

PEOPLE POWER:
THE JUSTICE OF DEMOCRACY
IN BOOK III OF ARISTOTLE'S POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

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In Book III of the *Politics*, Aristotle identifies, evaluates, and ranks the different kinds of rule by which a city and its citizens' lives can be definitively formed and ordered. Although Aristotle clearly shows an aristocratic predilection in the presentation of his arguments, I contend that the arguments themselves – when thought through, compared, and put together – lend more support to the claims made by democrats and the *demos* for the justice of majority rule and the principle of equal freedom on which it rests. I make my case for this position by examining three standards of adjudication to which Aristotle appeals in the discussion of Book III. First, I consider the question strictly in terms of aptitude and ability, as Aristotle initially frames it in the first seven chapters of Book III and tries to answer it in Chapter Eleven; by identifying the most qualified, competent segment of the city's population. I then look to his discussion in Chapters Eight through Ten on the different contending factions' claims to rule in terms of distributive justice, according to what each of them fairly deserves. Finally, I focus on Aristotle's appeals to the common good of the entire city as the most authoritative measure of justice, especially in the final seven chapters of Book III where the question of which part of the city should rule the whole is answered in reference to the effectual outcome for the whole city, in light of all of its purposes and needs. I conclude with a surmised of Aristotle's political and philosophical motives and intent.

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Chapter One: Introduction to the Question

“True fortitude is seen in great exploits
That justice warrants, and that wisdom guides,
All else is tow’ring frenzy and distraction.”

-Joseph Addison, *Cato Act ii, Sc. 1*

“Leaders are going to lead. That’s why they are called leaders.”

-Barack Obama

In book III of his *Politics* Aristotle, The Philosopher, deigns to descend (at least conceptually) from the lofty speculations of his academy, to engage in the public disputes of non-philosophers in the agora and assembly below, as a fellow member of “the city,” presumably divulging his own political preferences and partisanship in the process. For it is here that Aristotle explicitly invokes the adjudicatory authority of philosophy, while bringing it directly to bear on the sort of thorny, contentious issues at the heart of actual politics that stem from various claims about who in the city is truly a citizen and ought to rule. And by appealing to the precision of philosophy and the novel authority of “political philosophy” in the course of his adjudication of the issue, Aristotle seems to be putting the full weight and prestige of philosophy’s imprimatur on the table, which would, at least in theory, decisively resolve all partisan disputes and core claims once and for all on the solid certitude and preeminent authority of scientific knowledge, reason, and wisdom (*Pol* 1279b11-15, 1280b26-28, 1282b21-23). In

other words, Book III stands out from the rest of his corpus as critically important in determining the political motives, intent, and preferences of Aristotle himself.

I contend that, although Aristotle does not wholeheartedly subscribe to any of the three main viable political parties' claims to rule that he considers in Book III, on the whole, his arguments tend to support the claims made on behalf of the many and popular rule over and against those of the few. In the course of laying out the Aristotelian grounds and arguments for democracy in Book III, I also hope to show how the critical examination of the various forms and justifications of rule therein relates to Aristotle's larger political aims and inquiry into human affairs generally. The first and central task set forth in the *Politics* is to define "the city" in terms of its most basic elements (1252a15-26). After considering its origins in the family households of which it necessarily remains composed and yet fundamentally distinct in authority, and reviewing the various descriptions of the city suggested or enacted by his predecessors in Books I and II, in Book III Aristotle declares that the city is defined most of all by its regime – the authoritative ruling association around which all its constituents' lives and associations are shaped and ordered. Regimes, however, come in different kinds and sizes, varying widely in character – each defining the city and its constituent parts differently, according to its own aims and principles of justice. The question of what the city is, then, soon becomes "which type of regime best defines and contributes to what a city most essentially is?"

Aristotle's account of political community and rule centers around two commonly held but opposing conceptions of the city: first, from the start and most fundamentally, the city is defined and understood as the preeminent association of self-ruling peers, who share in and constitute its regime as equally vested partners; and second, coextensively with its citizens' collective claim of freedom, political community can be conceived according to its highest

defining end of self-sufficiency. This second defining feature of political community calls upon the distinguishing, exceptional qualities and noble actions of a city's individual members, awakening each man's acute self-conscious awareness of justice and the good – especially the portion of it that is rightfully his own. That is, politics pulls a community in two opposing directions, since it is fundamentally grounded in democratic presumptions and principles of justice (understood as evenness according to fraternal fairness among equals), but also geared toward the more aristocratic and oligarchic aspirations of unequal distinction, fitting recognition, and deserved rank according to each member's relative potential, contribution, and worth. The latter feature of political community comprises its most noble, divine, and distinctive final end, but the former is the more fundamental cause and purpose of politics. Therefore, in practice, more often than not, the former egalitarian mode justly becomes the higher priority, as it becomes increasingly necessary for preserving any degree of civic peace, order, and justice for anyone in the city at all. The more democratic understanding of the city's purpose, then, is often more just, but also at the root of the most pervasive and predominant political traits and tendencies, requiring much more attention, resourcefulness, and effort to rein in and moderate its influence. If left unchecked, either of these opposing trajectories of justice that bond and define a political community – the insistence on its members' equal standing and the rightful recognition of distinguishing individual perfection – can also lead to its demise. However, when both these core tendencies are correctly seen as necessary and just aspects of political community, they might then be aligned and balanced in such a way that their mutual tension stabilizes the whole community, as long as neither of these opposing conceptions of justice are completely realized, but always compromised and frustrated in a way that maintains the integrity and welfare of whole. Therefore, throughout the *Politics* Aristotle seems to shift back and forth,

chastising both party of equality and party of distinction in turn, in order to show both the utility and danger of these political tendencies in a variety of circumstances and conflicts, while underscoring the difficult but indispensable task of sustaining the uneasy equilibrium of an imperfect, unnatural, and perpetually swaying harmony of opposing interests.

Aristotle's case for democracy stems from the unavoidable limits and indelible injustices of political association itself, rather than any advantages or justice that democrats claim or democracy espouses. Aristotle is no democrat, despite his recognition of democracy's partial claim to justice. By the logic of the arguments in Book III, the cause of democracy does not command unqualified moral authority, but is presented as a corruption, or "deviation," of rule that must be accepted, but also resisted, as a consequence of our nature as political animals. A general tendency toward the dominance of democratic justice at the expense of other, more valid claims of justice is inherent to political life. Aristotle shows that the task of the prudent statesman is to resist and slow down this process of democratization -- even while recognizing the power of its claims -- not for the sake of distributive justice but for the common good. Accordingly, he presents the practical application of political science (in Books IV – VI) as almost entirely a matter of stabilizing different cities in the face of the inevitable expansion of political power and citizenship to a greater number of people inducted as free equals.

Although he is an incisive and harsh critic of the demos and their rule, I claim that Aristotle also offers arguments in favor of democracy and democratic justice, meant to temper his readers' expectations of political rule by presenting it as a task that is practically subsumed and lowered by the growing futility of curbing a society's inevitable decline. That is, Aristotle gives reasons both for the claim of the many to rule, and for limiting the complete rule of the many for as long as possible. He does not present democracy as a shining ideal, or the

realization and final end of justice and the city. Democratic rule and principles of justice are far removed from those of the best regime, and their permeating prevalence in political affairs is largely why what is truly best will always be impossible for any actual city. Unmixed democracy is not even categorized as a correct form of rule by Aristotle. Like oligarchy, it is irreparably deviant, tyrannical, and self-destructive in its erratic tendencies and actions. But the principles and form of rule favored by the largest, strongest segment of the city are also always impinging factors in political affairs and deliberation.

So, Aristotle's various discussions of the ineluctable political power of democratic justice and the essential role the demos plays in maintaining the stable order and resilient efficacy of their city are not meant to be taken as enthusiastic support or an unqualified, positive endorsement of democracy. Ultimately, the arguments for political justice and the conventional conditions of equal freedom upon which it depends are part of a larger critique of political life as a whole and its implied promise of renowned happiness through the immortalized glory of just actions and devotion to a particular city's authoritative ends. The perfect order and happiness, to which all contending parties' cited principles of justice seem to point as their most complete, collective realization, cannot be imposed on or maintained by any actual political community without destroying it. And, although this is prudent guidance for practical men, Aristotle's account also provides plenty of reasons to suspect that the fulfilling validation and certainty that goes along with moral virtue (and which practical-minded, active men are said in the *Ethics* to seek, but sometimes confuse with honor) cannot really be adequately discerned, attained, or properly acknowledged within the fleeting and ultimately ungovernable political sphere. In this way, Aristotle's case for conceding to the demos and their claims also, at the same time, casts grave doubts on the practicality and coherence of the predominant ruling principles of justice that

drive the contending parties against each other, just as it reveals men's personal devotion and adherence to them as a continual source of men's dangerously mistaken and incomplete conceptions of the common good, the best regime, and justice simply.

Recent Scholarship on the Topic

Although contemporary interpreters of the *Politics* agree that these questions of who in the city should rule constitute the main topic of Book III and are key to interpreting the work as a whole, there never has been an overwhelming scholarly consensus on the answer to them: whose side Aristotle takes in the dispute over who should rule, and what Aristotle's final position on democracy is. Many thoughtful commentators on the work have offered a wide array of answers. Aristotle is portrayed as a friend of democracy by some interpreters and as an enemy by others. Most recent extrapolations of the logical outcome of the arguments presented in Book III have been made in the course of more extensive readings of a larger topic, theme, or section in Aristotle's writings, and have not usually been the crux of any great controversies or debates in the field of Aristotelian studies. Almost all recent commentators acknowledge the fact that the *Politics* contains strong arguments both for and against democracy. And since these interpretations are very often made in the course of advancing a larger interpretative thesis about the book or its author, many commentators end up backing up their view of the matter by briefly stressing the importance of some passages over others on their way to another, related point.

Those who portray Aristotle as democratic or sympathetic to democracy include Hansen (1987, 1991), Simon (1951), Bluhm (1962), Nussbaum (1990, 1998, 2001), Barker (1959), Kraut (1997, 2002), and Fyfe (1963). Hansen is most emphatic in his claim that Aristotle's interpretations of Greek political disputes lean heavily in favor of the demos. Fyfe finds the

arguments offered in support of political equality in the discussion of citizenship in Book III decisive. Similarly, Simon finds strong support for the equal dignity of human beings in Aristotle, from which we might derive supporting grounds for an expansive democracy. Bluhm argues that Aristotle ascribes superior political judgment to the majority of the city, and that Aristotle's ideal regime is essentially a perfected democracy. Nussbaum derives a case for universally inclusive "political distribution" – in both internal and external goods – from the essential, egalitarian elements of fairness that she finds at the core of Aristotle's political and ethical writings. Barker recognizes some tensions in Aristotle's arguments, but also an overall democratic slant. Kraut also acknowledges that Aristotle can be considered antidemocratic to the extent that he wishes to exclude the masses of working people from citizenship, but argues that he is actually a radical democrat, because he seeks to limit elite power, and even idealizes a regime that has no elite class. Kraut goes so far to suggest that one might legitimately object that Aristotle is too democratic.

Others have come to the opposite conclusion, emphasizing different arguments that Aristotle makes in some of the same pages against democracy, or in favor of other forms of rule. Newell (1987) argues that Aristotle is ultimately in favor of monarchy, while Havelock (1957, 1978) and Mulgan (1970, 1977) both find Aristotle to be fundamentally undemocratic, due mainly to his support of the institution of slavery and the "natural" subordination of women, and in spite of the many arguments that they acknowledge he makes on behalf of the demos. These and other examples of elitism, along with Aristotle's arguments for some men's superiority to others in virtue or intelligence, lead Wood and Wood (1978) to label Aristotle an ideologically biased oligarch, opposed to all claims of equality. Accordingly, the *Politics* is merely the compiled, predictable opinions of a conservative stalwart of the aristocracy, who sees difference

and inequality as rooted, ultimately, in nature – as a result of birth, rather than environment. Bakshi (1975) makes a similar argument, that Aristotle posits a human good that is only possible for very few and resists lowering it in order to prevent more people from striving to achieve or share in it. Along the same class-conscious lines, Barry Strauss (1991) discredits Aristotle’s criticisms of popular rule as exaggerated, due to his ingrained, privileged prejudices against the vulgar, and suggests that he wished to motivate his contemporaries to become even more hostile toward democratic Athens. Charles (1984, 1988) finds Aristotle’s moral philosophy and ontology relevant to and compatible with contemporary ideas of common cause and justice, but still concludes that, due to his ingrained exclusionary, hierarchical views and aristocratic affinities, Aristotle “fails to provide even the basis of an acceptable theory“ of distribution (1988, 206).

My own understanding of Book III has been improved by the many insights of all of these interpreters on both sides of the issue. It will help to further distinguish and clarify my own position by comparing it to three recent, diverging studies of the *Politics*, authored by Clifford Angell Bates, Jr. (2003), Mary P. Nichols (1992), and Robert Goldberg (1990). These three interpretative works also stand out as going much further than any others of which I am aware in addressing the question of Aristotle’s final assessment of opposing political factions’ claims, capacities, and favored regimes. While Nichols and Bates both ascribe to the general gist of my thesis – that Aristotle gives a convincing case for the democracy and the many’s claims of equality and citizenship as just – the grounds of their agreement and the conclusions they draw from it are far different from those I present below. Bates presents the most extensive case that Aristotle advocates for democratic rule and equal freedom as conducive to justice, virtue, and happiness. Nichols also considers Aristotle to be sympathetic to the many and their claim to

deserve equal rights of citizenship, but stresses the ongoing need for good laws and prudent statesmen to guide and balance their influence, with an eye to the highest ends of education and virtue – an arrangement that, in turn, ennobles and serves the common good of the entire city. Accordingly, Nichols posits “polity,” identified as a mixed regime that combines all contending political factions, their ruling principles, and a large, influential middling element into its order and rule, as Aristotle’s practically feasible ideal of a harmoniously well-balanced political order that incorporates both the high and the low aspects of human life, in which he finds a fitting and essential role for the masses, the virtuous, and philosophy (Nichols 1992, 165-67). Goldberg, in a textual analysis of Books III and VI of the *Politics*, gives the most thoroughgoing and persuasive case that Aristotle stands in fundamental opposition to democracy, the demos, and their claims. And while I stand with Bates and Nichols against Goldberg, on the final answer to the question of Aristotle’s judgment of which part of the city should rule the whole, in many significant ways my own interpretation of the *Politics* is more consonant with Goldberg’s antidemocratic interpretation than any other recent study of the work.

