and-such* citizens.
- (7) [Therefore:] Correct regimes are incorrect regimes.

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<sup>43</sup>McDowell, *Mind*, c. 1, §2.

<sup>44</sup>*Generally*: McDowell’s point specifically concerns the ‘nonextensionality of specifications of aim or purpose’, but this sort of nonextensionality is a species of a *wider* genus: the nonextensionality of *thought* in general. ‘Missing’ this general kind of intensionality tempts the interpreters examined here in §3 into flawed inferences. But we shall see below how Aristotle’s readers often make the kind of mistake that McDowell more *specifically* underscores. Also recall n. 35 above.

<sup>45</sup>Recall the mistaken inference to (iii) from above, concerning Jones’s and Smith’s desires to elect Roberts.



Needless to say, Keyt, Reeve, and Miller don't endorse (2), (3), and (7), let alone the *soundness* of the argument as a whole. Rather, they think the absurdity of (7) militates against particular candidates for specifying 'such-and-such citizens' in (2)–(3), or (5)–(6), exactly because they hold the argument to be *valid*. But, in so doing, they assume that claims about what constitutes the common, or private, advantage must stand or fall at least partially in light of claims about rulers' aims, and, by implication, that claims about rulers' aims must stand or fail in virtue of specifications of what constitutes the common, or private, advantage. Both moves, though, erroneously assume that 'specifications of aim or purpose' are extensional, contrary to McDowell's apt point. The argument simply isn't valid, since it relies on substitutions in (2) and (5) that are irrelevant to the truth of (3), (6), and therefore (7). And, for reasons we've already discussed—recall Smith, Jones, and Roberts—no succor can be found in the the addition of:

(2)' Correct regimes think, or even know, that the common advantage is the benefit of *such-and-such* citizens.<sup>46</sup>

So, even from a merely philosophical point of view, the interpretations that Keyt, Reeve, and Miller take to be required by scholarly charity turn out to be rather uncharitable.

Spotting the flaws in this first general strategy—which strategy focuses on the beneficiaries implied, or thought to be implied, by the common advantage—puts into place a number of illuminating lessons. This subsection closes with the first lesson; two others will be soon canvassed in §3.2.

We can start with the fact—now obvious—that the intentionalist interpretation rehearsed above (§1) must not be *even so much as in view*. For that reading takes quite seriously the 'nonextensionality of specifications of aim or purpose'. Recall that, for the intentionalist, when Aristotle says that a *politeia*'s correctness consists in the shape of its rulers' aims—as seeking either the common advantage or merely the private interest—he means to allow for this sort of correctness to leave open extensional and even constitutive specifications of that at which rulers aim. These features can be left open exactly because the change from an incorrect regime to a correct one depends entirely on a specific shift in the intentional orientation of its rulers, without, at least in principle, any changes in their actions or in any other of their thoughts. In such a shift, the question who thereby comes to benefit is starkly irrelevant: the change from deviance to correctness need not map on to any change in the *class* of beneficiaries. Nor need it map on to a specific change in an agent's *thought* about such a class. In fact, had the intentionalist reading been clearly within our commentators' horizon, the defects of the above

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<sup>46</sup>Nor, of course, does a parallel amendment to (5) yield any help.

form of argument would have been plain.

But this also shows—and now the first lesson—why the above argument cuts no ice against the intentionalist. Were it valid, then it would be possible, and perhaps even attractive, to gloss the constitutive difference between correct and incorrect regimes in terms of aiming to advantage different classes of beneficiaries. However, since it is in fact invalid, there is no obvious reason to entertain this kind of alternative to the intentionalist reading. And the point is general. Nothing Aristotle is alleged to have said about the common advantage’s beneficiaries or effects—or about rulers’ non-purposive thought quite generally—can in this way threaten the centrality of what the intentionalist finds patent in *Pol* III.vi–vii: Aristotle’s frequent appeals to the peculiarly *intensional* contexts that mark out a constitution’s correctness. The more or less extensionalizing interpretations we’ve surveyed here make no contact with the intentionalist’s construal of Aristotle’s own language.

### 3.2 Production

We can bring out a second and third lesson if we try to amend the above argument on our our commentators’ behalf. Again, the goal would be to form, not a *sound* argument, but rather a *valid* argumentative scheme: a scheme whose validity is supposed to imperil the coherence of Aristotle’s thought on constitutional correctness, given certain—putatively dubious—specifications of the common advantage. The task would be to generate an argument to which our commentators could assent, insofar as they mean to query only its soundness. In other words, what needs to be preserved is the absurdity of (7), on which basis candidate specifications of the common, or private, advantage can be rejected.

But, if these candidate specifications can be rejected, and others endorsed, then we might be given to see attractive rivals to the intentionalist reading. In such a case, correctness would hang, not on distinctive exercises of practical thought, as the intentionalist holds, but instead on other sorts of facts or features.

In light of this goal, the natural way to avoid the kind of error that McDowell underscores, and so save our commentators’ conclusion, is to remove its nonextensional language. This—the second strategy prominent among Aristotle’s readers—would amount to something along these lines:

- (1)’ All and only correct regimes produce the common advantage.
- (2) The common advantage is the benefit of *such-and-such* citizens.
- (3)’ [Therefore:] All and only correct regimes produce the benefit of *such-and-such* citizens.

- (4)' Incorrect regimes produce the private advantage.
- (5) The private advantage is the benefit of *such-and-such* citizens.
- (6)' [Therefore:] Incorrect regimes produce the benefit of *such-and-such* citizens.
- (7) [Therefore:] Correct regimes are incorrect regimes.

Now it must be accepted that this sort of argument is indeed valid. And so, to that extent, it provides some reason to doubt certain putative specifications of ‘*such-and-such* citizens’.

However, there is hardly any reason to let pass something as onerous as (1)'. And resistance to it allows the denial of (3)', and therefore the denial of (7), with the effect that (2) can avoid whatever strain our commentators mean to impose. But this also shows that there is no obvious incoherence in the intentionalist's thought that, as it happens, correct and incorrect regimes both produce the common advantage: so long as the intentionalist can stop short of (7), nothing self-contradictory here follows from her allowance, contrary to (1)', that correct and incorrect rulers can be, in a familiar sense, behaviorally indistinguishable.<sup>47</sup> Of course, we might even say that the intentionalist position has been articulated so as to mount explicit opposition to this argument's *unsound* movement from (1)' to (7).

But might Aristotle really hold to (1)', after all? Answering this will put into place the second and third lessons of §3.

The second lesson is that, if (1)' is what Aristotle means to pick out as central in *Pol* III.vi-vii, then we must here find in his official account of constitutional correctness *egregiously bad* instances of self-expression, and in two related respects. For a start, as I've stressed, the intentional terminology that Aristotle employs stands at far remove from what (1)' alleges; and so we can credit (1)' only if we are willing to entertain the idea that Aristotle repeatedly and flagrantly misspeaks on so central a topic. But, if we are willing to go this far, we must also find Aristotle guilty of the intolerable opacity that Keyt, Reeve, and Miller allege to find at the heart of his treatment of constitutional correctness: crediting (1)' cannot help but raise urgent questions about the scope or extension of a correct *politeia*'s beneficiaries. But these questions seem hardly within Aristotle's horizon at all, as everyone admits. And so adopting this kind of rival to the intentionalist reading should seem exegetically unattractive.

The third lesson comes to a difficult dilemma that non-intentionalist readings will face. On the one hand, if the *purely* extensional reading—which claims that correctness consists in various sorts of *production*—is right, then, as I've just said, we will have to charge Aristotle with dismal

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<sup>47</sup>There is a complication here; recall n. 34 from above. The sense in which the intentionalist can maintain this thought is given by *whatever* sense her extensionalizing opponents attribute to the ‘common advantage’. As we shall see (§§5–6), the intentionalist position urged here favors a *different* conception of the ‘common advantage’, one to which the allowed thought is not meant to apply.

displays of self-expression and a gravely unmotivated reticence, incurring costs against charity. But, on the other, if constitutional correctness hangs on aiming to advantage different classes of citizens—in the way the *half-heartedly* intensional readings examined in §3.1 allege—then we will probably have to credit Aristotle with the kinds of flawed inferences we’ve already made plain, inferences whose mistake consists in losing track of the peculiar nature of intensional contexts. Of course, charity demands that we try to avoid attributing to Aristotle these sorts of gross defect.

But perhaps the non-intentionalist can reduce the costs imposed by the dilemma’s second horn: charity might be quite easy to satisfy, if there is reason to think that Aristotle commits in this area the kind of error McDowell holds out for scorn. If Keyt, Reeve, and Miller are susceptible to ‘missing [...] the nonextensionality of specifications of aim or purpose’, might Aristotle have been similarly vulnerable? If so, then the intentionalist reading might seem only *faithlessly* charitable. The next section turns to this possibility.