Nichols and Bates: Aristotle as Republican Proponent of Democracy

I will begin with Nichols’ own scrupulous study of the *Politics*, since, true to the spirit of the text, she has staked out the most mixed and middling of a mean position possible concerning Aristotle’s preferred political order and recommendations, and because she offers a schema for classifying scholarship on the topic and distinguishing her own interpretation of the work from those of others that resembles my own. Nichols identifies two main camps of recent interpretation of *Politics* that she labels “republican” and “aristocratic” (1-3). The republican camp finds fertile grounds in Aristotle’s depiction of citizenship and rule as the fulfillment of

man's political nature for promoting democratic participatory community – especially compared to modern liberal thought and mass society, which tend to denigrate political rule and engagement as detrimental to freedom, but often necessary to preserve it. The aristocratic camp, which includes Leo Strauss (1964), Lord (1978, 1981, 1982, 1987), and Winthrop (1975, 1978), holds that the arguments Aristotle makes for political community as a natural human habitat or naturally intended end are patently flawed and meant to lead readers toward the study, or at least the toleration of, philosophy (3-4). Like many of the modern liberal thinkers whom the first camp decries, these interpreters contend that, for Aristotle, man's greatest natural fulfillment is made possible by, but fundamentally independent from, the political community at large; they go even further than most moderns in their insistence that this end can only ever be enjoyed by a very small minority of a city's most virtuous members (4-5). Nichols acknowledges these "aristocratic" elements in Aristotle's thought, but insists, with republican interpreters like Sullivan (1974), Yack (1985), Elshtain (1981, 1982), Wolin (1960), Fay (1975), and others, that Aristotle's thought also "speaks to us today" in a way that is relevant and practically applicable to our own political issues and concerns (Nichols 1992, 2, 122-23). Aristotle does elevate virtue, leisure, and wisdom, but within a civic framework incorporating a place and integral roles for the best men in the city's operations, rather than simply above and apart from it. This is because politics is the most suitable venue for a political animal, even the most contemplative, to most fully exercise and cultivate the virtues, faculties, and prudence essential to the complete flourishing of his nature and happiness (160-65). In regard to the republican camp, Nichols argues that they, like Pocock (1975) and Arendt (1959) before them, tend to neglect Aristotle's simultaneous insistence on the political need for prudence and noble actions of statesmanship to guide the deliberations and noble activities of the greater multitude. This competing emphasis

that Aristotle places upon capacity for good rule and virtue as the true qualification and end of a ruler, Nichols says, does not contradict the concessions that he also makes to the demos according to their claims, so much as it balances those claims and the demos as a necessary ingredient for realizing all aims, through the well-coordinated guidance and ennobling interaction between both elements, united by law and common natural ends.

The differences in Nichols' categorization of recent academic studies of Aristotle's *Politics* from my own partly reflects the scope of our respective readings: whereas I am concerned more specifically with the question of Aristotle's evaluation of democracy in relation to the other fundamental regime-types, Nichols addresses this issue in regard to the larger question of Aristotle's defense and assessment of the city and political life generally. Accordingly, while I am here placing her on the same side of the issue as me regarding Aristotle's views of democracy in Book III, under Nichols's schema of the literature, my own interpretation would be called an "aristocratic" one, since I emphasize the many difficulties raised by Aristotle's treatment of political community and shared political rule as constituting the natural end of man (cf. Nichols 1992, 177 n.1). And although I do agree with this camp's characterization of Aristotle's final assessment of political life, unlike them, I contend that Aristotle's critique of a practically active life also leads to a sort of vindication of democracy and the claims of the demos, rather than aristocracy or kingship. In contrast to Nichols, who seeks to combine or harmonize these opposing interpretative camps' views, I hope to show that, at a fundamental level, there is no real basis for their opposition in the text; the case that Aristotle makes for democracy is at the same time a case *against* the politically active life – at least as portrayed by the first camp -- as the highest, most complete activation of our nature and, ultimately, is part of a larger case for a more private life of leisure, contemplation, and study.

In her reading, Nichols discusses the virtues of the citizen, presented in Chapters Four and Five of Book III, as arising both from being ruled by and ruling over other free individuals in turn, and equates the virtue of the good man to that of the good citizen in the best regime, which is best by virtue of being the most *political* form of rule possible, incorporating the full range of civic capacities within men's nature into its laws, structure, and deliberations (60). For Nichols, the mixed regime of polity is not only the most practically feasible political model that most cities are ever capable of emulating, but serves as the most correct model for all rule (63). The mixed regime is central to the practical education of the *Politics* because it combines all the essential ingredients for political rule and practice in one regime. As such, in its most ideal, well-mixed form, a polity is more than merely the modified or moderated rule of the majority but, most essentially, constitutes a truly comprehensive and authoritative harmony of all human ends in the city, high and low. At its best, the well-mixed regime simultaneously brings the beastly many ("who would take all") in touch with the good life, and the god-like best man ("who deserves all") in touch with the conditional necessities that apply as much to him as to others (61, 82-84). Accordingly, Nichols attributes a great deal of potential for moral and intellectual virtue to the demos and menial classes, on the basis of their demonstrable knack for military virtue, and says that their good and ennoblement is the authoritative, larger purpose that will complete the virtue of the best men through the most noble exercise as rightly honored statesmen (81-82).

Nichols finds most of the arguments that Aristotle offers on behalf of the many's political capacities and moral authority – on account of their aggregated nobility and wealth – as convincing and valid as the claims that are made on behalf of an individual or individuals who surpass the rest of the city by the same degree in the same traits (67-69). Democracies, like all

regimes dominated by a single faction or principle, must be corrected and brought into a working balance with other groups' claims and contributions, in order to become more comprehensively political, fair, and free (58). When correctly arranged and directed by wise lawmakers and statesmen, each of these essential elements of political community – high and low – complement and enhance the virtue and lives of the other in their political interaction (164-166). The most justly-arranged and correctly-called regime of all will find a place for both of these elements of citizenship, along with their respective capacities and principles, in a way that enriches, secures, and elevates all lives through the same unifying purposes and common activities (69-72). Aristotle, then, is not so much pro-democracy, according to Nichols, as he is pro-polis, insofar as the demos and their rightful claims of virtue, judgment, and equality are one part of well-balanced polity, which is also necessarily bound by good laws, as applied by prudent, equitable statesmen, who themselves are improved by improving the many through good and inclusive rule (69-81).

I argue that Aristotle's practical position on these matters is far more democratically inclined than Nichols's portrayal of a mutually reinforcing balance of claims and aims. For instance, rather than finding a place for both the low and the high in the city's operations, as Nichols claims, Aristotle says that the ostracism of outstanding individuals is a useful and even just institution in all regimes but the best. Yet he never considers anything quite as drastic in regard to the demos, except in the best of all regimes that we could hope for, and for which the many's complete enslavement is a necessary condition. In every actual regime, the many must somehow be admitted as part of the city and entitled to some sort of share in its rule.

The well-mixed equilibrium of polity is not the prudent combination of the ruling and ruled elements, but achieved and maintained mostly through their ongoing exclusion. The few

best men can easily be excised through banishment, but to remove the blurry-eyed bulk of the multitude from any role in ruling the city in the same way would essentially gut the very city itself, leaving nothing behind for anyone to rule, manage, negotiate with, or even call a city. Removing the demos from the city, like the best, most deserving individuals, for the sake of the whole, is not a viable political option because they themselves constitute and support so much of the whole, each one's freedom and rights requiring that many more dispossessed alien laborers and slaves. So, while ostracism is useful and just for all known regimes, the demos is an indelibly inherent and necessary element of all known cities. And therefore, other less reliable devices of deceit and coercion must often be prudently applied by statesmen to limit and divert the corrupting influence of this strongest, least prudent, but vital part of the city in its incorrect claims to rule the whole in the name of the whole. The unavoidable inclusion of the lower, vulgar elements does not balance out the higher, ruling elements so much as dilute their deliberations and command, eventually precipitating the further expansion of the ruled and disenfranchised classes beneath them, necessary to maintain the greater political freedom they claim for themselves.

Likewise, Bates, in his extensive study of Book III, cites the many's claims of collective and individual virtue as qualifying them for self-rule. He also contends, along with Nichols, that the many's capacity for military virtue implies a love of honor, dignity, and self-command shared by all those with a capacity for both political and moral virtue (Bates. 2003, 80-82). However, Bates parts company with Nichols in his portrayal of Aristotle's political preferences, recommendations, and ideals as essentially democratic, rather than mixed. For Bates, it is not the mixed or corrected form of popular rule that Nichols finds in the polity, but democracy itself, that meets Aristotle's criteria for the best possible regime, and he corrects Nichols and other

interpreters who have been confused by the ambiguity of the term “*politeia*” as it is variously used throughout the work – sometimes in reference to *the* “regime called regime,” but at other times, more generically, in reference to the various corrective procedures, moderating institutions, and finagling adjustments necessary for any and all regimes whatsoever, insofar as they are regimes (82-86). Books IV–VI show how mixed rule is useful for any and all forms of *politeia* in this second, generic sense, but in Book III, democracy emerges not as a deviation, or incorrect form of polity, but as the regime most correctly “called regime” and as the formal model of all political rule, including the best regime of Book VII, where, Bates says, it is not clear which part is ruling the city (2, 86-87, 98, 140-153).

Book III consists of two peaks, according to Bates: the first demonstrating that democracy is not only the best of all deviant regimes, but the best of all possible regimes, and the second consisting of the arguments in the final six chapters, which Bates says favor the rule of law over a community of equals as superior to the absolute authority of the best man alone (60-61, 160-161, 212). And while both these peaks might at first seem questionable in light of Aristotle’s interceding statements regarding nobility and virtue as the “true” and best ends of the city, Bates dismisses this challenge to the justice of the many’s claims by noting that what is held as noble is relative to a regime, and that the many are perfectly capable of sharing equally in its true, fullest manifestation, as virtuous citizens of the best regime (131-132). While both Nichols and Bates are on my side concerning Aristotle’s ultimate adjudication of the many’s claims to rule, both of their interpretative cases – on behalf of mixed polity and democracy respectively – hinge upon the great potential for virtue and ability that they attribute to the greater multitude of the city and the presumption that equally divided and shared political freedom, activities, and community constitute the best and most noble way of life for every member of the city -- worthy,

therefore, of all the clamor and efforts of the factions vying for it. In contrast, I interpret Book III as a demonstration of political justice and a tacit endorsement of democracy, if only by default. My interpretation of Aristotle's theoretical vindication of democratic rule does not rest so much on the claims made for it and the demos in any positive, superlative sense, but more upon the harsh realities of the world, stemming from intransigent facts about common life and human nature, that Aristotle makes plain in the course of his open-ended discussions. That is, I argue that, in the end, Aristotle's best case for democracy is a negative one, which at the same time lowers the possible esteem we can rightfully hold for the political life and community.

Goldberg: Aristotle as Aristocratic Critic of Democracy

As a negative case for democracy, my interpretation also shares a great deal with those who portray Aristotle's views as undemocratic and positively in favor of aristocracy or kingship. My own reading owes a great deal to Goldberg's detailed study, which I have found unparalleled in the soundness and clarity of its analysis. And aside from the central contention of his thesis – that Aristotle ultimately opposes democracy in favor of the rule of the best – I concur with almost all of the lines of reasoning that lead him to it. Goldberg argues that Aristotle portrays the demos as falling far short of all that citizenship requires and necessarily unworthy of such a potent honor as rule (Goldberg. 1990, 98-105). He goes on to show that the arguments Aristotle advances on behalf of the many's claims to possess collective excellence in character and judgment (in which Nichols and Bates place some credence), to rule in the name of all and to be free and equal to everyone else in all things, are all unsound, invalid, or insufficient, especially in comparison to the claims of the best men: to know and aim at the best ends of all (325-333). In addition to misunderstanding their own principles and ends, the many are incapable of

effectively securing their incorrect, ignoble aims, due to their inescapable poverty and large numbers. Democracy, therefore, Goldberg argues – especially in comparison to the rule of the few truly virtuous men of a city – is fundamentally unjust, and consequentially harmful, to the entire city.

Against both Nichols and Bates, I side with Goldberg’s reading of Chapters Four and Five of Book III, after which he concludes that, strictly speaking, only the good man can be a good citizen, and since only the good citizen has the virtue needed for fulfilling the whole task of the citizen, which includes ruling, that only good men should be citizens in the full sense:

The best regime, then, would seem to be one that promotes to full citizenship those, and only those, who have shown themselves to be good men. One can say that the virtue of the good man and of the good citizen is the same, but only because the good citizen, unlike the citizen simply, has been defined independently from the regime. (94-95)

Goldberg, like Nichols and Bates, presents Aristotle’s discussion of the serious and good citizens’ and ruler’s virtue in Chapters Four and Five of Book III as determinant of the virtue of a good man simply – at least in regard to the sort of man who is good enough to be wholly devoted to the best regime of all and its ends. And because all three interpreters view the good and serious citizen in the best regime as identical to the good man, they also all presume that Aristotle’s favored form of rule looks to whichever one best fosters and empowers a ruling body of truly good and serious citizens. Even though Aristotle does not explicitly mention it in regard to the good citizen, Goldberg attributes prudence to him on the grounds that half of a serious citizen’s defining activity (ruling others) requires it, since “in the absence of prudence one could

not genuinely understand how to rule” (94, 169-184). However, on this point I would add that, as Aristotle and Goldberg both emphasize, all cities necessarily contain a wide variety of people and ways of life, of which only a portion can be said to be capable of exercising the full range of virtue and prudence that distinguish the good man and ruler. In the first place, only ruling citizens holding certain offices have a chance to develop and exhibit prudence – and only in part and in turn. It would seem, then, that only the good *ruler*, rather than the good citizen of even the best regime, can most correctly be said to exercise all the same virtues as the good man – who is good simply, regardless of his regime. Of course, at the same time, apart from a well-established regime and well-developed political community devoted to and dominated by the incomplete virtues of common, shared citizenship, we might well wonder whence either the good ruler or good man could ever be expected to arise in the first place, except by luck.

I think Goldberg is correct to say that Aristotle considers the rule of the one or a few best men in a city over everyone else as by far the fairest, most advantageous regime imaginable – but only when possible for a particular population suited to it and living under the most favorable set of geographical and historical circumstances, conditions that are far beyond human powers to bring about. So, although I agree that Aristotle’s most straightforward, rational statements and theoretical arguments favor the rule of the few best men of the city as an optimal ideal of justice, I also contend that this is hardly his final word. The very standard by which Aristotle assesses these issues and claims of rule changes over the course of his discussion, as he tries to apply it in a rigorously coherent, consistent basis and lasting procedural arrangement for distributing and exercising political authority. And as we are confronted with a growing array of obstacles to ruling others justly, in Book III, and the ideal possibilities of politics become more remote, the principled claims of merit that the contending factions make become less central to the purposes

and justice of the city.

If Aristotle favors some form of democracy, as some have claimed, asks Goldberg, then why does Book III conclude with a case for the rule of the best man of all against the rule of law or a virtuous multitude, on the basis of his superlative merit and ability to rule well (333-334)? In reply, I would suggest that this concluding section of Book III is, more precisely, a comparison of the outstanding man's rule to that of the best regime, composed of virtuous peers. Thus it does more to undermine the aristocrats' case to rule over the multitude, whose earlier, inadequate arguments in Chapter Eleven (to possess surpassing collective virtue and prudence) are recycled by the party of virtue (Chapter 15) in their arguments against the absolute rule of one man, who is said to surpass them all in virtue (1281a42-b21, 1286a23-b7). The arguments that Aristotle puts forward for the absolute kingship of the outstanding man who surpasses everyone else demolish all the other claims of every other faction's favored regime, by this point, marking this most concentrated and correct form of rule as the best. However, concerning this closing discussion of kingship, from which Goldberg and Bates draw completely opposing conclusions, I side with Nichols, who presents Aristotle's comparison of the best man's rule to the best laws and regime as a lesson in the impossibility of a fully empowered and purely rational ruling element ever taking complete authority or control in human affairs (Nichols 1992, 72-77).

Despite the fact that the best man of all, almost by definition, would most deserve to rule and presumably would rule better than any other contenders, Nichols draws our attention to two brief, unanswered objections to kingship that Aristotle mentions at the end of the discussion on the quality of the best man's rule and his ability to secure the common good alone (Chapter 15), and immediately preceding the discussion of his surpassing merit to rule alone (Chapter 16):

kingship's unique need for clearly designated successors and the king's unavoidable reliance on friends and allies (Nichols 1992, 76-81, *Pol* 1286b21-40). No matter how much a single man may surpass everyone else in terms of ability, character, or merit, as a man he is mortal, and nature's ability to replenish the species is undependable at the individual level. A city ruled by such a good king could look forward only to being ruled soon by a string of far less deserving and able men, whether a line of firstborn princes or a council appointed by the good king before his death – if at all (cf. *Rhet* 1390b21-30). All such kingships, based on the king's desert and ability to rule alone, would be short-lived, historic blips of justice and communal harmony, immediately followed by steep decline, disappointment, or chaos.

As Nichols points out, however, Aristotle's second brief critique at the end of Chapter Fifteen (that a king needs friends and allies to rule at all) implies that the arrangement under consideration, of absolute authority and power consolidated in the hands of one surpassingly deserving and able man, could never really be established anywhere in the first place (Nichols 1992, 78-81). All monarchies depend upon the pre-established and coordinated energies and support of a member body that can approximate the collective, assembled forces of the city's free inhabitants. And this requires strong associates, bound by even stronger bonds of trust and common cause – bonds best forged on shared and level grounds of friendship between the king and his principal allies. All friendships require some parity in shared aims and a basis for equal standing between friends. And arrangements among equals are already a sort of conventional tie and "law" between them, by which each one's aims and activities are compromised, conditioned, and coordinated with a view to the whole (*Pol* 1287b24-34). That is, undiluted, absolute kingship of the sort put forward by Aristotle as the only true form of kingship (at the end of Book III) cannot be realized without a king first being recognized, accepted, and enthroned by a

critical mass of other people – even if from outside the city. And for others to enlist in league with the king this requires that they see their own hope, advantage, and justice in his reign, as his devoted subjects, paid minions, or practical peers and partners. And this is why no actual example of this pure sort of kingship has ever existed, since its very founding would depend upon somehow compensating the most vulgar elements of a population. Any man’s royal authority can only be securely established on terms that condition, limit, and compromise his powers according to institutionalized customs of mutual trust and binding protocol. Despite the manifest advantages of appointing a single, architectonic, head official, the king’s ongoing need for others’ many hands to carry out his commands compromises those very commands, and hampers the direct, uncompromised exercise of his rightful authority and virtue, recalling the monstrous multi-limbed, multi-headed representation of the many’s collective superiority that, in Chapter Eleven, Aristotle evokes in defense of their claims to rule, which Goldberg rejects (Goldberg. 1990, 183-191).

One reason that Goldberg comes to the opposite conclusion on the issue of Aristotle’s final assessment of democracy that I come to, despite my general agreement with his textual interpretation, lies in the different theoretical contexts in which we frame our interpretations for contemporary readers. Goldberg orients his argument against a view shared by most contemporary scholars and political theorists, that democracy is somehow a more fundamentally just, superior, or advanced form of government than any hierarchical alternative (1-3, 334-336, 345). And I agree that Aristotle offers no real basis for, and even explicitly rejects, many of the core axioms and orthodoxy of modern liberal democracy and its foundational notions of consensual legitimacy, contract, and natural, inalienable rights. And from this standpoint, Goldberg’s interpretive study is indeed, as he suggests, a much-needed and clarifying corrective

of both recent Aristotelian scholarship and contemporary political thought. At the same time, however, from a more practical standpoint, the same portrayal of Aristotle's political teaching would seem to offer no more than the condemnation of democratic society to anyone seriously interested in defending, enriching, or better understanding the freedom and equality that our own democracies provide for us. I presume from the outset that the truth is always pertinent and applicable, if accessible, and that the conclusions to which we are led in the course of Aristotle's discussion on these matters are timely and useful for us today, no matter how ignoble, hostile, or repugnant to our own principles we may find them. This is not to claim Aristotle as "one of us," or to posit "us" as the sort of democrats or citizens he writes about, but that to whatever extent we remain political animals, his political teaching is practically relevant to us and our lives.

Rhetorical Considerations of Aristotle's Historical Context

As mentioned, a major reason for Aristotle's position concerning democracy to be so divergently construed by so many scholars is the indirect, elliptical, and leading manner of his writing, which lends itself to a variety of plausible readings, depending as much on each reader's own political outlook as it does on Aristotle's. All of these recent interpretations, reviewed above, correspond to some aspect of Aristotle's treatment of democracy in the *Politics*, where we find that Aristotle often argues on both sides of the fence, and it is not always clear where he winds up in the end. And even when he takes sides, Aristotle can seem cryptic, hesitant, or ambiguous – often contradicting what he had seemed to conclude only a few pages before, and then later rehashing some of the same arguments again, but in a different context or from a new perspective. Sometimes he seems to change his mind on the matter in mid-stride, and by the end of Book III, it is not exactly clear where Aristotle finally stands in regard to all the various

opposing observations and claims that he raises. The turns he sometimes takes in an argument or the apparent inferences he draws do not clearly or logically follow from the preceding line of reasoning. Occasionally, he comes to startling, unexpected conclusions inviting us to fill in logical gaps with the possible missing steps, while at other times his arguments abruptly end and require us to think through and leap to the unstated logical upshot of the matter on our own. And throughout, Aristotle rarely, if ever, plainly states his own settled opinion on a matter in his own words without couching it in numerous qualifications.

In exchange for complete clarity and comprehension on the part of his readers, an indefinite, suggestive ambiguity in an author's writings can provide some deflection, shielding him and his ideas from those who form conclusions too quickly when they come to understand some things too easily. Aristotle, of course, lived in a politically divisive and dangerous time when rulers and citizens were not reined in by any principles of toleration or free speech, and held all self-proclaimed teachers of wisdom, virtue, or rule in suspicion. In addition, Aristotle was writing seriously about nature, morality, and politics – topics always bound to offend some other serious person in every age – presumably after already having run afoul of the ruling authorities at least once in his life. It is obvious how textual ambiguity, circumspection, and apparent discrepancies or obscurity might help protect someone writing under such conditions. And although Aristotle's likely concern for his personal safety helps explain some of the erratic and confusing features of his work, the dialectical form of his arguments itself serves the further purpose of being the method of investigation that best takes a reader into the mind of the political actors themselves, and the political issues and opinions at play. And besides being the best approach to human phenomena, which – unlike parts of animals or meteorology – are largely the stuff of opinions, such as justice, its goodness, and its relation to the greater cosmos, Aristotle's

manner of withholding or hiding his own views behind those of the disputants serves the further purpose of helping us understand and confront political life on its own terms. It brings us into the fray of political discourse in all its conflictual confusions and absurdities, in a way that might induce us to question, untangle, and sort out our own most authoritative moral and politically instilled opinions in the process.

We might gain some insight into the intentions behind some of the ambiguities and contradictions in Book III by keeping in mind the likely expectations of his general reading audience. It is reasonable to assume that Aristotle wrote the *Politics* for those who could read it, and especially those who would be most inclined to read theoretical texts about practical action, virtue, and rule. And the reading audience of his time was composed of rich and leisured partisans of oligarchy and aristocracy. Therefore, whatever his personal position on the matter, Aristotle's audience would presumably be much more predisposed and open to reading what seems like eloquent echoes of their own opinions, backed up by clearly reasoned and high-minded philosophical arguments against democracy, than otherwise. And the negative case that I contend he makes on behalf of democratic claims is partly obscured by the rhetorical, high-minded tack that he takes with his audience to win their full consideration of the complex difficulties in defining justice for a city.

Many of the seeming contradictions in the text can be attributed to the dialectical manner of Aristotle's inquiry, which often involves expressing some party's commonly shared opinion, and then posing various objections and counterarguments to their view of the matter from other various perspectives. Because these fractured segments of conversation are not written in the form of a dialogue between named speakers, Aristotle often gives the impression that he is merely thinking out loud, replying to himself. The style of the *Politics*, then, poses a challenge

to Aristotle's readers – to take the time to recognize and reconcile the various discrepancies and qualifications in the text in order to piece together many of the mostly unstated or quietly implied logical conclusions of the various arguments and what they amount to in the end. My interpretation will presume that these apparent shortcomings in Aristotle's arguments are intentional, and that plausibly resolving them as such is the key to determining his views and conclusions on the matter.

I follow Bates in taking "a dialogic approach" to my reading of Book III, as a kind of writing in which the author rarely speaks directly in his own name and demonstrates his own views with the conversational clash of others' opinions, moving the argument forward in a more dialectical manner of reasoning than found in treatises written in one voice and from a single, authoritative viewpoint (Bates. 2003, 7). The discursive elements that continually interrupt and change the flow and focus of Aristotle's meandering exposition often require us to tease out his inexplicit, final view on these matters from his depictions of others' conflicting perspectives of them, rather than simply following a clearly laid out and uninterrupted chain of argument and the logical conclusion, of which there are very few in Book III (7-9). I contend that, by working through the clashing arguments and difficulties Aristotle puts forward for us to consider, a case for democracy is made that is not simply a reflection of his culture or class bias, but is grounded in certain inescapable and concrete facts about the human condition that are relevant to our own concerns and form of democracy. That is to say, the case for democracy contained in Book III does not begin from the premise that we must accept and defend the form of government that has also shaped us and our opinions, but that only by beginning with these opinions can we begin to gain any distance and freedom from them, in order to judge and justify them as something other than contingent traditions.

Overview and Summary

My thesis – that, in the final analysis, Aristotle’s deliberative adjudication over who should rule in Book III (despite the unique disadvantages of popular rule that Goldberg and others correctly evince) favors the claims of the demos and democracy, over those made for aristocracy, oligarchy, or kingship – begins from and centers upon his initial concluding statement on the matter, at the beginning of Chapter Eleven: “that the multitude should be the authoritative element rather than those who are best but few, though, would seem to be resolved, and while questionable, it perhaps also involves some truth.” (1281a39-42)

In the course of discussing Aristotle’s arrival at this resolution and subsequent confirmation of it, I hope to show how this conclusion is questionable and yet still remains partially true. My argument in support of this thesis will be made according to three distinct, but overlapping measures of justice that Aristotle applies to the dispute between the three main groups of the city vying for rule (the rich, the poor, and the virtuous). The three standards of measure to which Aristotle most explicitly appeals at different points in the course of the discussion reckon upon who in the city is best able to rule well, who most deserves rule, and whose rule is most conducive to the common good. I will present Aristotle’s qualified endorsement of democracy as the best of the deviant forms of rule, and its incorporation into a mixed form of polity as the only possible form of correct rule in regard to these three criteria that Aristotle applies to the question at hand, corresponding to the following three chapters.

In the next chapter, I will look primarily at the first standard, of political competence, and Aristotle’s assessment of the faction’s qualifications to rule well. Chapter Three will address the question of who should rule in terms of who most deserves it. And Chapter Four concerns which

sort of regime is most conducive to the common good. In Chapter Five I will review and summarize the complete case for democracy, as presented in Book III, in light of Aristotle's larger teaching and intentions. The latter two evaluative criteria by which Aristotle judges a regime's justifications – the parties' claims to deserve rule above all, and also to rule for the sake of the greater good – are more political and practically relevant to the dispute (as the disputants themselves understand and express it) than the first criterion of competent rule. This is because these two more clearly take their bearings almost exclusively by shared perceptions of fairness and the greatest good for man and the city, rather than merely the measurable ability of prospective rulers to rule well, or rational appeals to the obvious expedience of knowledgeable and discerning command. Though less fundamental and less obviously pertinent to political life, as a reasonable qualification for ruling the city competency seems, at first blush, the most sensible, straightforward criterion for assigning the crucial and complex task of maintaining the integrity and welfare of the entire city.

The first criterion – political competence – is defined by the third criterion – the common good – at which the competent political practitioner presumably aims. This professional standard of expertise that Aristotle tentatively proposes for assessing rulers' potential and performance in Book III immediately raises the further, crucial question of what the competent political ruler's knowledge consists in: that is, what the city most essentially is and needs for its purposes (1252a6-16, 1260b28-36, 1275b31-40, 1288b10-9a14). And determining these matters already places us in the midst of heated political controversy (cf. 1253a8-19, 1253a37-39, *NE* 1096b21-7a2). However, I have chosen to put off examining Aristotle's discussion of the common good until my fourth chapter in order to separate considerations of rulers' abilities and proper intentions from the task of defining the actual ends at which knowing rulers rightly aim,

because, as it soon becomes apparent over the course of Aristotle's inquiry, the innate talent and manifest expertise that constitute the ordinary meaning of competence lack the same sort of effective power and authority in the political realm that knowledge automatically bestows upon the knower of every other art. Of course, the apparent competence of some men's charisma and inclination to lead, of course, can just as easily serve unworthy political ends, like perpetual war and empire, as it can be applied to advancing the causes of political justice and self-sufficiency.

Of course, true political competence, exhibited by a truly expert statesman, in the most precise sense, would include the knowledge of the city's true ends. Even aside from the good at which a ruler aims, however, special attention paid to the meaning of political competence, in the most basic sense of simply being able to take part in some capacity of political rule, will help us understand why the political knower can only effectively command the course of action that he ascertains as best for the community by making significant concessions to incompetence, chance, and shortsighted aims. Therefore, as the argument of Book III progresses, political competence must be reconceived in terms of its composite parts, rather than its highest, ultimate ends, as it becomes clear that the political expert is far less hands-on or in control of his medium as the efficient cause of its form than the knowing practitioners of any other art. And, in the process, the common good at which political competence aims must also become reformulated in light of the practical limitations and constant contingencies that impinge upon cities and regimes, from the deliberate product of unclouded vision and steady aim informed by knowledge of the good, to the more practical meaning, as the most certain good, general outcome for a particular city and regime.

Chapter Two: Completing Competence through Its Compromise

Inquiry and politics are not complementary activities. No engaged, active citizen, for instance, ever has to ask what the city is, as Aristotle does in the *Politics*, but always presumes a conception of it that defines every human category and relation for him in the exertions and assertions he makes on its behalf. And yet, at the same time, Aristotle's initial attempt to bring theoretical reason to bear on the political disputes in which citizens are absorbed by judging rulers, regimes, and factions according to their ruling abilities and performance – as we would judge an artisan of any craft – seems warranted by the everyday examples of both practical reason and common sense. This very direct and rational approach to the matter of assigning political rule – as a knowable art (*politike*) best performed by the best practitioner – is congruent with the purported purpose of studying politics as declared at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, to gain practical knowledge that might be used to improve men and their way of life (1094a1-b11, 1103b26-32, 1179a33-80b28, *Pol* 1252a1-6, 1253a29-32). The *Politics* as a whole, then, is ostensibly about the practical application of political science, the learning of which would presumably enable the most correctly habituated, experienced, and discerning political practitioners most able to direct the city and its affairs for the good of all. And by the same token, the same learned expertise would also seem, in theory, to mark these men as most properly deserving of the ruling offices, since their competency is defined by their ability to secure the common good, to which they can contribute the most according to their knowledge of the city's purpose. The city's inhabitants, therefore, owe it both to themselves and the most knowledgeable experts of the good life for man to grant preminent power over all common affairs on the basis of competence, for the sake of best fulfilling everyone's nature in the role and rank to which they are most suited.