## 4 Aristotle’s Examples

In §3, I made much of the inferential mistakes that commentators often make when they discuss the intensional contexts that saturate Aristotle’s thought on constitutional correctness. The critique has so far centered on the *philosophical* terrain that the intentionalist construal of his thought occupies, ground that is only apparently threatened by what Aristotle is supposed to have said about the common advantage and its beneficiaries. So it remains to wonder whether there is textual basis—above and beyond the surface terminology of *Pol* III.vi-vii—for the idea that Aristotle himself occupies the kind of terrain that is distinctively held by the intentionalist.

As our commentators point out, the question of what class constitutes the beneficiaries of the common advantage seems not to be explicitly addressed by Aristotle in what might appear to be the most natural place for it to arise, namely, in his official treatment of the primary distinction between correct and incorrect regimes in *Pol* III.vii. Trying, as Reeve says, to ‘provide the missing information’ has generated mountains of scholarship and speculation, in the hope of filling in the gaps where Aristotle should have been less reticent.<sup>48</sup> On this view, Aristotle should have been less reticent exactly because grasping that treatment requires a grasp of the extension of the real beneficiaries of the common benefit; at the very least, his account seems naturally to invite this question about exactly who is supposed to be included in the relevant class, a question Aristotle lamentably neglects.

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<sup>48</sup>Reeve, ‘Introduction’, p. lxviii (quoted already, in §3.1 above).

What's remarkable, though, is that Aristotle in fact addresses this sort of question quite explicitly—but *only to set it aside*: a fact standardly lost on his readers. In *Pol* III.vi, Aristotle registers that his discussion of the kinds of aims rulers have, whether in the *polis* or in households or in other technical spheres, is apt to raise the question of the extension of those for whose sake rulers rule, the question that animates our commentators. But his answers on this topic invariably appeal to the concept of the *accidental*, in opposition to the concept of the *primary* or *essential*.<sup>49</sup> The upshot is that the question that has stoked our commentators' interest is supposed to be ultimately beside the point, at least by Aristotle's lights.

In pursuit of the question 'what is the purpose of a state' (1278b15–6), Aristotle discusses the 'various kinds of rule' that 'have been often defined already in our popular discussions' (1278b31–2), moving directly into what might appear to be a woefully metaphysical<sup>50</sup> digression:

The rule of a master, though the slave by nature and the master by nature have in reality the same interests, is nevertheless exercised primarily with a view to the interest of the master, but accidentally considers the slave, since, if the slave perishes, the rule of the master perishes with him. On the other hand, the government of a wife and children, and of a household, which we have called household management, is exercised in the first instance for the sake of the governed, or for the sake of something common to both sides, but essentially for the sake of the governed, as we see to be the case in medicine, gymnastics, and the arts in general, which are only accidentally concerned with the artists themselves. For there is no reason why the physical trainer may not sometimes practice gymnastics, and the ship captain is always one of the crew. The trainer or the captain considers the good of those committed to his care. But, when he is one of the persons taken care of, he accidentally participates in the advantage, for the captain is also a sailor, and the trainer becomes one of those in training. And so in politics. (*Pol* III.vi 1278b32–9a8)

But, as we should already see, the passage is not a digression *at all*. The passage is obviously crucial to understanding the difference between correct and incorrect regimes, as I argued at the paper's start (§1): it puts into place Aristotle's distinction between ruling for the sake of

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<sup>49</sup>These sorts of appeals should be familiar to Aristotle's readers, not least because they arise frequently in his official discussions of regime types: see, for famous examples, *Pol* III.viii, where the numerical size of the ruling class is claimed to be 'accidental' to the 'definition' of particular forms of *politeiai*.

<sup>50</sup>For some disparaging remarks against the kind of thought we are nonetheless about to entertain on Aristotle's behalf, see W.V.O. Quine, *Methods of Logic*, fourth ed. (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1982), p. 289. Needless to say, it would be surprising if commentators' misunderstandings of Aristotle's thought on constitutional correctness are owed to a latent attachment to Quine's thoroughgoing extensionalism. Whatever the latter's philosophical merits, they obviously should not prejudice the interpretation of someone as concerned with metaphysical concepts like *essence* and *accident* as Aristotle.

the governed, on the one hand, and ruling, as the slave-master does, for the sake of oneself, on the other; and it thereby forms the background for III.vii's official treatment of constitutional correctness. The contrasts here in III.vi are clearly meant to apply immediately later in III.vii, where constitutional correctness is squarely in view, not least because the closing lines of III.vi virtually force the application.

This much is obvious. What bears emphasis here is that Aristotle explicitly recognizes the ambiguities that arise in speaking of either the common or the private advantage; these ambiguities arise when we try to understand the discussion in extensional terms, terms that Aristotle stresses are orthogonal to it.

For instance, when a slave-master as such aims at his own benefit, he will also, if all goes well, benefit his slave. But Aristotle tells us that this feature is *accidental* to the character of the master's aim; the slave's benefit is no part of what he *primarily* seeks. By contrast, a physical trainer as such aims at the benefit of his student, just as a ship captain as such aims at the advantage of his ship and its crew. But Aristotle importantly notes that these truths are not supposed to be disparaged either by those perhaps *rare* cases where the trainer himself becomes, as it were, his own student; or by the quite *exceptionless* generalization that a ship captain also counts as a member of his ship's crew. That some trainer is sometimes also his own student and that all captains are always also crew members are both merely *accidental* to the characterization of their aims; these facts are therefore no part of what it is to have the sorts of aims that are appropriate to *what it is* to be a correct trainer or a correct ship captain.

By implication, then, such facts, when they are facts, are no part of what it is *to aim at those under one's care*. Such facts would *seem* to be relevant only if one were to take Aristotle's thought in this area as issuing extensional claims, which is clearly *not* how we are to understand it. For, if we take his thinking in this way, the slave-master will come to count as aiming primarily or essentially at his slave's interests; and the physical trainer who decides to improve his own health and the ship captain who realizes that his own life is bound up with the nautical proficiency of his fellow sailors will come to count, both of them, as minor despots. But surely Aristotle's point is that this is exactly the wrong line to take.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>The difference between the *essential* and the *accidental*, especially where they overlap in a singular agent, is of wide interest to Aristotle. See *Metaphysics* 1019a15–20: a doctor does not somehow cease exercising the powers essential to a doctor when he treats himself, so long as he treats himself *qua* 'other'. Extensionally, of course, the doctor is the patient in this kind of case. But that is supposed to be beside the point. Moreover, even if ship captains are, as Aristotle says, always members of the crew, necessary features, for Aristotle, need not be essential features, in the relevant sense; see *Metaphysics* 1025a30–34: a triangle's angles always—and, in some sense, necessarily—sum to two right angles; but this is no part of what it means to be a triangle. We might dispute his view, but surely Aristotle is committed to it.

We can see quite clearly, then, that Aristotle sets his fact against the kinds of extensionalizing inferences criticized in §3. For the present passage tells us in no uncertain terms how Aristotle would respond to the following argument:

- (A) The ship captain aims at the benefit of the crew.
- (B) The crew includes the ship captain.
- (C) [Therefore:] The ship captain aims *in the relevant sense* at his own benefit.

Obviously, (B) is not supposed to license the move to (C); for whatever truth (B) contains is ‘accidental’ to the kinds of aims correct ship captains characteristically and constitutively have.

And, as before, the matter is not helped by the addition of:

- (B)’ The ship captain thinks, or even knows, that the crew includes himself.

After all, it would be absurd to entertain the possibility that Aristotle means to apply his objection only to cases where ship captains happen to forget that they’re also sailors, or only to cases where physical trainers suffer from a grotesque psychological disorder. There is no room, then, for the proposal that ended §3.2: that we should attribute to Aristotle the sort of mistake about intensionality that McDowell stresses. And so there is little hope for the idea that constitutional correctness must hang either on the *production* of a more or less expansive set of benefits (§3.2), or even on a ruler’s *aim* to benefit some more or less expansive class of citizens (§3.1). A ship captain can correctly exercise his distinctive powers, even when he is his only sailor; and the trainer can do so, too, even when he is his only student.

So, however we are supposed to make sense of Aristotle’s distinction between the essential or primary, on the one hand, and the accidental, on the other, it is obvious that we should not be hung up, as Aristotle’s commentators too frequently are, on the question of the extension of the common or private advantage. For Aristotle, that question is strictly incidental to what is supposed to be of interest. It is therefore quite unfortunate, I think, that commentators interpret Aristotle’s discussion in *Pol* III.vii in ways that Aristotle takes such marked pains to forestall in III.vi; they adopt extensionalizing lines of thought that conform to what Aristotle is explicitly concerned to oppose.