Attaining knowledge of what good rule consists of – in order that we might be able to identify the best candidates for rule, or that we ourselves might qualify – requires learning the purposes of rule and the city by inquiry into its proper form and function. And this is precisely what rulers and their laws authoritatively dictate for all. So merely broaching the topic of what the master political craftsman knows already delivers us directly to the heart of the political antagonism and controversies of justice that fundamentally divide and turn every city against itself, since the answer to the question of who is best able to rule well denotes one's more correct knowledge of the proper order of all things and everyone's naturally just relation to them, according to a host of other issues concerning the moral worth of the various, contrary ends and ways of life. The question of who should rule raises the further encapsulating question – of who in the city is the best simply – since proclaiming a group's superior qualifications to rule everyone else implies that they know and live better than everyone else. And it would seem that those who best know man's naturally good activity and purpose would thereby be able to live the best life possible and, based on the widespread assumption that the good for any one man is the same for an entire city, the same individuals would also be most likely to know best of all how to direct the interwoven lives of all.

When thought through, this line of argument would seem to grant the highest authority to science, reason, and men who live according to it – and, ultimately, to the divine, self-sufficient wisdom of the philosopher (*NE* 1180b7-28). Strictly in terms of practical ability, experience, and knowledge, the most qualified candidates for rule are more likely to be found among the elite few who enjoy the more numerous opportunities necessary for developing leadership skills (cf. *Pol* 1277a14-20). And this makes sense, since the rule of the most competent and virtuous men in the city would presumably be of the group most likely to take into account both the

highest and most urgent ends of the city in the city, thereby best assuring the common good for all (1280a15-22, 1282b14-23). So, Aristotle initially agrees that, according to the standard of the arts, the best, most virtuous men of the city – those with the leisure and temperament necessary to refine their characters and capacities through education and politically pertinent activities – are most qualified and, therefore, entitled to the fullest citizenship of the highest, ruling offices (1277b33-8a5). However, this conclusion, as Aristotle indicates at the end of Chapter Five, is insufficiently political, and it soon becomes apparent that, in practice, rulers' good intentions are always inevitably subverted to the only possible ends that actual regimes can ever willingly pursue or attain (1278a34-39).

The common good, conceived in terms of artistic functionality as the good ruler's proper aim, first emerges as the bifurcating metric by which Aristotle distinguishes the two main kinds of rule in the six-fold typology of Chapter Seven: as either correct or deviant. Correct regimes and rulers act as the selfless caretakers of the common good of the rulers and ruled, while deviant ones aim at their own good to the detriment of the ruled and their city as a whole (1279a22-b10). This view of political rule, as a necessary public service, was shared by the earlier, primitive inhabitants of the earliest cities, mentioned by Aristotle in Chapter Six, whose associations are said to have been "simply just" (1278b14-9a9, 1279a15-21). Rather than fighting over ruling authority as some sort of prize, these original citizens sought to be ruled, as beneficiaries of others' efforts to serve their own good rather than fighting over who gets to serve the rest. They wound up following the same procedure of citizens in Aristotle's time, ruling in turn, but this was premised on a different, more rational view of public office, as a common burden of responsibility – each one eager to pass the responsibility to the next in line – rather than a preeminent good or right (cf. *NE* 1099b9-25). Because ruling is the most comprehensive and

necessary job in the city, requiring a constant absorption in arranging others' lives for the sake of their good, it is also the most complicated, challenging, and thankless job to do well. And this is why, Aristotle tells us, it was first stipulated, when men still viewed these matters in terms of their true natural worth, that ruling officials be compensated for their troubles by a greater opportunity to gain unequal profit and honor from "the common" that they maintain and manage for all (*Pol* 1273b1-7, 1279a1-16).

If it ever was, this bygone, more rational, and "natural" golden era of simple, clear-sighted city members living together according to undistorted views of their own true good would surely would not have lasted long, but would have quickly given way to the feverish, dynamic clash of contesting anxieties over the perpetually unfair shares of those who are equal or unequal in merit. This epitomizes politics everywhere, now that inhabitants have become infected with the unnatural feelings of psychic hunger for the same share in the job that was sensibly shunned before, and now that they have seen the excessive compensations of rulers' self-apportioned, unequal portion of the common wealth and renown of the entire city over time. Political community necessarily foster this ill condition in its members by insisting on its own authority and supremacy as the just end of citizens' actions, and by honoring those who sacrifice the most in service to others' good. But the honor that was originally meant to justly compensate and reward those in such a demanding position, Aristotle says, has obscured the original function of rule and transformed public officials' servile devotion to others' good into the highest, most honored and envied position in the city, corrupting men's ability to identify their true good according to nature (1286b7-20).

The common good of producer and user, presumed in the study and practice of every other art and made possible by the overarching authority, assurance, and sanction of the greater

political community, does not exist by nature between rulers and those they rule. Artisans either do their art and make their artifact well, or do not, and their aims and expertise can be inferred easily enough in regard to the quality of their technique and final product according to its apposite purpose. A person who professes competence in smithery but proves unable even to melt metal would be called an inept charlatan, among other things, but would not long be addressed by the title he advertises. Blacksmiths, as with every artisan within a city, are only commonly called such when they can actually carry out the activities and ends of their art well enough to be willingly relied on by others for their own purposes, whereas in politics, Aristotle says, even the bad or unjust ruler in charge of the city is still commonly called the city's "ruler," albeit qualified by ideas of legitimacy, fairness, and performance, because they do in fact rule, even if they do so unjustly.

So, contrary to every other practical field, the assignment and practice of political rule, with considerations of effectual authority, must take precedence over notions of correct and properly held authority according to the strictest political standards or theoretical precision of meaning. For, in the political realm, truth is mostly subservient to opinion and appearance, and especially in determinations of the basis of rulers' authority. Politics is defined by and revolves around what is held to be noble and good for men. Expertise is taken as a sufficient qualification for every other job except political rule, then, partly because the practical wisdom of a political expert would ostensibly stem from a special, privileged knowledge and surpassing familiarity with what is truly good and just. In every other art and vocation, it is the user of the production or service and *his* purposes that are the primary cause and guiding standard for assessing its practice, but the work of political rulers is oriented by determinations of the final, unifying purpose of all arts, activities, and human beings contained in the city, along with the role and

worth of each (*NE* 1094a26-b26). Moral claims about which person, group, or allotted ways of life give rise to the best arrangement of rule are always at the same time an assertion of who in the city is equal or unequal to whom in the highest, most authoritative sense. Telling others what to do, how to live, and effectually arranging their relations and ends, always presumes some basis of superior capacity concerning the whole on the part of the commander, whose effectual command is inevitably seen, on some level, as a function of this fundamental superiority.

Were expertise cited as the sole or primary grounds of someone's political authority, it would only compound the seemingly presumptive, patronizing pomposity of claiming any authority over others, because all authority already implies inborn, natural self-sufficiency, or access to wisdom beyond the reach of ordinary men. That is, unlike the possible claims of learned artisans in any other field, the claim of political expertise is, at the same time, a bold and potentially abrasive declaration of one's fundamental moral superiority to others – as a more complete and able seer, free enough from conventional opinion to rise above the immediate concerns and disputes of his fellows as their worthy arbiter, model of emulation, and discerning guide. And this chafes the citizen's dignity. In other arts, competence is practically equivalent to an applied, expert understanding of the art's proper end and knowledge of the best technical means for attaining it. However, even with a thorough understanding of the noble, good, and just course of action for human beings, no man can politically rule with the same immediate influence, direct control, and masterful command of his craft and media as exhibited by leading experts in other fields – not without sacrificing the essential political integrity and bonds of their community. Choral directors, trainers, and pilots, for example, rule much more automatically over their chorus, athletes, passengers and crews simply by virtue of their expertise, as the rightful custodians of a readily apparent common interest between them and those depending on

their effective authority. Citizens' irrational attachment to their own claims of shared dignity, merit, and political standing fosters a general, built-in political bias against any individual claims of special ability or surpassing expertise in matters of justice or living well, striking their ears as offensive pretense, tantamount to tyranny.

Therefore, ruling the city is not, and cannot be distributed and carried out as simply another necessary but arduous task among others in the city, but as the unique, overarching task of chief taskmaster, officially defining the proper task and function of the entire city and its parts (cf. 1097a30-8a19. This not only means that ruling a city requires a capacity for clearly discerning nature's wishes for us when her own competence has fallen short (practical knowledge of which is far beyond the reach of most men), but also that, in light of its divine comprehensiveness and multifaceted noble grandeur, political authority comes to be seen as that much more prestigious and rewarding. Determining the right and proper course for all is inescapably an intimation of the deciding ruler's superiority as a knower of the good – an impression compounded and enhanced by the greatness of the city and the concentrated power by which he rules it. And deciding for others on the basis of practical wisdom or knowledge that they lack requires not only trust in rulers' superior competence, but also principled moral appeals to rulers' meritorious worth as kindly benefactors of all.

Assigning citizenship and office is never as simple and straightforward as hiring a pilot or coach, who can more easily display their abilities beforehand, partly because citizens and rulers can only correctly be deemed good at their job according to the ruling moral categories of their regimes and cities (*Pol* 1281b38-2a23). Expertise concerning the most important matters, about which everyone has strong convictions, requires some separate, even greater capacity to enable its noble superiority and wisdom to shine forth and be realized as honorable and authoritative for

a political community. And to compel the proper recognition and deference of an entire city requires that expert rulers can convincingly align their own claims and purposes with at least the greater part of the people who might be moved to help compel the rest of those are still not won over by his qualifications, merit, or words alone. However, if they are to wield any degree of political influence or command at all, the proper, the logical authority of the most knowing and qualified rulers of a city could only ever be established on the basis of improperly construed ends and shared commitment to a pre-existing common way of life that falls far short of the civil order, practices, and laws that studied and seasoned experts on human affairs would presumably know are best.

Purely rational standards of expert knowledge and skill can never gain a secure or lasting foothold of unmediated influence in political affairs because political competence necessarily takes its cue from the incompetent. An able ruler cannot move people on the basis of the truth he knows, but only on the basis of what already resembles their own opinions and desires – and enough so that the bulk of them can be moved to help compel the rest who are still not as won over by his qualifications, merit, or words (*Rhet* 1355a24-29). Political competence, then, unlike competence in any other necessary art in the city, depends almost entirely on predominant opinions and widely shared, ingrained perceptions of things, rather than how things truly are by nature, because the competent practice of politics requires not only knowledge and experience, but also the supplemental, coordinated ability to persuade an entire group of people to follow the leading expert and defer to the natural authority of his expertise. The political art, then, is uniquely exercised and applied to the particular problem of moving and shaping those who do not and cannot recognize its proper authority. Thus it is understandable why some sophists would reduce political education to the study of rhetoric and popular laws, by which citizens

might be led on the basis of their inherited prejudices by an expertly trained speaker who possesses a practiced familiarity with all the most useful psychic triggers that might move them to obey (*NE* 1181a12-b16).

The political community and ways of life it engenders depend upon the level of its members' support and its recognition of rulers' legitimate authority, matching the physical capacity required to enforce it. And how others assess the merit and abilities of even the most competent and virtuous officials largely depends on the sort of regime they already live under or favor (cf. 1094b25-5a11, *Pol* 1282a41-b13). Consequently, in every existing city, political capacity and science are held hostage by popular justice as dictated by the limited capacities and aims of the multitude, which are never certain or clear, but always conflicted and mostly wrong. Even if everyone in a city *could* correctly identify and agree about who best knew how to arrange and administer things, like the unspoiled, clear-sighted original citizens of Chapter Six, they still could not rationally expect their selected rulers – no matter how knowing and decent – to put the welfare of the ruled ahead of the known, true good of the rulers themselves (*NE* 1094a1-6, *Pol* 12691-2, 1286b20-27). However, political consent and support are not simply matters of trust. Nor can they simply be reduced to the logical dilemmas of establishing rational cooperation through well-coordinated self-interests (as in economics today), but are much more essentially grounded in and inextricably tied up in men's sense of the noble, and the passionate pride they take in their perceived worthiness, to freely pursue and partake in it as rationally self-moved beings.

Therefore, the true test of political competence turns out to depend on the practitioner's ability to rule over those who already live according to their own longstanding convictions and principles, without any other obvious basis on which to prefer his superior deliberation and

command to their own aims and desires. That is, although knowledge of the city's proper end is crucial to the good statesman's good rule, its advantage is entirely dependent on the perspective and entirely separate capacity necessary for moving and ordering others. Even if someone were fully aware of what constitutes the complete common good of a particular city he could hardly be considered competent if he did not also have some knowledge of how to secure and maintain such an outcome. To rule well requires knowing how to move and order a city's constituent parts in accordance with the separately grounded knowledge of the good for all. Simply *knowing* the highest end for man and best way of life for all in a community is of little help to the would-be political practitioner, since this is something about which everyone in the city already holds long-held, world-defining opinions. To approach rule as a task of technical know-how, suited to a master political craftsman, would require being able to account for and accommodate all other pre-existing political claims of the good for all.

Fully realized political competence consists of expert knowledge of ultimate ends and immediate particulars, backed by the overwhelming collective might of a united multitude of non-experts to carry out its decreed actions, which can only be supplied from within the city by a devoted multitude. The surpassingly massive size of the demos, therefore, is essential to establishing and maintaining all lasting arrangements of political rule, good or bad. But, contrary to the sophists' claims, there are no reliable psychic triggers by which a ruler can move the ruled in the spontaneous way that they move themselves, but must always begin from and be seen as carrying out their own self-determined principles, deluded hopes, and aims. And this is only possible when men feel they truly lend some crucial element or play some part in the deliberation and command of their common lives in way that does not run counter to the dignity they presume as autonomous free men. Therefore, bringing these two elements of complete

competence together in one regime requires somehow incorporating the many into its rule on grounds that are acceptable to an overwhelming majority of the city -- in effect, perverting the aims and directives of any knowing statesman for the sake of fulfilling them in any form -- since the very basis of any proclaimed expert's authoritative command depends almost entirely upon the dominant opinions, character, and potential of a given multitude to properly recognize and carry it out.

Offices are not mere jobs, but preeminent positions of emulation and honor, desired by the vulgar as public commodities bestowing special privilege and access to a greater share of personal profit, and sought by the already good and blessed best men of the city to confirm their goodness, but which all disputants claim as their just due. Competence cannot be the only or even the most central consideration in actual political determinations of who ought to rule, because, as preeminent honors, offices and citizenship must be distributed to those who already are widely perceived as deserving them on some basis other than their supposed or demonstrable expertise (*Rhet* 1387a8-16). Since political office and citizenship are necessarily the highest distinguishing honors of the highest human dignity and faculties, it is necessary for the aspiring scientific inquirer of human things to understand the practice of this art he seeks to know as itself the central object of political desire and dispute, seen by all as the confirmation of their moral worth and merit. In practice, no rulers, regimes, or citizens ever base their right to rule solely on their expertise or superior ability to rule well, but are only ever accepted by anyone as legitimate when they themselves are seen as good and deserving of their eminence. And although capacity for rule can itself be a claim of desert, the extent of its political capital primarily depends on whether the qualified candidate is seen by others as even being worthy of his own endowments and abilities, as well as the inordinate honor his expert skill and prominent position will more

easily gain for him. Because ruling requires the moral authority that redounds from the purportedly surpassing suitability of rulers, rule cannot be wielded apart from claims and perceptions of rulers' moral stature – both for the sake of rulers' own compensatory sense of deserved honor and to secure the general deference of the ruled. However, in a feverish, developed city full of large numbers claiming a share in virtue and freeborn competence, these inextricable moral implications that follow from unequal allocations of authority also breeds resentment, defiance, and faction.

Theoretical inquiry into the question of who the citizens and rulers are that constitute the city's essence, then, requires us to recognize justice as the proper end and governing context of rule. The proper distribution of rule, functions, and goods cannot simply be according to a universal, constant ratio of justice or law, because the city's primary and final purposes are never any clearer or less controversial to everyone as the question that they spring from: who should rule. In this way, the seemingly simple, straightforward, and pertinent standard of technical expertise becomes muddled and beside the point, resolving nothing in the dispute between factions, but at the same time, helps put the immense and conflicting tasks of political rule in perspective. Aristotle's aborted attempt to resolve the dispute over rule by appealing to the artistic standard of competence alone is helpful, then, not for resolving the question of who should rule, but for illustrating the severe built-in limitations of expert knowledge and practical wisdom in shaping or directing the character and endeavors of a community. To address the question of who should rule in the proper context in which it emerges as a central and contentious controversy, it is first necessary to recognize the prime political importance of the just and its apparent formal priority over the good in political affairs, in order to gain some understanding of the issue in the way that the politically defining contenders for rule do: not as a

vocation of trained experts, but the recognized right to the highest position of honor in the city, and suited to or earned by the deserving, according to impassioned claims and moral principles of desert.

Chapter Three: Fairly Mixing Incommensurable Measures of Fairness

The issue of which part of the city ought to rule is never as simple as merely outlining the most rational, orderly political arrangement we can imagine in detail, but must be established in terms of what is fairest to all who compose it. In Chapter Three, I will consider Aristotle's adjudication of the dispute in terms of what each contending faction claims to fairly deserve, according to the aspect of justice that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he calls "distributive justice." We usually say that someone fairly deserves something or some proportion of it, good or bad, for two main, related reasons: that it is especially fitting or suited to him, due to his inferior or superior inner worth and moral fiber as a deformed or fully realized and perfected human being, or in reciprocity for some helpful or harmful action, contribution, or exchange he makes or has made to others or the community as a whole. In the political realm, every regime and faction is defined most of all by its answer to the central question of distributive justice, concerning who most *deserves* the preeminent honor of ordering the city's common goods and way of life, and the right to fill the ruling offices.

Although actual instances of factional strife are often triggered by minor differences over some small, random matter, they are not really *about* small matters, but the fervent distributive claims over fundamental issues of justice that they stir up (*Pol* 1303b17-19). Factional claims are not simply the products of simple material interest or the lust for power, but are rooted in deeply held principles by which citizens might rightly order all interests, lives, and goods for

their entire community. All sides conceive their fair share of rule in terms of how they see themselves as a part of the political community. Justice is the proper end of political community and, therefore, most realized and elevated as a central concern in the political sphere, not because it is merely a social construct of opinion and rhetoric, but because what men deem as morally owed to them flows from presupposed general principles that they come to understand, express, and care for as distinct participating parts of the city (1253a37-40, 1282b15-23, cf. *NE* 1129b30-30a5). People are often passionately certain and insistent on their own claims of desert because they see their own claims, for their benefit and right to political power, as flowing directly from transcendent standards of obligatory right and just order, rather than the other way around (cf. *Pol* 1325b20-29).

The dispute over political rule is so passionately divisive and contentious precisely because it concerns more than merely the satisfaction of basic needs and desires. Both the rich and the poor contest each other's claims out of deeper motives than material greed and insecurity (1267b40-a7, 1267a12-14). Aristotle's approach to the dispute avoids the temptation of supposing that such disputes and conflict might be avoided or resolved by a surfeit of goods or by each claimant's promise to defend their common peace and safety from the injustices and encroachment of others. All contenders for rule want more than merely to secure enough of the city's distributable goods for them to live comfortably. The ruling offices are not sought by those claiming them as just another scarce and indivisible economic good, but as their personally earned and naturally due desert. Men's ambitions for office are not inflamed merely by the tangible perks and privileges of authoritative power, but even more so by the conviction that such glory and honor is their destined right and responsibility to attain (1266b26-7a15).

Factions clamor over rule with such myopic intensity, even at the cost of their own immediate good, due to an earnest dedication to their own principles, by which they are compelled to establish and fully realize their own narrow conception of complete justice by correctly ordering the entire community city in light of it alone (1309b34-10a35). But they are moved to do so out of a love for the just due and good of everyone in the city, as opposed to sheer self-interest and power. So, the deviance of the deviant regimes listed in Chapter Seven is hardly intentional or due to men's selfishness, but stems directly from the rulers' highest genuine aims and noble aspirations to see justice fulfilled, being misdirected by their necessarily limited and distorted view of the whole. Each faction genuinely believes that the partial perspective of justice that they claim is the whole of it, and that the strict adherence to their principles to the exclusion of any others truly constitutes the good for all.

Because they all identify the arrangement by which each member receives his just due, as they understand it, with the whole of justice, all factions become willing to advance their own principles of distribution to the exclusion of all others, even to the point of the city's destruction (1296a22-39, cf. 1276a6-19). And because factions' competing principles of distribution are not merely empty rhetorical slogans masking more fundamentally real and urgently felt material interests and insecurities, but emanate from a deeper, spirited, and noble concern for justice and its real, abiding power in the world – which is why they demand that the entire city be reformed and reordered according to the same distributive principles to which they appeal in their own case -- they are also compelled to settle for what is right simply and finally for everyone, principles for which they often prove willing to sacrifice their interests for the sake of city's good, however they conceive it. Therefore, the factional dispute over political authority and the moral basis of its legitimacy is not merely some unprincipled, selfish, and wholly irrational

struggle for the power, prestige, or profits at the city's disposal, but stems from the fact that all sides in the dispute arrive at this irresolvable impasse of political conflict simply by following their touted principles and claims of superiority in contributive worth to their logical conclusion.

In terms of moral worth, neither the rich nor the poor can claim a comparable degree of good character, judgment, and nobility as the truly decent aristocrats who claim virtue as the rightful principle and true end of the city and its laws. As a claim for rule, moral virtue is incomparably superior to the oligarchs' material self-sufficiency, as well as the democrats' dignity as naturally free men, and, therefore, in terms of innate worth only the most virtuous few of the city ought to rule – the same class of men who are too few to form an actual, viable faction in any city and are the most reluctant to actively oppose or favor any particular form of regime than the existing one. In regard to the two groups actually large enough to form real, formidable factions in a city – the oligarchs and democrats – Aristotle would seem to give more credence to the moral worth of the democratic claims because their principle of freedom comes closer than the oligarchs' to at least aspiring to the freedom of the aristocrats' noble self-sufficiency, despite the multitude's misunderstanding of this end as simply being unconstrained by any forces outside one's desires. And in terms of contribution, moral virtue is also an unrivaled, incalculable boon to a community, which no other class but the best born, well raised, and educated gentlemen of the city can offer.

The aristocrats also emerge as most deserving of the city's highest honors for many of the same reasons that they would offer a more expertly qualified pool of candidates for ruling office. They alone exhibit the most cultivated nobility, moral worth, and decency, and provide the most definitive and impressive fruits of political community through the exercise of virtues in their pursuit of self-sufficient perfection. Distributive justice, then, would seem to favor the unequal,

proportional distribution of ruling offices to the most virtuous men. However, the aristocrats' unequal merit does not mean that the other factions deserve nothing. The most serious faction of virtue contributes the most toward the highest end of the city and deserves to rule, but others contribute as well, and theirs is not the only claim. And granting ruling authority only to those most deserving and suited to it is, at the same time, unfair to every other reasonably disputing claimant.

All three groups – democrats, oligarchs, and aristocrats – have a just claim, just not equally or on the same basis (1280b4-1a10, 1283a2-4a3). The aristocrats' superior worth makes them more deserving of rule, but by an incalculable degree. The wealthy few, those with and without virtue, also have some rightful claim to rule the city, but on different grounds, as the suppliers of the city's material means, staking their claim on their substantial, nourishing investment in its existence, aims and actions. The oligarchs contribute the surplus wealth necessary for the city's sustenance, defense, and a generally elevated quality of life. And, of course, without these basic provisions and equipment, virtue has virtually no real strength or influence at all – virtue itself owes something to the material contribution of the rich.

The oligarchs' wealth is itself the accretion of common conventional measure by which all commodities can be compared and exchanged conveniently. So it is somewhat understandable why they would gauge their own merit by the same standard. Access to great wealth is infinitely useful for cities, but its essential political function in helping meet daily and non-daily needs often disposes men to rely on it as a sort of convenient shorthand for measuring themselves like commodities. And because wealth allows for and usually accompanies the activation and development of moral virtue, it is often taken as a sign of the possessor's of moral worth (cf. 1273a20-b1). Of course, not everything can be supplied, exchanged, or measured by

money, any more than it can by success, power, or luck. And, although they are blinded by the passionate immediacy of their own case and unable to articulate it adequately on their own, the many are also not without merit. Nor are their claims entirely groundless or irrational.

While the many are most of all distinguished by their poverty (a disadvantage that cannot be counted as an asset like wealth and virtue, and to which they owe the shoddy shape and erratic orientation of their souls, that stunts any capacity for virtuous action), Aristotle favorably compares them, as a group, to the other contenders in terms of both their potential and actual contributions to the whole. Individually, each member of the demos is weak, fully occupied with the necessities of daily life, and mostly without resources, but as an aggregate, Aristotle claims – because they are not only defined by their poverty, but their numbers – the cumulative sum of their wealth, altogether, as a faction, will almost always outweigh the collective wealth of the few oligarchs. The sheer size of the demos would seem to make up for the deficiencies of its individual members, giving them a claim more commensurate to that of the oligarchs, in the same quantifiable terms of their common currency. But this is because money, like the size of a multitude, is a cumulative and measurable common quantity. A similar assessment of the same two groups' collective virtue is much more difficult to reckon, though, since qualities of moral character and ethical cultivation do not add up in measurable units like wealth and population. Simply enlarging the citizen body does not augment the virtue and prudence of the regime.

However, unlike moral virtue, physical might correlates directly to a group's numbers and collective weight, might which every regime needs to throw around in order to attain any of its aims. The long roster of freemen who compose it is itself the most unique and invaluable contribution the demos makes to the city, since the mass of a multitude alone provides and constitutes the very stuff of what a city most palpably is, as the most immediate concretion of

dedicated pupils, crafted product, and principal purpose of its laws. The demos is necessary for the city's very existence, let alone its survival. Therefore, they are correct to claim that they make and constitute an integral contribution to everyone's common good and thereby deserve some share in the deliberate public effort to define and direct it for everyone else as well (1281a39-42).

Accurately evaluating these three unique, essential contributions in comparison to each other is impossible because there is no coherent way to make strength commensurate to virtue or to wealth. Because no derivable common denomination of exchange can possibly exist between them, as with every other good and service in the city, it is impossible to correctly determine what amount of moral virtue is equivalent to what measure of strength or wealth (1282b30-3a22). Therefore, there is no single, correct, or certain way to distribute rule among the contesting parties in proportion to their merit in a way that is manifestly reasonable or fair according to any of their competing principles of rule. This is why Aristotle says that that the wellborn, free, and wealthy dispute reasonably over who should rule, along with those possessing justice and military virtue.

They all can be said to dispute reasonably because their dispute is the inevitable result of their mutually exclusive claims and the unbridgeable grounds upon which they stake them (1283a23-4a8). And because each claim is valid, but only according to distinct principles of distribution, they cannot be reconciled according to a knowable ratio of desert by which rule can be divvied up fairly. This is primarily for two reasons that are fatal to the hope of satisfactorily realizing distributive justice: firstly, the ruling principles to which the contending parties appeal are completely incommensurable to each other, and secondly, moral desert is itself incommensurable to the contested honor of political authority and power – which, in practice,

can never be extended or bestowed to all those who justly claim it in way that is satisfactorily fair to all. No possible arrangement could be said to be truly fair, since no arrangement can fully honor any of the competing principles or claims of desert without denying and dishonoring the principles and claims of the other factions, who also have a claim. So although virtue may have the noblest case for deserving rule, it is not the only one; since its rule would only attain a partial justice, moreover, an absolute aristocracy would rightfully be labeled unjust and even deviant in light of those other aspects of distributive justice and the common good that the aristocratic rulers would neglect. Justly honoring and benefiting any person or group in the city with office and authority, therefore, also unjustly dishonors and deprives others simultaneously.

All of these groups claim to offer some unique and confirmable superiority in comparison to the others, but it is impossible to adequately compare or assess the competing distributive principles and goods to which they appeal. We can decisively determine the superior case for the aristocrats' greater expertise and desert, even while acknowledging the many's limited capacity for judgment of general qualities of beauty and harmony and the lesser merit of their moral worth and deeds. And the fairest resolution of the dispute over what constitutes fairness requires the partial recognition and political participation of the demos, and the equitable compromise of all factions and principles for the sake of the more common ends of peace and stability, because moral worth largely depends on contribution, which depends on the ends of the city, which are multiple and only met partially under conditions of neutrality and the strict, pervasive rule of law. Distributive justice itself, then, when thought through, calls for only the partial realization of its moral principles through the restraining balance of a mixed and indistinct form of "polity," ruled according to no single, politically defining principle beyond its laws and perdurance, for the sake of maintaining any degree of equitable fairness among its members'

disparate views of what truly constitutes fair distribution and the just order of things. And this can only be achieved in a regime that rules and distributes offices according to no single perspective or aspect of fairness.

Determining a principled, all-around fair proportion of ruling authority among the contending factions is impossible because, in the first place, any possible division of offices or powers between factions would necessarily preclude ever granting the men of virtue (who most of all deserve the finest goods of all) the full rank and power most suited to them. However, from the standpoint of the most strident claimants and serious devotees of justice, a mixed arrangement of rule lacking any consistent moral principle of distribution can only be considered fair in a negative sense – as the equal rejection of all moral principles that men commonly claim as absolutely authoritative for the whole city. Aristotle’s proposed compromise of mixed polity, then, at least in the eyes of its most principled citizens, would seem an inherently unfair arrangement, rendered tolerable only by the common consolation that at least every other faction shares in their indignation. Mixed polity can only be established and made lasting by a generally shared dissatisfaction and unifying frustration among its members, and only so long as no faction sees others and their competing claims as disproportionately favored by the arrangement. The greater moral weight and merit of men’s contributions to others, in contradistinction to their innate moral worth, points to the primacy of the effectual good in all determinations of political justice. That is, distributive justice itself points beyond the innate worth and surpassing nobility of moral virtue, as both political principle and end, to the most likely and comprehensive good outcome for an entire community, according to which the true worth and justice of actions, regimes, and men can be properly assessed.

Chapter Four: The Greatest, Composite Good and Intrinsic Dissonance of Justice

Besides the fairness of the disputants' claims, there is another, separate sense of justice that concerns the common good. Justice encapsulates the entire purpose and virtue of political community, and as such, must be good for both the city and its constituent parts (1253a35-39, 1282b14-23). As we saw, Aristotle first names and ranks regimes in Chapter Seven by distributing each applicable measure of quantity (one, few, or many) over the two variables of quality (correct and deviant) to arrive at six categories. While in my second chapter, I will examine these regimes mostly along the axis of size, in terms of how well each part of the city is able to rule, in my fourth chapter, I will recur to this classification; more in terms of its other, dichotomous variable of regimes' orientations, however, and the correctness of their ends. While the six-fold classification of regimes is helpful for conceptually sorting out terms for regimes based on determinations of aim and size, its applicability to understanding or partaking in actual political affairs and real-world classifications or regimes is soon shown to be severely limited.