The natural way out from under this strain is to adopt the intentionalist interpretation, which of course avoids the difficulties we’ve just encountered.

And there is an additional—salutary—implication. Most commentators, as I’ve said, charge Aristotle with an awkward silence on the question of the scope or extension of the common advantage, a question that is, on their view, necessary for making sense of Aristotle’s distinction between correct and incorrect regimes. In this light, many of Aristotle’s moves in *Pol* III.vi,

where he is concerned to make distinctions between the primary and the accidental, will come to seem metaphysically digressive, leaving the crucial question unanswered. But, if we free ourselves of the presumption that this kind of question must be central, then the turns of III.vi will come to appear all the more motivated, exactly because they are themselves efforts in the direction of undermining what makes the presumption attractive. Once the extensionalizing question is side-lined, the intentionalist reading can fall cleanly into place, uniting, as I think it does, Aristotle's thinking across III.vi–vii into a motivated whole. The question of the extension of the common advantage's beneficiaries, something about which Aristotle seems substantively reticent, can thereby lapse, with no prejudice against Aristotle's choice for being relatively silent on the topic in his official treatment of a *politeia*'s correctness. To the contrary, his reticence, such as it is, will come to appear entirely appropriate, whether in III.vi or III.vii.

So much, then, for the hope with which we closed §3. But I want to end this section by noting two further points in favor of the intentionalist reading.

First, we can now remark on ways in which non-intentionalist readings ride against the natural thought that Aristotle must mean for *Pol* III.vii to carve out a *six*-fold scheme (recall §1). Keyt, Reeve, and Miller all think that the distinction between correct and incorrect regimes collapses, if the common advantage is ever supposed to pick out the same extension as the private interest. And so they appeal to the kinds of argument examined in §3.1 in order to equip Aristotle with an escape route; but, without an escape of that kind, the famous six-fold classification is supposed to reduce to a *three*-fold division of logical space. However, that route consists in taking Aristotle's discussion to depend on thoughts similar to (B) and (B)' from immediately above, a discussion that we must now see as incapable of bearing that kind of dependence. And so, if we keep *Pol* III.vi firmly and clearly in view, standard non-intentionalist readings will have to find Aristotle guilty of the kind of incoherence they seek to remove.<sup>52</sup>

Second, we can now begin to see how the intentionalist reading imparts a meaningful and attractive sense to the concepts emphasized in what might otherwise appear to be, as I've said, a woefully metaphysical digression in *Pol* III.vi. For, without that reading, we are likely to take its references to the *accidental* and the *primary* as applying to extensional contexts, and

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<sup>52</sup>Something similar applies to the possibility of finding in Aristotle a *twelve*-fold division of logical space (§1). For, if mere *production* is stressed (§3.2), then it becomes quite natural to wonder whether there are variously important sets of beneficiaries and effects to consider, sets which might as well be saliently described as the partial advantage of the one...or of the few...or of the many. For, if we are allowed to extensionalize correctness in this way, then we might as well extensionalize incorrectness, and so be gripped by the endless possibilities—twelve, or eighteen, or a hundred?—that extensional contexts puts into place. Or, if what matters is not production as much as a ruler's *thought* about what is going to be produced, in line with an appeal to (B)' from just above, then it would be natural to carve out space for the various non-purposive thoughts—twelve, eighteen, or a hundred?—that rulers might have about what they are about to produce.



so think that acting in the manner of a correct ship captain is ‘primarily’ to produce nautical safety and success. But what would it mean for nautical safety and success to be the ‘primary’ things produced? When something counts as nautical safety and success, it surely counts as bearing myriad other predicates. When some stretch of sailing into port with all of one’s goods in manifest is a bit of nautical success, it surely is many other things besides: it is perhaps a bit of pleasing one’s creditors, or a bit of arming one’s *polis*, or a bit of moving atoms of air, water, and earth. So, of all these true predications, which are to count as ‘primary’? And which are to count anyway as ‘accidental’? We might be puzzled by the application of such concepts, since facts about extension seem to be, as it were, together on all fours.<sup>53</sup>

Now it will be suggested that the relevant application is to consist in familiar appeals to a subset of facts about extension—to facts about the *constitutive*—as when we might think that certain facts about water are ‘primary’ or ‘essential’: for, if water just is constituted by H<sub>2</sub>O, then, if we take away something’s being H<sub>2</sub>O, we take away the fact that it is water. On this tack, the fact that water is H<sub>2</sub>O is the ‘primary’ or ‘essential’ fact about it. Might this move put into place, then, a natural home for the application of the relevant concepts?

In certain contexts, this kind of move may seem quite plausible. Perhaps the case of water is the right sort of illustration. But I find it hard to believe that this type of appeal will do much to elucidate the *present* context. For Aristotle surely holds that the sphere of human action, broadly conceived, is a sphere subject to misfortune and misadventure, where the possibility of interference is ever present. Of course, when nothing interferes—when the conditions for the application of Aristotle’s *haplōs* are met, whatever they might be—then an action will succeed at securing or realizing its agent’s goals. But there is little reason to saddle Aristotle with the implausible thought that, if storms strike and misfortune interferes, a ship captain must thereby cease to count as bearing the powers proper to his kind: as though possessing such powers must always guarantee step-motherly nature’s full cooperation. It should be clear, I think, that this kind of reliance on necessity runs against Aristotle’s quite architectonic stress on what we can call the fragility of human life and action.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>For ease in handling, I have sketched this skeptical line so as to make contact with the *purely* extensionalizing readings that populate standard commentaries. But I trust that it will be clear enough how the skeptical line, suitably modified, can apply even to those *half-heartedly* extensionalizing readings we’ve already examined. For, if facts about a predicate’s extension stand, as it were, together on all fours, so can the thoughts that purport to pick out such facts. Amid these myriad thoughts, what sets the criteria for the application of the ‘primary’ or the ‘accidental’? As we shall see, the intentionalist is equipped with a ready answer.

<sup>54</sup>The point is a delicate one. I do not mean to suggest that proper *exercises* of a power stop short of success, as though the cooperation of nature were not required. Rather, what I do want to keep open is the thought that, when the conditions are right—when nothing interferes—one’s contribution to whatever success there is can consist fundamentally in the exercise of the powers one has. Such powers are fallible, and so they can misfire when the conditions are not as they should be: when something interferes, blocking the application of Aristotle’s *haplōs*. But

So how might the intentionalist’s construal impart a different sense to the ‘primary’ and the ‘accidental’? Aristotle’s own language already implies the answer. For the contexts in which these predicates apply are supposed to be intensional contexts: it is not something that is *produced* or *effected* that is ‘primary’ or ‘accidental’; rather, it is something that is *sought*. Better: These predicates apply to the *manner* in agents seek what they do. But these points amount to one of the intentionalist’s core theses: the idea that, in political contexts, ruling correctly consists in bearing in one’s actions a distinctive sort of purposive structure. On this view, to rule correctly just is to rule *mainly in order to promote or instantiate the common advantage*. And it is the place occupied by one’s conception of the common advantage in one’s intention in action that governs what one’s aim ‘primarily’ is.

In a word, it is the structure of one’s motivational orientation that determines what is ‘accidental’, on the one hand, and what is ‘primary’ or ‘essential’, on the other. In this context, to deploy these concepts is to speak of the distinctive sort of concept-application—purposive and practical, productive and creative—that has been the intentionalist’s defining commitment.<sup>55</sup> And it is this defining commitment that is most naturally suggested by Aristotle’s contrasts in *Pol* III.vi.<sup>56</sup>

## 5 Further Rivals

The readings we’ve just been discussing diverge from the intentionalist interpretation insofar as they seek to make sense of constitutional correctness by appealing to facts about the common advantage’s beneficiaries, or to rulers’ non-purposive thought about such facts. I’ve argued, though, that these readings not only deploy unjustified inferences (§3) but also misconstrue the context of Aristotle’s official account (§4). The first error consists in ‘missing [...] the nonextensionality of specifications of aim or purpose’, and the second is generated by ignoring Aristotle’s own sensitivity to this type of mistake.

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the fact that one’s power, say, to speak grammatically can occasionally misfire does not imperil the idea that, when one does succeed in speaking grammatically, success is guaranteed by nothing less than the proper exercise of the relevant power. For more on this kind of ‘disjunctivist’ option, see J. McDowell, ‘Anscombe and Bodily Self-Knowledge’, in *Essays on Anscombe’s Intention*, c. 4; and also his ‘Acting in the Light of a Fact’, in *Thinking about Reasons*, edd. D. Bakhurst, B. Hooker, and M. Little (Oxford, 2013), c. 1.

<sup>55</sup>Recall n. 41 from above.

<sup>56</sup>While much more remains to be said on how concepts like the *accidental* and the *primary* are supposed to be given application by an agent’s intention in action, I hope it is clear enough that it is the structure of an intention that sets the right context. We might hazard the thought—what is entirely natural here—that whether an aim is ‘accidental’ or ‘primary’ depends on its *placement* or *position* in a purposive characterization: if I am  $\phi$ ’ing in order to  $\alpha$  in order to  $\beta$  in order to  $\psi$ , then  $\alpha$ ’ing and  $\beta$ ’ing count as more or less ‘accidental’, while  $\psi$ ’ing is, by contrast, ‘primary’. Further refinements—perhaps an analysis in terms of counterfactuals and the dispositions that underwrite them—to this picture will be required, but I hope the general strategy is plain enough from this supposition.

But other readings diverge from the intentionalist interpretation by emphasizing, not so much the class of beneficiaries, as much as what action in conformity to the common advantage is supposed to be like. The idea here is that, once we clarify what the common advantage is, apart from the question of its beneficiaries, we will be able to make more intelligible Aristotle's primary distinction between regime types. In §§5.1 and 5.2 below, I examine two forms of this rival tack.

## 5.1 Aiming at Happiness

We've already seen one such form above, in Reeve's dispute with Keyt. There Reeve argued that, since the 'common benefit in a correct constitution is a matter of having a share in noble or virtuous living', and since (even free) tradesmen and other laborers lack virtue, rulers in a correct constitution cannot aim at the benefit of all of its free, native-born inhabitants—contrary to Keyt's view on the matter. We can reconstruct Reeve's argument in the following way:

- (i) Rulers in correct constitutions aim at the common advantage.
- (ii) The common advantage is noble or virtuous living.
- (iii) Sub-class *S* is incapable of noble or virtuous living.
- (iv) [Therefore:] *Pace* Keyt, rulers in correct constitutions do not aim at the benefit of *S*.

As before, we can set aside whether Keyt or Reeve is right about the question of beneficiaries. The key point for us is that Reeve purports to infer facts about the shape of rulers' aims from facts about about what truly constitutes the common benefit. He cites as grounds two passages: *Pol* 1278b20–23 and *NE* 1142b31–33. But neither passage speaks of what constitutes *aiming at the common advantage*, though they do refer either to what truly constitutes the common benefit or to what constitutes a successful exercise of practical wisdom. Again, the apt reply is that constitutive claims of the sort picked out in (ii) need not bear a relation to claims about the kinds of aims agents might have. Reeve's argument just recapitulates the error underscored in the previous sections, something that can be seen clearly once we put Reeve's argument into schematic form, as we have. The trouble arises with the insertion of (ii) into an argument about the character of a *politeia*'s aims, and therefore about its status as correct.

It bears emphasis that the difficulty does not concern the particular substance of what Reeve says, once we extract his claims from this particular argumentative or inferential shape. Indeed, Reeve might be quite right as against Keyt: taken severally, each of (i)–(iv) may be a more or less reasonable gloss on Aristotle's thought. But none of (ii)–(iv) is *internal* to a regime's correctness. Rather, if they are true, they are true in virtue of claims that stand apart from what

it is for a constitution to be correct. In other words, if (ii)–(iv) are true, their truth is incidental to Aristotle’s account of a political system’s correctness: correct regimes could, in principle, aim at the benefit of *S*, or fail to aim at noble and virtuous living; but—*as it happens*—they don’t. That they don’t is not guaranteed by their status as correct, though it might be guaranteed by other of their features.

The situation is worse, however, when we encounter a seemingly similar argument. On roughly the same grounds as Reeve’s, Eugene Garver has recently claimed the following:

[T]rue (*orthos*) are distinguished from corrupt (*parekbasis*) constitutions by whether their end is the good life or life. [...] [C]orrupt constitutions [...] don’t aim at living well. [...] Corrupt constitutions are still communities organized around justice, even if they fail to aim at the good life.<sup>57</sup>

Here the argument seems to work in the following way:

- (1) Rulers in correct constitutions aim at the common advantage.
- (2) The common advantage is living well.
- (3) Rulers in incorrect constitutions do not aim at the common advantage.
- (4) [Therefore:] Rulers in incorrect constitutions do not aim at living well.

As should be obvious, my reply will be entirely predictable. Here, in (2), a material claim, surely true by Aristotle’s lights, is playing an illicit role as partial grounds for a claim about the character of rulers’ aims in incorrect constitutions, just as, in Reeve’s argument above, a material claim purports to ground a claim about Aristotle’s conception of the aims of correct constitutions. As before, this is again just to miss the ‘nonextensionality of specifications of aim or purpose’.

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<sup>57</sup>E. Garver, *Aristotle’s Politics* (Chicago, 2012), pp. 74 and 84–85. But I must note a qualification about this. Garver seems to contradict himself within these pages, and so his thought will come to appear unstable: in addition to what I’ve just quoted, he goes on to say, ‘[A]nother community organized around wealth can mistakenly conceive wealth as the good life, the ultimate good. Then it is a polis, a corrupt one’. But, all the same, Garver seems to be committed to the the view I have quoted in the main text of this paper; see Garver, *Aristotle’s Politics*, p. 72. In any case, Reeve endorses the sort of thought that I am attributing here to Garver; see Reeve, ‘Introduction’, p. lxvi, where, in defense of the claim that oligarchies and democracies fail to aim at living well, he cites two passages: 1280a31–32 and 1257b40–8a14. But, for reasons I shall here only cite, Reeve’s view is mistaken: the first need only imply that oligarchies and democracies possess incorrect conceptions of living well, not that they fail to *aim* at it; and the second seems to say just that democracies and oligarchies sometimes contain people that do not aim at living well—presumably, Aristotle’s akratics. Indeed, the context rides against Reeve’s claim, since Aristotle explicitly says that oligarchies and democracies nonetheless contain people who do aim, again albeit poorly, at living well. So, whatever Aristotle’s thought here comes to, it cannot be that deviant regimes characteristically fail to aim at living well. Needless to say, it is an even greater stretch to say that a deviant regime is *constituted* by such failures or by such akratic dispositions. We can bring out the implausibility of this view by focusing on a specific deviant ruler. When he rules for his own benefit, *must* he, as he issues some decree, be failing to aim at living well? Sometimes he might so fail, but that seems hardly guaranteed by his status as deviant.

But there is an important difference between what Garver and Reeve say: there are independent reasons for doubting the applicability of Garver’s (4). In fact, I think that it constitutes a severe misrepresentation of Aristotle’s thought. For Aristotle repeatedly points out that citizens and rulers, even deviant ones, take *living well* as their aim. There are many such places, but here are two famous instances:<sup>58</sup>

[A] When several villages are united in a single complete community, [...] the *polis* comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life [*men tou zēn heneken, ousa de tou eu zēn*].  
(*Pol* I.ii 1252b28–30)

[B] Now, whereas happiness [*eudaimonia*] is the highest good, being a realization and perfect practice of virtue [*aretēs energeia kai krēsis tis teleios*], which can some attain, while others have little or none of it, the various qualities of men are clearly the reason why there are various kinds of states and many forms of government; for different men hunt [*thēreuontes*] after happiness in different ways and by different means, and so make for themselves different modes of life and forms of government [*tous te bious heterous poiountai kai tas politeias*].  
(*Pol* VII.viii 1328a38–b1)

One might wonder, though, whether we must connect ‘living well’ with ‘happiness’, as I have, since our two passages certainly employ different terminology in making out the kinds of aims that political communities have. For Aristotle, however, a conception of happiness, whether substantively correct or incorrect, just *is* a conception of the human good or, indifferently, living well. That is the uncontroversial but perhaps neglected lesson of *NE* I.iv, where the human good and happiness are equated—both substantively and also *notionally*—with ‘living well and acting well [*to d’eu zēn kai to eu prattein*]’ (1095a17–20).

So the idea that, for Aristotle, citizens in all *politeiai*, whether correct or deviant, generally aim at living well should stand confirmed, despite Garver’s claim, not least because passage [B] is surely meant to apply not merely to correct regimes: its point, after all, is to explain the diversity of *politeiai*, including those in which happiness is *not* actually attained.<sup>59</sup> Aristotle’s idea is presumably that, where happiness or living well is sought but not attained, the explanation can often reside in an incorrect conception of happiness or living well. But the presence of that sort of error is no mark against the claim that all forms of *politeiai* are nonetheless embod-

<sup>58</sup>See also, e.g., *Pol* 1280a31–32, 1280b30–1a7, 1281a3–4, 1295a40–b2, 1328a35–7; and *NE* I.ii and I.iv.