All of the major parts of the city unavoidably share the assumption that ruling others is good for them. But since rule cannot be evenly divided and shared in a way that satisfies all claimants at once, the question over whose rule is most just is ultimately answered by determining whose *supposed* good is most aligned with the actual good of all. In my fourth chapter, I will review Aristotle's discussion of the competing visions for rule advanced by each faction in terms of its goodness and desirability, apart from any assessments of the rulers' merit or proficiency in each case – with a view only to the likely outcome of actually authorizing any one of them to rule the rest. Ultimately, the arguments of Book III reveal that the consequential fallout of various laws and regimes are the most politically just and authoritative factor by which we can judge them, leading to the elevation of the effectual common good above all other moral

claims that spring from the characteristic traits of the contending parties. Virtue, especially the most comprehensive virtue of justice, can never be bad for that which manifestly realizes, harbors, and wields it. By right, then, the good must take absolute priority over all conceptions and claims of fairness whenever they conflict. Accordingly, politics rarely concerns choosing between the good and bad, then, but between various partial and conflicting goods that differ in kind. This practical understanding of the common good that emerges from the discussion of Book III becomes the operative standard of Aristotle's subsequent analysis in Books IV through VI of the many particular situations, varieties, and admixtures of rule as found in actual cities of his time (cf. 1319b33-20a8).

In Book I of the *Politics*, Aristotle characterizes the natural development of political community by three distinct but overlapping ends: its members' material sustenance, friendship, and virtuous activation (1278b15 - 40). These three political purposes also constitute the common good as Aristotle first defines it in Book III – as the determining of the distinctive aim shared by all correct regimes and by which they are distinguished from deviant ones, which look only to the advantage of the rulers (1279a17 - 20). Aristotle initially derives this touchstone of correct rule – knowledge of the city's primary ends and the willingness to aim at them – from the older, “natural” view of rule, as a necessary public service of others' good (1279a10 - 16). And, of all the regimes considered, aristocracy at first seems to come out far ahead in regard to both learned discernment and good intent. But, as in the case of distributive justice, the common good consists of incompatible parts and significations, which must always somehow be ranked and balanced in every city at the same time. And each faction's favored regime would best provide only one part of the complete common good.

The demos and the wealthy also make essential, and even noble, contributions to the common good – contributions that virtue alone cannot provide (1282a11-41). So, by the same logic of desert, they are also owed something for their own invaluable assets, but the decent deserve more. And although the goods the democrats and oligarchs contribute are less good and noble, they are also more necessary. The democrats are especially essential since they supply the actual bulk and stuff of the city; their collective size and strength provide the embodiment of any regime and effectual realization of its commands, laws, and actions. Democrats do not really contribute much at all to the highest ends of living well, at which the aristocrats alone aim, but at the same time, are integral to providing the more necessary and common but far less good elements of a public peace and security that conduce to the general concord of a city and the friendships of its members.

Although the demos, oligarchs, and the decent all deserve a share in rule, in some proportion that might match the worth and contribution of their respective ends (to the extent it is possible to make incommensurable things at least *seem* proportional), the democrats are the most essential necessary part of the city, and contribute more to the most common of the common goods by ensuring long-lasting tranquility, security, and stability. This may not be as impressive or noble as the aristocrats' claims, but it is more necessary and a precondition for any other good or endeavor of the city. The arguments Aristotle presents on behalf of the democrats, for their collective virtue surpassing that of the few, depends on the analogy of their collective wealth and strength, as if virtuous qualities could be tallied and combined like quantifiable weights or currency. Despite their noble claim of freedom, the democrats seem to have no real case of superiority to put forward in terms of real virtue, and virtue is the highest and best part of the common good. But Aristotle says no contending faction is completely correct, and in fact the

exclusive rule of any of them is unjust and troublesome in its own way, including the rule of the most decent men over everyone else (1281a6-32).

The trouble with aristocracy is not its claims, principles, or aims, but the injustice of its effectual outcome in practice. Any attempt to turn politics toward the cultivation of higher moral character and freedom will be resisted by the greater part of any city. Because every city necessarily contains a multitude, any arrangement that grants special rights and duties of rule to a small, exclusive minority will always, at the same time, result in the city being “full of enemies” and perpetually at odds with itself (1281b25-34). Such a lopsided arrangement can only destroy the common good of the city’s inhabitants and citizens; virtue and security, the good life and mere life will be lost in any attempt to make moral virtue the central and sole aim of political life. The opportunity to live a virtuous life is the noblest aspect – but still *only* one aspect – of the complete common good. The political community also exists for the sake of friendship, as well as the mutual protection and subsistence of all.

Aristotle makes it clear that political actors, constantly judges of their own cases, will never accept these aristocratic arguments. Democrats in particular will tend to see any such appeals to natural inequality as oligarchic and tyrannical (1281a17-37). Although the city, at its best, does exist to enable those living in it to live most nobly, this end is often missed due to the more regular (and as legitimate) end of preserving the general security and welfare of the city - the city also exists for the sake of staying alive, and not just living well. So, even if we could in practice limit ruling to the best men, we would have to extend in some way the status of citizenship to those who would otherwise feel dishonored by their exclusion on grounds of their own inborn worth as freemen or their contribution to the city’s existence. The collective strength of the many, necessary for enforcing laws and defending the city, is as much a threat as it is a

valid claim of superiority, and in the end it is not the justice of the many's aims and abilities, but their injustice, that compels the prudent statesman to consider the common good as more urgent than realizing the claims of those who are more deserving, and the most common aspects of the common good as more urgent than the best. Therefore, in terms of the common good – the most authoritatively determinant standard of justice – the many always hold the most definitive claim to a share in rule by dint of the city's inextirpable dependence on them and their continued support, or at least begrudging acceptance, of the ruling order.

The demos is always owed, regardless of their inferior desert and collective capacities, at least some share in rule by the city in scale to their size, but for the city's sake rather than their own. After this convoluted, but inescapable resolution of these paradoxes of justice becomes fully apparent in Chapter Ten, Aristotle suggests (Chapter Eleven) the compromise of a mixed arrangement of rule that bestows a legally limited role of judgment for the democrats – who may lack the virtue and capacity for competent deliberation and command but can generally be relied upon as adequate jurymen, selectors, and auditors of officials' public actions and decrees in terms of their general consequence and outcome for the city (1281b21-2a41). But then Aristotle begins again in Chapter Twelve (1282b14-22); the general principle of equality, and equilibrium of ends it helps effect, is now acknowledged as an essential element in the partnership of any political community or regime, but only a mixed form of rule provides a place to all three factions as proportionally equal aggregate bodies in the operations of the regime. The centrality of maintaining this artificially imposed equality, even in the face of obvious natural inequalities among men, leads Aristotle to raise the topic of ostracism in Chapter Thirteen as a traditionally reliable way of preserving this basic equality (1282b21-32, 1283b13-4b26). Like the mixed polity, ostracism is said to be both just and unjust, but also useful and necessary. It is undeniably

unjust to the best, most deserving man who is removed from the city, but just in regard to the remaining citizens' common good, to the extent that it preserves their community and its established formal structure. In practice, all lasting regimes are somehow mixed and could be categorized as polities, or modified democracies. And while all existing regimes necessarily contain democratic features, no pure democracy or oligarchy can last very long either. But, at the same time, there seems to be no actual, perfectly mixed or balanced models of polity to which Aristotle can refer. Carthage seems to come closest of all, which is maintained by an efficient emigration and colonial program by which the demographics of the whole can be managed (1273b16-20).

Aristotle excludes monarchy as an element of the mixed regime, and delays his discussion of the king's claims to rule until the final chapters of Book III. The rest of Book III consists of a consideration of the justice of a regime and community's necessary condition of a ruling republican spirit of equality between ruling citizens, and also between irreconcilable factions, in light of the resulting injustice toward the most deserving individual in the city, in a discussion about kingship. In this final adjudication of Book III, Aristotle ends up once again concluding that an aristocracy, composed of equally virtuous men, is the best form of political rule imaginable. But the preceding case made for that regime, against the claims of the most outstandingly virtuous man overall, are no more sound or valid than the same claims of equality and collective excellence that the democrats make against them. All of the claims in support of aristocracy point to and support the superior case for the kingship of the best, most able and surpassingly virtuous man of all – but even in the best possible circumstances of the ideal city where every member is decent, it is difficult to imagine that this arrangement would be most

conducive to the best possible way of life and happiness of all those decent subjects who would otherwise share rule as equals in the true king's stead (cf. *NE* 1096b21-7a2).

Chapter Five: A Reluctant Republicanism

Aristotle is no spokesman of the people, or true, full-throated, wool-dyed democrat. Nor can he be said to be a strongly committed partisan of any specific political faction in contention and under consideration. Of course, by writing a treatise on the topic, raising the questions that this requires, Aristotle is already engaged in political activity of a sort, and can, therefore, be understood as a sort of political activist with his own agenda and political aims that we might ascribe to him on the basis of his text. However, Aristotle's party is not represented here among the contenders for rule in Book Three. His stipulated endorsement of the multitude's claims is complicated by the fact that he advises every city and statesman to aim, not at democracy *per se*, but specifically, at the many's mixed and moderated influence in as mixed and least democratic an arrangement possible for their circumstances or community (cf. 1319a37-b32). The overwhelming power of the demos and its cause suffers from no shortage of spokesmen, upstanding heroes, and selfless heroes to aid in its ascension, but has a much greater need for statesmen who can duly recognize when and how to relent or resist the many's just, but detrimental, political encroachment when necessary or possible.

Aristotle would be the first to admit the shortcomings in competence and merit of the demos in terms of competence and merit, and that giving them an inch of entitlement is to give in to miles of long-run popular measures and endeavors; he argues nonetheless for the recurring need to give them at least that inch, albeit qualified on all sides by good laws and strong institutions, going so far as to put the same arguments for popular rule in the mouths of spirited

partisans of aristocracy, in opposition to the rule of the single worthiest man most suited and able to do so for the good of all (1263b15-28, 1267a36-b8, 1309b18-34, cf. *NE* 1134a23-29). While the correctly oriented form of rule found in the polity seems more practically imitable in most times and places, it also does not aim at or hit upon the common good intentionally, but as the outcome of its amenable design, balance, and proportional mix of elements. When no extremism or fanaticism disrupts and spreads harm to all, there results the bare minimum of common good – polity is least good of the correct, but seems the only one any possible city can realistically imitate or aim at. No regime can be ruled by and dedicated to true virtue. At best, one might hope for the independent development of moral and intellectual virtue among those few members left free enough to reflect upon and react to the needs and shortcomings of common life, through the chance combination of the laws, relations, and experiences of those most able to cultivate a moral character that commands its own authority as its own, independent activity and end. But if the mediocrity of mere tranquility and preservation is the best we can ever accomplish through the comprehensive, ultimate authority of the city, then rulers, legislators, and cities can never deliver the real education or expert soul-craft necessary to make them good or happy.

In general, the demos alone retains the more “natural” outlook of the first citizens postulated in Chapter Six, and usually has enough good sense to allow others to take care of common affairs, being more inclined to rest content with their smaller amount of leisure and diminished share in citizenship and office than the ambitious few – so long as they do not perceive the greater goods, honor, and freedom of ruling officials as being at their own expense or disproportionate to the officials’ moral worth and job performance (*Pol* 1267a35-b8, 1308b24-9a14, cf. 1261a22-32, 1286a36-b20). It is usually some individual member of the elite

who, out of his own personal ambition to attain his rightful portion of power, acts as demagogue or champion of the people, stirring them up and turning them against his fellow peers by calling attention to the regime's excesses of power and aggrandizement (1320a4-38). Of course, demagogues can also rise to power from within oligarchic regimes – pitting the larger number of less wealthy citizens against the few very rich ones in a similar manner and for the same basic reasons (1308a10-24, 1321a31-b1). And over time, the greater inclusiveness of regimes is only made possible and sustained by the exclusion and exploitation of an even larger and diverse population of non-citizens, and so-called citizens within the city walls, because regardless of the principles to which regimes adhere, there remains in every city an ongoing, inescapable need for diversity in the ways of life of its members that presumes and reinforces inequalities among its members. Increasing the number of citizens always requires the further expansion of institutionalized, subservient misery for an even greater swath of disenfranchised inhabitants in order to sustain freemen's augmented freedom and participation in ruling the city. Therefore, universal, absolute democratic freedom and equality is never actually arrived at, but always only approximated by a process of decline and yet accelerated as the city grows beyond the scope of its naturally governable bounds, culminating in its splintering or degeneration into another sort of community altogether. Human affairs and collective endeavors will always tend toward the lowest common denominator, because there is no dependable natural distinction on which limits and exclusions can reliably be made.

Although Aristotle defends democratic justice as an inextricable, central, driving force of political affairs and rule, it is on these same grounds that political life falls short of the best life for man. Democracy is very far from being the rule of the entire city, as democrats claim. More precisely and in practice, it is the rule of one least expertly competent faction of the city acting

on behalf of their own principles, friends, and interests at the expense of the rest (1276a13-16, 1279b5-10). Aristotle demonstrates the extent to which the democratic claims are just, and even portrays the many as offering some unique collective capacity for judgment of others' political performance in the ruling offices, but he makes clear that their claims are only just in the most vulgar sense, and that the complete political authority their principles mandate is practically equivalent to the most volatile and insecure anarchic sort of tyranny. Pure democracy is unjust to the extent that it destroys the political partnership of similars that limited, mixed democracy is meant to preserve.

In the process of defending the justice of conceding to the demos and demonstrating the pervasive power of the multitude's claims, Aristotle casts aspersion on the apparently pure and perfect nobility and goodness of the city's justice and authority. Ultimately, the negative case for democracy contained in Book III is meant to lower the esteem in which Aristotle's readers may hold political community, and to tarnish some of the apparent charm and nobility of living an active public life devoted to the political cause of justice. Book III is meant to be practical, then, on both a public and personal level. For statesmen and prospective statesmen, it helps put some of the recurring disputes and claims of politics in a larger perspective that reveals certain inherent limits in human nature and our conceptions of justice, lowering their expectations and moderating their ambitions in the process. And for some, this debunking of what the city and justice would seem to promise will be enough reason to turn from the apparent self-sufficient freedom of politics altogether, in order to dedicate themselves to discovering and living for the more certain, satisfying good found through private pursuits, like philosophy.

Aristotle's case for the more aristocratically palatable, neutral anonymity of a polity ruled by law, with a large middling element, oriented toward maintaining the most commonly enjoyed

goods of preservation, peace, and stability, is made on the basis of the political justice of the city's common good. The priority of the city's good, however, and Aristotle's partisanship of whatever regime or laws best maintain it, hinges on the claim that it alone provides the conditions to raise man above necessity in order to develop his full nature and more completely cultivate and realize the good of his complete nature. Aristotle stands by this claim, made in the grandiose opening chapters of both the *Ethics* and *Politics*, that the city is man's highest end and natural home, in which he might bring forth and attain nature's own wishes for himself, by his own agency, made self-sufficient in the city; how this is true, however, turns out to be far from the initial impression given in Book I, of a city that is ever formed and maintained with this highest end as its exclusive, or even its primary conscious aim. Rather, it is due to its low aims and relatively modest achievements and mundane focus that a city can create a space for men's free development, in both moral and intellectual virtues, that can become their own honorable ends and activities within the scope of prerogative provided to some under the comfortable protection of an imperfect, incomplete, but strong and stable political realm.

Due to the inherently inexact character of his science, art, and language there are few hard and fast reliable constants, or neat and tidy practical distinctions by which the engaged statesman can orient himself in his task of distributing the few goods and honors and the many attending disadvantages and dishonors at his disposal (cf. *NE* 1094b2-12). And yet, the comprehensive, self-sufficient fulfillment and nobility of virtue, which "must be set down" as the city's "truly" defining final end, and to be seen as promising, is possible for only a slim few – inadvertently, and only under the imperfect, unjust compromise of a mixed regime that incorporates the many and allows their ever-creeping claims and aims to take root (*Pol* 1280b1-13, 1280b40-1a4). Although Aristotle defends the common goods of stability, concord, and

security as the proper and justly orienting ends of political deliberation, the greater unity secured by a city being ruled and ordered more like one large, self-sufficient household is not worth the cost of losing the individualizing equal freedom and claims for the good that essentially define what the city is and aims at (1261a29-15).

In spite of the inherent incoherence and irrationality of political life, it is worth defending. For Aristotle, a politically active life is not equivalent to human flourishing or self-realization, but it does provide human beings with the sort of experience and examples that can help them to figure out what they truly want and can hope get out of politics. As an expression of man's natural urge for freedom and self-realization, politics is an impressive but insufficient attempt to transcend our nature. As such, its ultimate value is that it points beyond itself – to the more complete and satisfying, private life of leisure and contemplation. The city gives a space for man's moral development, individual excellence, and leisurely pursuits of happiness – not by its nature or even the intentions of its rulers and laws, but incidentally -- for those who are most free from the duties of ruling or being ruled. The best end of man differs from the city's necessary concerns for its strength and capacity for effectual actions, but that does not mean they are strictly incompatible. Although men's pursuit of private good does not serve the city's practical ends directly, like political virtue, it does contribute to civilizing and calming men's passions; domestic tranquility, moreover, and the strength, stability, prosperity, and contentment secured by a city's aggressive martial policies and military are necessary to provide some freedom in which different forms of individual flourishing can emerge and take shape. Aristotle recognizes the tremendous degree to which the community and laws necessarily shape and determine individual character and actions, but insists on the possibility of some regimes providing conditions for individuals to free themselves from their regimes, and even judge them

from a wider vantage. This possibility, of attaining some larger perspective beyond one's own regime allows Aristotle, an insightful critic of a purer sort of democracy of a different age, to offer a higher vantage from which to ascertain better the root basis for our own commitment today, to both popular rule and its limits.

Because Aristotle's defense of democracy rests upon certain intractable facts of political life and human association, rather than metaphysics, biology or mere prejudice, as some have postulated, the inegalitarian views that these commentators have correctly ascribed to him do not lead him to condemn the demos and its claims of equality outright, but to provide us with better, more plausibly compelling and solid grounds for democracy than the inherited and unexamined conventional opinions human beings absorb through communal habit. Aristotle's theoretical account and defense of democracy is superior to those commonly made today, then, precisely because he does not begin in acceptance of democratic principles, but by bringing the many flaws and dangers of majority rule to light. Although it falls far short of Aristotle's own portrayal of the best regime, he justifies democratic rule – but not for the low-grade political virtue and republican communion it fosters, or for the psychic fulfillment that individuals might gain from participating in it, but as most necessarily just in proportion to the necessary, incurable element of all possible political orders. Accordingly, for Aristotle, the justice of democratic claims, principles, and rule does not simply call for the unlimited moral authority and unmitigated, universal expansion of ruling rights to the greatest number, as many political theorists suggest today, but for its proper management and containment (cf. 1319b33-15).

Chapter Two: According to Ability

“Birth and blood do not make one an American.”

-Barack Obama

“Equal opportunity means everyone will have a fair chance at being incompetent.”

-Laurence J. Peter

Occasionally in Book III, Aristotle considers controversies of rule and citizenship solely in terms of the faculties, knack, and know-how necessary to rule well and be a good citizen, or what we mean by the term “competence.” Bestowing rule upon whoever is best at it and thereby most able to benefit the city and everyone else in it would seem to be the most straightforward and correct way of distributing all rights and offices in a political community, especially since political competence is always defined and guided by that particular community’s purposes. This qualification for political rule is also congruous with customary opinion about hiring or paying a practitioner in any other art or expertise – that those who are best at producing or serving the final purposes of that task ought to be assigned to it (*Pol* 1273b2-3, cf. 1282a7-23, *NE* 1094a1-b12). Since it seems proper, good, and just to everyone that only the most capacious craftsman available and trained for a specific task should be hired to do it, regardless of his family, character, or past, it might also seem that expert skill should be an even greater and singular consideration in assigning the most comprehensive, authoritative task of managing the most comprehensive, authoritative community. And certainly, all factions that contend for rule could at least agree on the general precept that no one who neglects the true good of the city should be considered a competent citizen or ruler. But competence is a

problematic political standard because it is defined by and can only be assessed in light of the true ends of the city, which are even more contentious.

This chapter presents the advantages and disadvantages of applying the standard of competence to the political distribution of rights and offices as it arises in various discussions throughout Book III. Competence is the category in which even virtue itself must be conceived from the standpoint of political utility, as a means rather than its own end, and as an advantageous trait for a city's citizens and rulers to have for the sake of the city's good, rather than their own sake or the noble itself (cf. 1280b4-13). Moral virtue and prudence are essential to competent rule, but are not the whole of it; complete competence includes both more and less than virtue, while certain aspects of complete virtue have no bearing on, and might even impede, good rule (cf. 1309a32-b14). This standard, which Aristotle proposes to resolve some disputes about justice and the good, is geared more to the outcome of chosen actions in light of their purpose than their nobility. When judged in terms of expert knowledge and keen skills and discernment of the good, democracy (which, in effect, amounts to the rule of the unequipped, uneducated, and un leisured poor) falls far short of the proposed rule by one or a few able and trustworthy men. But in the course of answering it, Aristotle indicates that the question of who can rule best is insufficient for determining which faction or individual should rule the entire city. Expertise and familiarity with the best possible laws, policies, and actions is not equivalent to competent rule, which depends even more on the ability to command on the basis of passions and opinions those who are unable to rule themselves or others well. And in revealing that political competence can only be completed collectively, from outside the political expert himself, Aristotle's discussion also establishes practical grounds for the general enfranchisement and inclusion of the demos in the rule of a city.

In the first section of this chapter, I will consider Aristotle's rejection of the older families' and nobles' appeal to their natural superiority, as descendents of the original founders and inhabitants of the city, as insufficient evidence of good citizenship, which owes its goodness to citizens' aims and actions rather than blood or legend. In the second section, I will turn to showing how Aristotle also appeals to political competence in order to modify the democrats' own standard of legitimacy as effectual power over others. When he relies on this standard of good citizenship and rule, Aristotle initially seems to presume that the common good at which good rule aims is an end easily identified and agreed upon by all contending factions. But Aristotle himself indicates the problems with this presumption even as he uses it to illustrate the inadequacies of prevailing political standards used by existing regimes. Both parties in the dispute over legitimate citizenship are only partly correct because they both tend to presume some automatic sanctity or nobility in the status and title of citizen. Accordingly, Aristotle assents to only a part of each of their claims: whoever actually possesses the rights and title of citizenship is correctly called a citizen, but nothing prevents the citizenship and exercise of political authority enjoyed by actual citizens from being unjust. Citizenship does not preclude injustice. The questions concerning what ought to constitute political legitimacy and who ought to be deemed a citizen, then, are not adequately answered by the widely held beliefs or customary policies on which citizens base their rights of participation, but only in reference to the actual, resulting quality of their participatory actions as members of their regime.

In the next three sections I will discuss Aristotle's conception and application of this rational but unconventional standard to the different regimes of the few and the many. Complete competence involves two distinct elements: the correct orientation and knowledge of what to do, and the capacity for doing it. Later in Book III, Aristotle attempts to defend the many's ability to

lead, discriminate, and judge, then presents the mixed regime as an acceptable political compromise between the few and the many. This apologetic defense fails to vindicate any form of democracy as contributing to good rule, but it does connote the essential impetus of effective political authority that the sheer size of the demos can provide. In the end, the standard of competence points beyond itself, since complete competence in political affairs includes whatever more than mere expertise and virtue is necessary to achieve the best for a city. In terms of the native capacities for virtue, reason, and discernment, democracy is the least competent form of rule, due to the necessarily poor education, debilitating occupations, and passions of the majority in any city (1273a20-25). But, at the same time, the demos is most essential for supplying the sheer bulk and strength necessary to carry out rulers' deliberative commands, through the effectual enforcement of their consent.

The many's consensual cooperation, necessary for realizing a modicum of effectually competent rule in the city, is contingent on the many's sharing and participating in rule, which constitutes a built-in obstacle to the direct influence of expertise on political affairs. In the final two sections of this chapter, I will address this paradoxical feature of political competence, which would seem to preclude any possibility of truly knowledgeable rulers ever coming to power or ruling well in light of that knowledge, in any existing political community. Assessing the relative goodness and justice of different regimes, then, largely depends on which can actually secure active authority over a particular community at a given time. And attaining the more basic and necessary element of complete competence – by the ability to enforce their authority – requires rulers to court the many's opinion constantly and win their consent by endorsing and incorporating their inexpert imprudence. Political competence, then, is not an adequate political standard, because no actual regime could simultaneously possess both the

clear knowledge of the good for all and the ability to realize it. The impracticality of this rational standard for the assignment of ruling offices is due primarily to the fact that offices are seen as the only rightful honors in the city that can satisfactorily recognize the noble dignity and worth of an individual. Aristotle's sensible standard for settling this core political dispute, therefore, helps demonstrate the innate, irrational attachments and opinions that inform the political community as a partnership of self-sufficiency. Because it has moral ends, the city cannot be ordered and ruled on the basis of mere rational utility, but must appeal to common moral principles of desert as its justification, in order to gain the consensual contribution of the many to the regime's effectual, legitimate authority for meeting even the most basic needs or aims of its members, whether good or bad.

Rejection of Oligarchic Legitimacy

Competence seems like a commonsensical, obvious consideration in assessing who should have and do things in every other facet of life. However, Aristotle cannot simply posit the most straightforward standard as a relevant qualification for distributing rule and guiding political discourse and action as a purely theoretical abstraction, outside any context or prior principles of distribution through a dialectic examination of the arguments commonly advanced concerning who is most correctly called a citizen and of which regime. In practice, the question over rule only arises in the course of the already ongoing struggle between parties sharing a common identity, fate, and opinions, decisively defined and determined by their common conventions. To raise competence as a basis for resolving the question of who should rule as it actually arises in the course of political affairs, in regard to a particular practical controversy or crisis, requires us first to assume a set of circumstances under which citizens would feel compelled to put aside

customary procedure and distinctions by which they assign political authority and office, and be willing to entrust their good to whoever seems best able to secure it for them.

In political affairs, these essential questions do not actually become central to political discourse and serious deliberation except during such times of crisis, often preceding or following a change in the regime, when certain practical particulars force the issue to the fore; men are then forced to look to first principles and solid grounds by which they can coherently define, order and justify their actions and themselves as citizens and rulers. Accordingly, Aristotle first suggests competence as a standard by which political disputes should be resolved in regard to the specific controversy between new and old citizens that often arises following upon a revolution or expansion of the existing regime (1274a31-8b5). While trying to clarify the common presumptions of the disputants, Aristotle shifts the focus of their dispute from issues of origin and desert to considerations of outcomes and the good.

Aristotle raises the question of what the polis is at the beginning of Book III by invoking the particular controversy over whether a city remains responsible for the deeds of a prior regime after a new regime has taken power (1274b30-38). Because the most apparent features of a city – its basic population, history, location, look, and layout – are not fundamentally altered by a revolution in its regime, some argue that the new regime remains responsible for the actions of the previous one. This argument presumes that the city is somehow a self-perpetuating common identity and whole that can abide any changes in its form or content, just as a river is considered the same river despite the fact that it is never the same body of the same water at any given moment (1274b32-35, 1276a33-38). Against this view, others argue that, because a revolution in regimes changes a city's most essentially defining form and purpose, a new regime renders it most essentially a new city altogether (1276a40-b5). The first argument that a city essentially

remains the same entity, no matter who happens to rule it at a given time, echoes Aristotle's own assertions at the beginning of Book I that every city is a naturally all-encompassing, persisting coalescence of ends that is ontologically prior to and determinant of all its parts, which in turn are wholly subordinate to it and most optimally ordered according to its encompassing, collective purposes (1252a1-6, 1252b27-a3). Aristotle apparently makes the second argument – that a new regime essentially changes a city – on behalf of those who consider any undemocratic arrangements equivalent to tyranny (1276a6-14).

Aristotle simultaneously poses two different ways of approaching the controversy – asking both who ought to be and who actually is a citizen – and initially focuses only on the second question. Strictly speaking, in every city a citizen is he who most of all rules, or shares in the city's authoritative power, through the right to deliberate or adjudicate in a public office (1275a22-24, 1275b2-3, 1275b13-21, 1278a14-34). Aristotle's precise and descriptive definition of the citizen, as the most empowered and entitled member of a political community, seems to support the views of democrats, who identify citizenship with effectual rule and ruling with freedom. The democrats seem to derive the legitimacy of their own citizenship from the plain fact that they actually possess and freely wield rights, and that no one has an absolute legitimate right to rule over non-slaves as non-citizens. The democrats claim that only their understanding of citizenship, grounded upon the fundamental equal freedom from bondage, expands rights of authority to everyone, and that only such an arrangement based upon the universal suffrage of associates can truly be considered the autonomous rule of an entire self-same city over itself and the deeds done in its name (1275b5-7). This view – that only the shared rule of the equally free is legitimately *political* in the purest sense – is the root of the democrats' denial of their regime's culpability for the actions of preceding tyrants or oligarchs, who ruled with a view only to their

own good (1276a6-19). But Aristotle soon elaborates on who citizens actually are by mentioning another feature of conventional citizenship everywhere: “As a matter of usage, however, a citizen is defined as a person [born] from parents who are both citizens, and not just one, whether the father or the mother, and some go even further back, seeking two or three or more forebears.”

In everyday parlance and practice, actual citizens with actual political rights are normally designated as those whose parents were actual citizens. The opening question of who is and is not a citizen in fact and by right becomes salient in political practice in conflicts between a pre-existing, traditionally defined citizenry and newly sanctioned citizens (cf. 1275b34-37). These groups of old and new citizens roughly line up with the two main factions that emerge and dominate the affairs in every city – the few, rich nobles and the crude multitude of poor, laboring freemen. As Aristotle says later, the claims of wealth and virtue are implied in the claim to be wellborn (1283a36-37, 1294a21-23). It is more the old guard, then – the party of the well-established, landed few – with the status, leisure, and equipment necessary to become virtuous and call themselves aristocrats due to their parentage – who tend to deny the equal standing of the more recently naturalized many (cf. *Rhet* 1387a15-b11, 1391a12-19). The oligarchs deny democratic citizenship as genuine citizenship based on the way in which the many gained their status – within living memory and by fiat – rather than according to the older, venerable laws and custom of birthright that sanction their own claims of superiority. Granting or seizing of citizenship by edict or force cheapens the very dignity of the city and the citizenship the multitude clamors for like children grasping at shiny objects without any understanding or appreciation of what they are. Aristotle attempts to resolve the thorny issue of defining citizenship by appealing to a less tendentious observation about rulers, whose title and status is

not as widely revered as citizens' (1276a2-5).