<sup>59</sup>Surely passage [A] speaks to the same point, too.

iments of efforts at seeking the good life; such ‘different modes of life and forms of government’ are nonetheless projects of ‘hunt[ing] after happiness’. And that claim is something to which Aristotle seems obviously committed.<sup>60</sup>

Now my point in bringing up Aristotle’s thinking on the aims of all constitutions is not merely to quarrel with a particular misreading. Rather, I think that mistaking the nonextensionality of Aristotle’s talk of aims can do significant damage to what should be taken as one of Aristotle’s central and abiding commitments. That is, losing track of the distinctive character of claims about aim or purpose—by assuming the propriety of extensional substitution—tempts one to find contradiction or confusion exactly where, on a more careful analysis, there are actually consistent and well-motivated philosophical moves.<sup>61</sup>

And, of course, if we keep this central and abiding commitment squarely in view, we shall be able to dispense with one of the intentionalist’s interpretative rivals. For, since incorrect regimes nonetheless generally aim at living well, or, equivalently, at happiness, the failure to bear such an aim cannot count as the criterion for constitutional correctness.

## 5.2 Correct Conceptions of the Virtues

I have argued that, contrary to many commentators, Aristotle is not committed to the view that deviant regimes fail to aim at happiness or living well. Indeed, I think he is committed to its denial. But it is the seeming availability of this kind of thought tempts readers away from the kind of interpretation I’ve been defending. If I am right, the temptation should be resisted exactly because the thesis on which it relies is false.

Now commentators might appeal to a different way of making sense of Aristotle’s primary distinction between regime types. On this view, the distinction really consists in the fact that it is only correct regimes that have correct conceptions of the virtues. At the very least, if it’s true that incorrect regimes are to be distinguished, materially, by failing to have such a correct conception, then we shall be faced with an attractive rival to the intentionalist position: perhaps what it means to count as an incorrect ruler is just to fail to have, say, a correct conception of justice.

So: Is it plausible that, for Aristotle, deviant regimes must generally lack correct conceptions of this sort? I think that there is scant textual evidence that pulls clearly in this direction.

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<sup>60</sup>Indeed, I think that, for Aristotle, it is a constitutive fact about *politeiai*, whether correct or deviant, that they are generally embodiments of this kind.

<sup>61</sup>I suspect that Garver’s interpretation is led into the kind of instability mentioned above, in n. 59, because he takes himself to see instability or contradiction in Aristotle’s own thought. But the appearance is illusory, a fact that can be seen once we hold tight to the nonextensionality of Aristotle’s thinking in this area.

Rather, there are actually strong grounds for believing that Aristotle thinks it's quite unnecessary for deviant regimes to bear this kind of defect. But this claim will already appear somewhat radical.

Interestingly, some scholars think that Aristotle *must* be committed to the claim that deviant regimes possess such incorrect conceptions, just on the basis that he takes deviant regimes to possess incorrect conceptions of happiness. For instance, Reeve again: 'Because different constitutions embody different conceptions of happiness, they must also embody different conceptions of the virtues'.<sup>62</sup>

Now, if this is supposed to be an independent argument, as in Reeve's hands it appears to be, then we need only reply, as before, that it just manifests the same error of 'missing [...] the nonextensionality of specifications of aim or purpose'. For it's entirely possible for two people to diverge with respect to their conceptions of happiness yet share a conception of the virtues. The possibility is warranted by the fact that one of our agents need not aim, in her hunt after happiness—however mistaken it might be—at virtuous action. This allows whatever divergence there must be between our two agents to float apart from a difference in their conceptions of the virtues. And so Reeve's quick argument will seem as gappy as the others we've already encountered.

More important, though, is that Aristotle himself repeatedly stresses the kind of possibility we've just articulated.

For starters, Aristotle is concerned, in the central moves of *NE* I, to shed light on what truly constitutes *eudaimonia*. Of course, his official answer—given by the infamous conclusion of the so-called 'Function Argument' of I.vii—is that the human good and therefore happiness consist in virtuous activity (1098a15–17). But what frames his official treatment is a series of efforts at contrasting—and, in standard Aristotelian fashion, eventually harmonizing—his favored account with *other* conceptions of what comprises *eudaimonia*. In opposition to the thought that it consists in virtuous activity, many believe that it instead consists in a life of pleasurable—or economically effective, or politically honorable, or even merely contemplative—states of life (*NE* I.iv–viii).

We need not go deeply into Aristotle's arguments against these rival conceptions.<sup>63</sup> The key point is just that, here in *NE* I, Aristotle explicitly countenances how rival and incorrect conceptions of happiness are not themselves rival or incorrect conceptions of the virtues. In

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<sup>62</sup>Reeve, 'Introduction', p. lxvi.

<sup>63</sup>But see Lawrence, 'The Function of the Function Argument', for what I take to be one of the best treatment of Aristotle's thought in this area. Moreover, I explore elsewhere the points of contact between Aristotle's strategy and contemporary topics in both the philosophy of action and so-called 'virtue ethics'.

fact, Aristotle's point seems to be that the incorrectness of an incorrect conception of happiness consists in that conception's failure simply to *be* a conception of virtuous activity—not that it consists in an *incorrect* conception of, say, justice. The point of Aristotle's discussion is to *contrast* conceptions of happiness that *do* center around a conception of virtuous activity from those that do *not*, and even to draw distinctions between sorts of the former. So Aristotle himself focuses our attention on cases in which unsuccessful hunts after happiness need not be reflections of incorrect conceptions of the virtues. Rather, those cases are supposed to be recognizable as instances of how conceptions of happiness go wrong: they go wrong in failing to be controlled or guided either by *any* conception of the virtues; or, even if centered around a conception of virtue, then by the *right* conception of *activity*. Instead, they are controlled or guided by alternative concepts: on the one hand, pleasure, wealth, and honor, contrary to the concept of *virtue*; on the other, the concept of a *state* or mere *disposition*, contrary to the concept of *activity*.

In short, Aristotle emphasizes the kind of gap our commentators consistently but mistakenly fail to notice. For Aristotle's discussion requires that an incorrect conception of happiness can come to something *other* than an incorrect conception of the virtues; his contrasts instead pick out how the former can consist in conceptual errors of markedly different sorts.<sup>64</sup>

It is striking, then, that commentators impute to Aristotle the thought that deviant regimes, insofar as they embody incorrect conceptions of happiness, must also embody incorrect conceptions of virtuous action. That the inference is mistaken is nothing less than a presupposition of Aristotle's core thinking on the relationship between *eudaimonia* and virtue.<sup>65</sup>

But scholars frequently point to a different passage where Aristotle seems more explicit about the possibility of substantive defects in conceptions of virtue. Famously, Aristotle says that

all men hold that justice [*to dikaion*] is some kind of equality; and up to a certain point they agree with what has been determined in our philosophical discussions on ethical matters. That is, they say that justice is a certain distribution to certain persons, and must be equal for equals. What we have to discover is equality and inequality of what sorts of persons. That is difficult, and calls for political philosophy

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<sup>64</sup>Significantly, the same kind of contrasts are highlighted in Book VII of the *Politics*, where the *substance* of the virtues is never held in question; rather, where political reflection goes wrong is in failing to *place* conceptions of the virtues in the right sort of spot: political thinkers either think that virtue is only occasionally necessary, or think that it is altogether sufficient. Aristotle's double-barreled point is that it is constitutively necessary but not sufficient: virtue needs equipment, if its exercises—in *activity*—are to constitute *eudaimonia*. See Lawrence, 'The Function of the Function Argument'.

<sup>65</sup>Nor is this feature of Aristotle's thought confined to the *Ethics*. He emphasizes the difference between a conception of virtue and a conception of happiness in *Pol* VII.i; recall n. 64 above. And we shall soon see further confirmation in the *Politics*.



[*philosophian politikēn*].

(*Pol* III.xii 1282b18–b23)

Now, on the reasonable supposition that knowledge of *to dikaion* (‘the just thing’ or ‘what is just’) is here meant as requirement on possessing virtue, readers go on to suggest, rightly, that Aristotle is here pointing to cases where there is some kind of conceptual or cognitive error about the correct application of a virtue-predicate, namely, *to dikaion*. So Aristotle must mean to say that some people have incorrect conceptions of what is actually just.

Now readers might go farther and then claim that, in light of the passage’s context, what truly constitutes a *politeia*’s incorrectness is the fact that its rulers are comprised of people of that sort: people whose grasp of what is just is erroneous in this—purely conceptual or cognitive—way. And so the defect that constitutes a constitution’s incorrectness must be something more specific than the general error of lacking virtue, something more specific than what, for all that, the intentionalist reading can allow. Rather, the idea is that the real culprit is a specific kind of conceptual or philosophical mistake. That is what is signified, on this view, by Aristotle’s appeal to the role of ‘political philosophy’.

But we should note that Aristotle possesses what we might think is a rather idiosyncratic conception of the kind of activity that ‘political philosophy’ is supposed to be. In his discussion of ethical habituation in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he issues a startling indictment of what people erroneously think *doing philosophy* consists in:

So it is right to say that one becomes just from performing just actions and temperate from temperate ones; and no one would ever become good from not performing those actions. But the majority of people do not perform those actions, but take refuge in argument [*de ton logon*], thinking that they are doing philosophy [*philosophhein*] and that thereby they will become good [*spoudaioi*], and so behaving like sick people who listen carefully to their doctors but do none of the things they are told to do. Now just as people who go in for that kind of regimen will not have a healthy body, similarly people who do philosophy in that way will not have a healthy soul.

(*NE* II.iv 1105b8–18)

Needless to say, the main thrust of Aristotle’s argument is that being good requires more than a correct conception of what goodness requires. It requires nothing less than the virtues themselves, which require for their acquisition and possession habituated characterological states, states brought about by forms of training and practice.

Crucial here, though, is Aristotle’s distinction between two ways of doing philosophy, with

one such way marked as ‘specious’.<sup>66</sup> People often *think* that doing philosophy consists in argument—in fleeing into *logos*—but, for Aristotle, philosophic activity, at least in this area, properly consists, *not* in argument, but in the kind of ethical training and practice that has been his focus in Book II of *NE*. And this strongly suggests that, for Aristotle, the main obstacle that stands in the way of becoming and being virtuous is not typically an incorrect conception of, say, justice—a conception whose correction would require the use of what *we* would call philosophy. Rather, the passage tells us that the real defect lies in failing to be *guided* in one’s actions by the appropriate desiderative and cognitive states. Such failures need not be accompanied by a substantively incorrect conception of justice, or of the virtues in general, much less constituted by it. For, if that were the real location of error, then fleeing into *logos* in order to practice this degenerate form of philosophy would be exactly what’s needed. But that is precisely what Aristotle sets his face against. He stresses the major role of habituation, at the expense of what is, by his lights, the minor and perhaps even needless role of philosophical argument. For Aristotle, ‘philosophy’ just isn’t what we happen to think it is.

What this allows for our reading of the *Politics* is the claim that *properly doing* ‘political philosophy’ yields two distinct conditions: first, it allows its practitioners to possess correct conceptions of *to dikaion*; and, second, it yields, not only that, but also the condition or state or disposition of *being* virtuous itself. But, importantly, this opens up the possibility that the former kind of fact can obtain without thereby guaranteeing the latter. If this is right, then, there is no compulsory route from the claim—what is plausible—that deviant rulers lack virtue, on the one hand, to the claim—what is dispensable—that deviant rulers must thereby lack correct conceptions of ‘the just thing’, on the other.

Does Aristotle countenance the kind of disjunct I’ve just sketched? I shall turn directly to this question in a moment. For now, I want to enter into it by raising a few considerations on behalf of attributing to Aristotle this perhaps idiosyncratic conception of what ‘doing philosophy’ comes to.

We can appreciate what appears to be Aristotle’s special notion of *philosophizing* by bringing out what is surely a familiar theme from the Socratic tradition: the idea that philosophy is a way of life. I suspect that, in hearing this formula, we often enter the equation on the left-hand side, as it were, holding fixed our own conception of what philosophic activity looks like, so as

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<sup>66</sup>I. Vasiliou, ‘Virtue and Argument in Aristotle’s Ethics’, in *Moral Psychology*, ed. S. Tenenbaum (Amsterdam, 2007), pp. 37–78, p. 43. This subsection of my paper has been greatly helped by Vasiliou’s work in this area; also see his ‘The Role of Good Upbringing in Aristotle’s Ethics’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 56 (1996), pp. 771–97. For how the tack of this paper illuminates, not Aristotle, but rather Plato, see I. Vasiliou, *Aiming at Virtue in Plato* (Cambridge, 2008).

to specify and revise what a desirable way of life must be like. But we might instead enter the equation on the right-hand side, holding fixed our own conception of the activities and attitudes that constitute a noble or *eudaimōn* or virtuous way of life, so as to specify and revise our pre-theoretical notions of what philosophic activity really amounts to. A strategy like the latter is, I think, the kind of strategy that Aristotle means to contrast with the way of doing philosophy that he disparages in what I've just quoted from the *Ethics*.<sup>67</sup>

But we can also note that what I just called Aristotle's special notion of philosophizing is entirely traditional, at least with respect to the wider discourse of ancient Greece. Before Plato, and perhaps also Socrates, the dominant conception of the *philosopher* was guided, less by a conception of clear and explicit argument, or even by rational discourse in general, as by the Solonic legislator. On this older pre-Platonic view, to do philosophy, or to be a philosopher, was to possess and exercise the capacity for ethical and political judgment in one's private actions and in one's public role as a kind of sage for the *polis*:

If the origins of the concept 'the political' lie in the *polis* itself, what about the concept 'philosophy'? The noun *philosophos* for 'philosopher' does not appear in writing prior to Plato's dialogues. As for *philosophia*, this word appears once in the corpus of the medical writer Hippocrates, before Plato establishes the term as a keyword in Greek literature, insisting that the name *philosophia* be applied very specifically to a new sort of activity invented by his teacher, Socrates. Does this mean that political philosophy did not exist before Socrates? [...] The answer depends finally on what one means by 'philosophy'. The historian Herodotus gives us a hint. We find the first instance of the verb *philosopheō* in his text; he uses it to describe the activity of Solon, typically identified as one of the Seven Sages or wise man of antiquity and the founder of the Athenian democracy. Indeed many thinkers, for whom politics was a prime concern, lived and wrote before Plato.<sup>68</sup>

I think that what stands in the way of seeing the attractions of this conception of *philosophizing* is a certain three-fold idea, something surely natural for us. For we likely think that (a) having a correct conception of the virtues is altogether very difficult to achieve; (b) that this difficulty must be overcome mainly by something along the lines of argumentative reflection; and (c) that failing to be virtuous is typically owed to this sort of difficulty. After all, we tend to focus on systematic questions about the sorts of actions that virtue—in particular justice—

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<sup>67</sup>The expository terminology of this paragraph is owed to McDowell, *Mind*, c. 1.

<sup>68</sup>D. Allen, 'The Origins of Political Philosophy', in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy*, ed. G. Klosko (Oxford and New York, 2011), c. 6, pp. 76–77.

permits, demands, and forbids. But, as often pointed out, Aristotle cannot help but disappoint on this score: if the question concerns the kinds of actions that count as virtuous in particular circumstances, he will often appear stubbornly unhelpful.<sup>69</sup>

Of course, we might want to fault Aristotle here, charging him with something approaching an unreflective chauvinism about his own ethical concepts.<sup>70</sup> But it is possible that his optimism about ethical concepts comes at a properly sobering cost; for, even if knowledge of ‘what is really good and right’ is in some sense easy, it does not follow that *acting* on that knowledge is something about which Aristotle must be lamentably rosy-eyed. But this kind of gap—the gap between possessing a correct conception of justice and possessing the virtue of justice itself—is just the kind of disjunct we must now try to find in Aristotle. And I think we can, especially since Aristotle explicitly challenges the natural three-fold idea from above.

Consider his discussion of the conditions that must obtain for an agent’s virtue to find expression in his action:

[T]he case of the arts and that of the virtues are not similar; for the products of the arts have their goodness in themselves, so that it is enough that they should have a certain character, but if the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action proceed from a firm and unchangeable character. These are not reckoned in as conditions of the possession of the arts, except the bare knowledge; but as a condition of the possession of the virtues, knowledge has little or no weight, while the other conditions count not for a little but for everything, i.e., the very conditions which result from often doing just and temperate acts.<sup>71</sup> (NE II.iv 1105a28–b5)

So Aristotle picks out, famously, three conditions on the virtuous agent:

- (i) He must act with knowledge.
- (ii) He must act from *prohairesis* (roughly, ‘ethical choice’), and for its own sake.
- (iii) He must act from stable characterological states.

The passage raises many puzzles; for our purposes, I want to stress what was just marked out

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<sup>69</sup>See, especially, McDowell, *Mind*, cc. 1–3; and Lawrence, ‘The Function of the Function Argument’.

<sup>70</sup>See McDowell, *The Engaged Intellect*, c. 3.

<sup>71</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics: Books II–IV*, in the Clarendon Aristotle Series, ed. C.C.W. Taylor (Oxford, 2005).

as (i), namely, the idea that the virtuous agent must act with knowledge.

Now Aristotle takes such a condition to be of ‘little or no weight’. So in some sense (i) is supposed to be unimportant. But in what sense? Surely it would be a mistake for us to take Aristotle as saying that knowledge of what is virtuous is unnecessary; after all, he has just listed it as an essential condition on an agent’s counting as virtuous. It is more plausible, then, that Aristotle means to underscore how *easy* coming by such knowledge is: it counts for little, not because it is unnecessary, but because it is not typically where deficiency lies.<sup>72</sup>

This suggestion is confirmed by the drift of the passage from *NE* II.iv quoted above—on two ways of ‘doing philosophy’. There Aristotle claims that taking refuge in *logos* is, at the very least, insufficient for becoming and being virtuous. But the passage stresses not only its insufficiency but also its relative unimportance; for the devotee of *logos* is like the patient who listens to his doctors but fails to act on what he has learned. For the comparison to work, we are obviously not supposed to entertain the thought that the doctors’ instructions are somehow incorrect; for, if they were, then failing to abide by them might be a reliable way of becoming healthy. But that is certainly not what Aristotle means to allow. Rather, the point is that it is no surprise that patients remain sick if they fail to act on what their doctors knowledgeably instruct. We are supposed to locate the patient’s error precisely in his failure to *act* in the light of what he knows, not in any lack of knowledge he might have about what the healthy thing to do is. For he does know *that*: he listens ‘carefully’ to what his knowledgeable doctors say.

So too in the case of virtue. When someone fails to act virtuously, we are not supposed to think that he must lack a correct conception of what is or isn’t the virtuous thing to do. We are urged to locate his error elsewhere, namely, in his failure to act in the light of his correct—but here useless—conception of virtuous action. That is why, in being a virtuous agent, knowledge of this sort is of ‘little or no weight’: it is no great achievement, since, for Aristotle, such knowledge is presumably just a natural part of a normal upbringing—at least for the naturally free Greek males whom he has allowed into his audience. With respect to this class of people, Aristotle seems to be more than optimistic on this score. But the sobering challenge instead lies, not in having a correct conception of the virtues, but rather in acting in its light.

Therefore, in the *Ethics*, Aristotle is plainly committed to our target disjunct: there is no reason to suppose, on his behalf, that lacking virtue must amount to possessing an incorrect conception of the virtues. And so there is no reason to privilege the proposal that deviant rulers,

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<sup>72</sup>The fact—from *Pol* III.xii—that Aristotle takes knowledge of justice to be ‘difficult’ need not contradict what Aristotle here says in *NE* II.iv. The former passage may imply only that *specifying* in argumentative or discursive form the contents of that sort of knowledge is difficult: a familiar move in Aristotle’s thought.

in lacking virtue, must thereby possess something like an incorrect conception of *to dikaion*. Rather, the natural thought is that such rulers must fail to act in the light of what they know or think about what the just thing is. In short, deviant rulers must lack the kind of disposition that guarantees that, when they act, they act in pursuit of *to dikaion*, or, equivalently, in pursuit of the common advantage (*NE* VIII.ix 1160a13).<sup>73</sup> But, of course, this is just a roundabout way of coming to the intentionalist reading: for the deviant ruler, in failing to be fully virtuous, typically fails to satisfy Aristotle's requirements (ii) and (iii) on being a virtuous agent. Whether or not some deviant ruler must fail requirement (i) can be allowed to lapse, and that is just what the intentionalist characteristically urges.

But what about the *Politics*? Does Aristotle assume a similar tack there? I want to close this section by examining two passages—one neglected, and the other entirely familiar—that confirm what we have found in the *Ethics*.

In a neglected but, as we shall see, crucial discussion from Book V of the *Politics*, Aristotle raises a puzzle about the *desiderata* that apply to officials in those regimes that usually count as deviant.<sup>74</sup> The immediate topic is a somewhat narrow and technical concern:

There are three qualifications required in those who have to fill the highest offices—first of all, loyalty to the established constitution; then the greatest administrative capacity; and virtue and justice of the kind proper to each form of government. For, if what is just [*to dikaion*] is not the same in all governments, the quality of justice [*dikaiosunē*] must also differ. (*Pol* V.ix 1309a34 ff.)

Aristotle remarks that candidates for high office should possess three qualities: civic virtue, political competence, and loyalty to the regime. Of course, that an attractive candidate will bear these traits is hardly surprising, since these features easily mark the *ideal* office-holder.

Now Aristotle recognizes as much, and so he then immediately examines the kind of case in which no candidate is known to satisfy all three happy features. Should competence or civic virtue be privileged, given that no one stands out with respect to both dimensions? Aristotle's sensible answer is that it depends on the kind of office at stake. If the task requires rare abilities but only a modicum of civic virtue, as the military strategist's does, then one should select on the basis of political competence, in the hope that a sufficient level of civic virtue will be

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<sup>73</sup>It is important to note that this equivalence is here meant *notionally*, not substantively. A substantive equivalence opens the door to the extensionalist fallacy, as we have seen; but a notional equivalence does not. For Aristotle says that a conception of the common advantage *internally* involves a conception of *to dikaion*. And so, if someone fails to aim at the common advantage, he must be failing to aim at what he thinks a notion of the common advantage is an equivalent notion of.

<sup>74</sup>Recall n. 2 above, on how democracies, e.g., need not *essentially* count as 'deviant' in Book III's sense, though they may, for all that, otherwise so count. More on this possibility soon below.

supplied (1309b4–6). (Perhaps Aristotle’s thought is that cowardice in battle is a relatively rare threat.) By contrast, if the task is technically simple but likely to occasion easy stretches of injustice, as the treasurer’s does, then one should select on the basis of civic virtue, setting aside worries about arithmetical skill (1309b6–9).<sup>75</sup>

Though surely sensible, Aristotle’s answers are, as before, hardly innovative. But the idea of prioritizing these *desiderata* leads him to raise an additional question, and to give a more interesting answer:

Someone might, however, pose this puzzle. If ability is present and also loyalty to the constitution, what is the need of virtue? For just the first two will furnish what is advantageous. But may not men have both of them and yet be akratic? If, knowing and loving their own interests, they do not always attend to them, might nothing prevent some men from having a similar relation to the common advantage?

(*Pol* V.ix 1309b10 ff.)

This is a remarkable passage, and for at least two reasons.

First, it gives us clear evidence that Aristotle thinks it possible for a democracy’s or oligarchy’s rulers, or at least some of its most important ones, to aim at the common advantage in their actions. In other words, it is not *internal* or *essential* to a democracy or oligarchy that it count as incorrect. For aiming at the common advantage is here held as a *requirement* on exercising civic virtue, which is the kind of virtue open even to citizens of non-ideal regimes (*Pol* III.iv–v). So not only *can* rulers of such regimes aim at the common advantage; they *should* do so, if they are to express the ‘virtue and justice of the kind proper to each form of government’. Needless to say, this seems to contradict the doctrine—allegedly Aristotelian—that democracies, e.g., must count as incorrect.

Second, it is important to note what Aristotle takes for granted in focusing on the possibility that rulers often succumb to a political, or *polis*-centric, form of *akrasia*. For it is political competence that seems to supply knowledge about the common advantage. Of course, Aristotle is here playing on a parallel between civic virtue and human virtue; but, beyond that parallel, he pairs *loyalty to the regime* with *loving one’s own interests*, and *ability* with *knowing one’s*

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<sup>75</sup>My reconstruction here is a little generous. First, Aristotle sets out his puzzle by wondering about a hard case: a seasoned general who possesses neither loyalty to the regime nor civic virtue. Aristotle’s answer fails to speak to this particular kind of difficulty, since the worry about loyalty drops out of the picture. But this is reasonable, despite the false advertising, since preserving a regime is not going to be helped by having disloyal office-holders. Second, taken literally, the puzzle is phrased in terms of a candidate’s failure to *possess* all three features together. But Aristotle’s answers are plausible only if what is missing is convincing *evidence* that a candidate bears them all. If one knows that a general is cowardly, then whatever military skill he possesses will probably remain unused at exactly the wrong moment; see D. Keyt’s commentary in Aristotle, *Politics: Books V and VI*, in the Clarendon Aristotle Series, ed. D. Keyt (Oxford, 1999), pp. 134–5.

*interests*. That leaves civic virtue to correspond with human virtue, but the salient point here is that the former is necessary for aiming in one's actions at the common advantage; the kind of gap that civic virtue is supposed to bridge is the gap between knowledge of the common advantage, on the one hand, and action done for the sake of it, on the other. This shows that Aristotle takes lacking civic virtue to consist, at least often, not in failing to possess a knowledgeable (or at least veridical) grasp of the common advantage, but in failing to be disposed to aim at it. For the central thrust of the passage is that, when a ruler fails to aim at the common advantage, the likely culprit is some form of *akrasia*, the kind of *akrasia* whose remedy is supposed to be civic virtue. Importantly, Aristotle does not point to a generally incorrect conception of the common advantage as the relevant *explanans*. Rather, it is a certain way in which an agent can fail to count as virtuous, where this defect lies, not in some defective cognitive state, more or less narrowly construed, but in a distinct kind of characterological feature. What's defective about our official is that he is disposed to *akrasia*, and it is that trait that explains why he fails to aim in his actions at the common advantage.

And, of course, this is entirely coherent with what we have above seen from *NE* II; for the disposition to *akrasia* just is the disposition to act against or without *prohairesis*.<sup>76</sup> Aristotle's emphasis there on conditions (ii) and (iii) on being a virtuous agent is mirrored quite closely by his emphasis *here* in the *Politics* on what is importantly gained by bearing civic virtue.

Now, in light of the possibility realized in Book V of the *Politics*—the possibility that lacking civic virtue typically shows itself, not in bearing incorrect conceptions of the virtues or of the common advantage, but in failing to bear particular sorts of motivational orientations—we can revisit Aristotle's official discussion of constitutional correctness from *Pol* III.vii. There Aristotle clearly suggests, not only that deviant regimes lack full civic virtue, but also that even forms of 'polity' do, too, despite their status as correct: even polities fall short of civic virtue, since it is, as it happens, difficult for 'the many' to aim in *all* their actions at the common advantage (1279b1–4). Rather, since polities are characterized by those who bear the virtues only in *martial* affairs, there is a recognizable domain of political life over which a polity's rulers standardly express whatever virtue they have, and they standardly express it by aiming—over this domain—at the common advantage.

As the intentionalist has urged, and Robinson admits, constitutional correctness does not hang on differing degrees of knowledge about 'what is really good and right'—a fact suggested by Aristotle's pregnant silence on this kind of *differentia*. Rather, constitutional correctness,

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<sup>76</sup>See *NE* III and VII; and also McDowell, *Mind*, cc. 1–3; and G. Lawrence, 'Reason, Intention, and Choice'; and his 'Human Good and Human Function'.



in hanging on dispositions to aim at the common advantage, hangs on those dispositions that preclude a kind of civic *akrasia*. Democracies happen to be ruled largely by akratics of this sort, while polities are typically ruled by fewer such agents, or by agents who bear the desired disposition only over a restricted domain.<sup>77</sup>

## 6 Virtue Politics

This paper has argued in favor of the thesis that Aristotle takes a *politeia*'s correctness to consist in certain aspects of the shape that its rulers' aims take. Admittedly, this thesis should seem hardly surprising, since even the surface of Aristotle's remarks in *Pol* III.vi–vii bears its marks (§1).

But commentators have often adopted positions inconsistent with the force of what Aristotle says there in *Politics* III. And so I have argued that these rival positions often rest on dispensable assumptions, assumptions both philosophically (§3) and textually unjustified (§4). In particular, they miss what McDowell calls the 'nonextensionality of specifications of aim or purpose', and they often ignore the argumentative contexts that make plain Aristotle's own gestures against a mistake of this kind. Mistakes of this kind also motivate rival construals of what comprises constitutional correctness, as though lacking virtue or failing to attain happiness *must* consist only in familiar forms of cognitive or conceptual defect (§5). And so I have lately tried to show that Aristotle's own interest is characteristically elsewhere: rather, it is on a particular way of lacking virtue, one that amounts to the kind of *motivational* defect that is the intentionalist's focus.

One challenge to the reading I've defended will remain, however. Earlier in this paper (§2), the question was raised whether this reading imputes to Aristotle—as Robinson worried—a kind of strange fixation on the character of rulers' aims. The challenge supposed that, were this reading interpretatively plausible, Aristotle would seem to be concerned with something that is hardly philosophically or normatively central. After all, what does it matter whether rulers happen to aim at the common benefit, or even at what is demanded by their own conceptions of virtue? Shouldn't the real focus be on the constituents of the common advantage, and on the

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<sup>77</sup>I elsewhere explore the sadly neglected topic of political *akrasia* in Aristotle, but I hope that its importance has already come into view here. But, at any rate, I hope the picture presented here now illuminates the right way of reading the closing lines of *Pol* III.vi, lines which commentators routinely suggest show that constitutional correctness hangs on bearing correct conceptions of justice. For it should now be apparent how Aristotle's claim that correct regimes are 'in accord with strict principles of justice' should be handled: since error or defect is likely to reside, not in incorrect conceptions of justice, but in failures to express the aim of aiming at the common advantage, the removal of those failures is likely to clear the way for an action to count as a correct expression of the virtues proper to political rulers.

true criteria for ‘what is really good and right’?

These are natural questions for us to ask, and they often seem, on our own conception of political philosophy, quite urgent. But I have suggested that this conception simply isn’t Aristotle’s.

Nor should these kinds of questions seem natural *to him*. For once we see that, on his view, questions about correct conceptions of the virtues are largely unimportant—either because they should be easy to answer or because fleeing into *logos* is no way to answer them<sup>78</sup>—we should be able to see how centrally important the question of the shape of rulers’ aims becomes. If, in the individual case, the real task is to live out one’s conceptions of the virtues, and so to give them expression, then, in the political case, the real task is to have the kinds of aims that Aristotle counts as correct. Just as the naturally free Greek male likely knows what virtue demands, his rulers likely know what political virtue demands. But Aristotle thinks that acting and aiming in the light of these demands are rarer achievements. And that motivates his concern with the kinds of aims political rulers have.

For Aristotle, the trouble is not ultimately to be found in flawed bits of evaluative or normative thought. If we think that he must have had a different view, then that is probably because we are bringing to Aristotle our own modern fixation on the idea that we can and must think our way into a virtuous life. But, whatever attractions a view of that kind holds out, Aristotle would not be impressed. Or so I have argued.

But I want to end by suggesting in a more direct way how Robinson’s complaint might be misconceived. For that complaint relies on a tempting but disputable dichotomy between *producing* or *effecting* the common advantage, on the one hand, and *seeking* or *aiming* at it, on the other.

Of course, the intentionalist reading I’ve been defending relies on a version of that dichotomy, too. But we are now placed in a position to see how these contrasts diverge. For, on standard readings, rulers’ intentions stand as an idle wheel, something irrelevant to the question whether a political system enjoys whatever normative credentials it does. However, for the intentionalist, these credentials rely in a distinctive way on a *politeia*’s aims: if the most important fact about a political community is whether it is indeed realizing *eudaimonia*, then this kind of fact *constitutively* requires that its rulers share in certain sorts of aims. That is because, for

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<sup>78</sup>Not *logos*, but something else: ‘Not every problem, nor every thesis, should be examined, but only one which might puzzle one of those who need argument, not punishment or perception. For people who are puzzled to know whether one ought to honor the gods and love one’s parents or not need punishment, while those who are puzzled to know whether snow is white or not need perception’. See his *Topics* 105a2–7.

Aristotle, the common advantage just *is* a form in which *eudaimonia* finds realization.<sup>79</sup> But, as with *eudaimonia* in general, the common advantage will then have to be the kind of thing that is realized only if a political community aims at its realization. Just as acting virtuously—and, equivalently, happiness—cannot be an *accident*, nor can the common advantage: it is the kind of living well that is a kind of living together, the kind of reality that hangs on agents' practical self-understanding.

And so we can isolate a distinctive sense in which Aristotle's political thought constitutes a kind of 'virtue politics'. For, if the concern of 'virtue ethics' is mainly to articulate what must be true of an agent and her thought for her actions to express her conception of virtue, then we can find in the *Politics* an important parallel. The task of political life will mainly consist, not in the correction of conceptions of the virtues, but rather in the provision and cultivation of those dispositions that make possible the expression of such conceptions. Of course, if all goes well, those conceptions will be correct. But the fact that correctness of this sort is necessary should not blind us to the possibility—what Aristotle everywhere stresses, as we now see—that an altogether different task remains, a task that might 'count not for a little but for everything'.

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<sup>79</sup>See *Pol* 1278b20–23 and *NE* 1142b31–33. Also see *NE* I.iv and I.vii.