And yet even a further perplexity might be raised by someone as to whether one who is not justly a citizen is a citizen at all, the assumption being that 'unjust' [*adikos*] and 'false' [*pseudos*] amount to the same thing. But since we also see certain unjust rulers, who we assert do rule but unjustly, and since the citizen is defined by a kind of office – for someone who participates in that sort of office is a citizen, as we said – it is clear that these too must be admitted to be citizens.

The reason that both questions, of who is and ought to be a citizen, seem equally controversial is due to the widespread sense of sanctity and moral meaning commonly attached to the term "citizen," as opposed to the more neutral and morally ambiguous title of "ruler," which lacks many of the same inherent connotations or implications of moral standing. References to illegitimate or unjust citizenship sounds like outrageous or oxymoronic nonsense to anyone who takes citizenship seriously – as absurd as calling someone a corrupt nobleman, enslaved freeman, or cowardly brave. From the perspective of the patriotic republican citizen who most cares about this dispute, a person is truly a citizen or he is not, and it is offensively ignoble to say that someone could truly be a citizen but is so unjustly. The reason for men's resistance to this use of such terms, Aristotle tells us, is that people commonly insist on presuming that what is just has the same effectual power in the world as what is real, as it ought to have. A serious citizen, especially an aristocratic one, would be incapable of separating the two questions about rightful and actual citizenship, because to him, in the most decisive sense, what is simply right is more real than any actual contingent happenstance or situation and,

therefore, the only guide necessary for the practice and science of politics under any circumstances (cf. 1255a3-b12). According to this view, if someone becomes a citizen in an illegitimate way, it is as incorrect (*pseudos*) as it is wrong (*adikos*) to say he truly is a real citizen.

Even those who cannot abide a similar descriptive qualifier on something so revered as citizenship are willing to admit that there are unjust rulers, who undeniably rule, but do so unjustly. This is perhaps because citizenship is operationally understood as something delimited and shared with others, lending it a general respectability and moral connotation as a selfless but free way of life, directed at governing oneself as much as others, while rulers are more commonly seen as capable of being either good or bad, just or unjust and blamed by some or all of the ruled as unchecked, authoritarian meddlers in a way that “citizens” are not. Even contenders for rule blame current or past “rulers” and regimes, but few ever blame “citizens” in the same way, as unjustly so, without besmirching the name, since that would be akin to calling them and their rule dignified or legitimate in the same breath – as though we were declaring noble and good men to be noble and good, but unjustly so. However, Aristotle has already defined citizenship as a mode of ruling and asserted that, in practice, those who most of all actually realize and wield political authority are most correctly called citizens. Aristotle is able to get around the moral undertone of citizenship even while drawing attention to it by relying on this less specific and categorically irrespective aspect of citizenship, which at the same time distinguishes the citizen from every non-citizen member of the city over whom he rules *qua* ruler. According to the first descriptive definition of citizens derived from colloquial usage, as those who hold some office or capacity in the regime, and thereby partake in rule, we should be able to say the same thing about them: there are some who are indeed citizens, but unjustly.

Therefore, Aristotle responds to the wellborn, we must admit that even unjust citizens are actual citizens – something that seemed impossible according to the account of the natural city in Book I. Here at the beginning of Book III, in his first adjudication between old and new citizens, Aristotle acknowledges the possible justice of the claims put forward by the established oligarchic families of the city, but seems to have sided with the more recently empowered democrats on the facts of the matter.

Yet even in this concession to the oligarchs, that some who are in fact citizens are unjustly so, Aristotle seems to deny their standard of legitimacy. A legitimate citizen, like the legitimate ruler, is one who has a just claim to his position and comes by it in a just manner. But, rather than rely on accounts of ancient and recent history, myths, opinions, or inherited understandings of propriety and inherent superiority, Aristotle seems, for now, willing to disregard all considerations of entitlement except the ability of different factions to rule well. After dismissing any group's claim of authority on the basis of their ancestry or prior entitlement, Aristotle quietly shifts the emphasis on how a citizen or ruler acquired his authority to how his authority is used. Even unjust rulers are still called rulers, Aristotle points out, because they do in fact rule. But they are properly called unjust rulers because of how they use their power as rulers, not because of how they acquired it; they actually rule, but they “rule unjustly” (1276a2-3).

Considering the matter strictly in terms of the ability to rule well, a legitimate ruler should be considered an unjust ruler if he rules in an unjust way, and likewise, a ruler who attained his position in an unjust manner but still rules justly is more correctly called a just ruler. And this more precise identification holds as much for any newly designated citizens, who have acquired their rights on untraditional grounds with no ancestral ties to the city's history, as it

does for rulers who acquire their office through unconventional means. In other words, it is more correct to distinguish just and unjust rulers and citizens on the basis of their actual actions as a *de facto* ruler or citizen, instead of following the customary manner of automatically designating legitimacy on the basis of birthplace, lineage, or protocol.

Aristotle cites Gorgias' quip about Larisaeans being “Larisa makers,” who made citizens out of their artisans as readily as their artisans produced pots, to raise the issue of the city's origins and the status of its first inhabitants (1275b22-33). A new citizen might be held to have been made a citizen unjustly, or not truly a citizen, when his father was a slave or a foreigner, because it is commonly presumed that legitimate citizenship is somehow natural or divinely sanctioned – that the gods ordained that we or our ancestors were born here, or that different peoples are naturally distinct and cannot simply be made like pots by other mortals when needed (1275b35-37). But, Aristotle points out, it is only by conventional fiat that anyone ever becomes a member of any community – a fact that seems to get covered up over time, compounded by traditions imparted and sanctified by the regular cycle of generational transmission and turnover. Aristotle almost immediately raises the insufficiency of origins as any sort of touchstone or standard for defining citizenship by citing the concrete example of Cleisthenes’ expansion of citizenship to slaves and foreigners after the expulsion of the tyrants in Athens (1275b34-37). The implication of Gorgias’ statement is that the claims by which men first made themselves citizens were as contingent and baseless as citizenship bestowed or usurped today. All citizenship would ultimately be seen as resting upon arbitrary, unfair usurpation if we could trace claims of parentage back far enough. Since every city has an origin, the definition of citizenship as a birthright would not apply to those who were the first citizens, thereby rendering all subsequent claims of citizenship on the basis of birth groundless.

Although most people equate the truly real with the truly just, Aristotle indicates with his reference to Gorgias' statement and common custom that there is no necessary connection between them: if something is truly just it is not necessarily possible, and if possible, perhaps not truly just (1275b38-a2, cf. 1252b7-9, 1254a13-b3). If justice cannot be fully realized even by the best arrangement of rule possible, and human affairs always necessarily fall short of what is truly just, because right's power in actual human affairs is limited by the constraints of reality itself, then justice and reality are always fundamentally distinct, and it *is* always contradictory to equate what is truly just with what is it real. Although his statements on these matters concur with the aristocrats' insistent distinction between justice and practice, Aristotle's own conceptual separation of reality and right is more complete and avoids the fallacious conclusion that complete justice is somehow more real or true than what is actually possible.

Aristotle's tacit correction of the oligarchs' views of legitimate citizenship exposes the irrationality of the prevailing beliefs of legitimacy that are premised upon the unfounded, unspoken hope that what is real can be defined by what is truly just. The same belief in the power of justice often leads human beings to form a mindless, habitual attachment to the customary order of things and to readily accept the authority of those fortunate enough to rise to a prominent political position legitimately, even if they rule badly, while at the same time decrying the one who rules well, merely because he had to overcome certain obstacles of convention in order to have the same opportunity. But in both cases the more correct and reasonable standard is the same: how good a ruler or citizen is at being ruler or citizen upon obtaining his title, rather than the original impetus or justificatory grounds of its acquisition.

The standard of competence as a basis for determining rule and citizenship constitutes a rejection of oligarchic and aristocratic entitlement, but as we will see in the following section,

just as severely undermines the claims customarily made by the opposing party of democrats.

Rejection of Democratic Legitimacy

In deciding the first question, of whether a city under a new regime is the same or different, Aristotle sides with the democrats, that it is a fundamental change, and so it would seem to follow that the difference in regime when a city's debts were incurred is the crucial consideration in ascribing obligation, but not on the same grounds.¹

¹ Of course, Aristotle does not simply state such a final conclusion. Instead, he puts it off indefinitely. In the meantime, over the course of Book III, it becomes apparent that, although no regime has an absolute obligation to honor the debts of prior ones, no regime is simply not obligated to answer for what prior rulers did in the city's name, either. The decisive factor of ascribing the just transference of duties in each particular case would seem to depend on whether fulfilling these prior obligations would be good for both the new regime and the entire city it has reordered and adorns.

However, Aristotle concludes this discussion with the democratic assertion that the old debts of the old regime that they have replaced belong to "the tyrant" alone, and not the city as a whole, which they claim they alone represent. This raises a point that soon becomes clearer. In general, the responsibility for expenses incurred by a previous regime tends to flow in only one direction – toward the consolidation of debt's ownership and management. A monarch who wrests power from the rule of many or a few will more likely be held accountable for the loans made in his city's name than a new oligarchy or democracy that replaces him would be held for his debts – even when they were incurred for the sake of their own good or that of the city.

In financial matters, at least, the democrats claim that it was not they but their illegitimate, self-appointed leaders who owe the old debts made in their city's name, but that they, the people, most essentially constitute the true underlying identity of the city as a whole; this carries a lot more weight than would a newly formed oligarchy or tyrant who would eschew the debts of the old regime on the grounds that it was not the proper rulers, but the ruled who illegitimately put the city in debt, without the full deliberative, sober consent of its properly ruling element. In both cases, the hypothetical shirkers of debt speak from a vantage of established power, but only the democrats can more plausibly claim no responsibility for an older inegalitarian regime, since the grounds of their authority are based on a conflation of majority rule with the rule of all. Kings, aristocrats, tyrants, and oligarchs, however, all claim their legitimacy as the rightful rulers of the ruled, for whom they are responsible by nature, and would therefore owe the old debts, according to their own presumptions of natural authority, in the same way a master would be held accountable for the debts of a slave he claims as his own racking up debts in the name of his household.

For if the city is a type of partnership and if it is a partnership of citizens in a regime, if the regime becomes and remains different in kind, it would seem to be necessary that the city also is not the same. At any rate, just as we assert that a chorus which is at one time comic and at another tragic is different even though the human beings in it are often the same, it is similar with any other partnership and any compound when the compound takes a different form. For example, we would say that the mode is different even when the notes are the same, if it is at one time Dorian and at another Phrygian. If this is indeed the case, it is evident that it is looking to the regime above all that the city must be said to be the same, the name by which it is called can be different or the same no matter whether the same human beings inhabit it or altogether different ones. (1276a40-b13)

For Aristotle, the matter is not resolved simply by determining which regime more legitimately speaks for the entire city than any others, because a change in regime fundamentally changes what the entire city is in the first place, by altering its members' perceptions, modes of life, and ends, just as the reordering of a chorus for a different purpose makes it an essentially different chorus. Political community cannot exist apart from or prior to some particular regime that rules, orders, and defines it as the city it is. It is not a matter of who sings which parts, but the end to which a community is dedicated that most distinguishes it from other communities. According to Aristotle, then, a change in regime is not so much like fresh water in the same riverbed as it is akin to changing a river's form and course by artifice or flood.

The analogy of the city as a chorus especially suits the democrats, since a chorus represents a sort of conglomerate of equals in which each member has a voice (1276b3-6). But despite the apparent nobility of such a conception of “the city” as a composite whole, Aristotle denies both the possibility and desirability of this political ideal (cf. 1252a24-25, 1253a19-31). Aristotle does not accept the idea that any regime can better speak in an unbiased way on behalf of an entire city any more than any particular mode of music could embody all music. No regime actually unifies the members of a city in terms of their best interest or true intent because these remain as separate as our naturally individual bodies and minds. The democrats presume to speak on behalf of the whole city because only democracy’s principles expand citizenship to every freeman. But because the virtuous and the wealthy are outnumbered in every city, democracy is, in effect, the rule of the many poor, a necessary, distinct segment of any city, with its own shared interests and aims. Therefore, all rule is partisan and can only be directed toward a limited range of ends, including democracy, which speaks for only one part of the city and acts on behalf of the whole no more than oligarchy or tyranny (1276a10-17, 1283a26-30, 1280a9-11).

Furthermore, because a city is composed of individual human beings who necessarily differ in character, vocation, and aims, it can never exist or function as a completely homogeneous, unified whole (1261a22-37, 1266b34-a7). Even a chorus, Aristotle points out, requires different roles and talents in order to harmonize as one musical body (1277a5-12). In the same way that voice alone does not constitute a capacity for speech or reason, let alone choral unison, speech and reason are necessary but insufficient for the formation of a human political community, because it depends on the formally structured differentiation and union between its members. This is not naturally spontaneous to human beings, but only provided and maintained by authorized law and custom, as provided and maintained by a city that is not

naturally spontaneous for us (cf. 1253a29-38). Political community, discourse, and activity require the pre-existing, conventionally sanctioned and accepted distribution of goods. Natural gifts like the shared capacity for speech, although necessary for public concord, deliberation, and adjudication, are not enough to make a city function – it is necessary to introduce fundamental inequalities through a division of labor (1328b15-23). If everyone sang all the same parts at once or only as they please, then they could never achieve any harmony of interests, aims, or actions. Some specialization is required even in a society composed only of equals – which in turn necessitates hierarchical relations to develop among its members (1291a22-b2). Those who do give voice to the city through speeches, laws, and actions should each know his own part and how it contributes to the whole song that is to be sung. For the sake of effective rule, even pure democracy requires taking turns in office and the transfer of greater authority to some, while others obey and busy themselves with narrower tasks (1261a21-b9). But democrats' tendency to insist on equal shares in rule as the touchstone of legitimacy limits the degree to which a city can ever be governed by expert knowledge, since expertise and the widespread deference to it require strict specialization and the unequal distribution and rank of goods and authorities. The conditions required for the greatest degree of equality, therefore, practically negate any possibility of reliably competent rule.

Aristotle later relies on another musical analogy, when he compares the assignment of rule and ruling offices to choosing a flute-player to play a flute.

One might perhaps assert that offices should be unequally distributed in accordance with a superiority in any good even among persons who do not differ in any other respect but happen to be similar, on the grounds that justice and what accords with

merit is different for those who differ. But if this is true, those who are superior in complexion, height, or any other good whatever will gain a larger share of political rights. Is this not plainly false? That it is false is evident in the case of the other sciences and capacities: where flute players are similar with respect to the art, a larger share of flutes is not granted to those who are better born. They will not play the flute better, but it is to one who is superior in the work that superiority in the instruments should be granted. If what has been said is in some way not clear, it will be still more evident if we take it further. If someone were superior in flute playing, but very deficient in good birth or beauty, even if each of those goods is greater than flute playing than he is superior in flute playing, the outstanding flutes nevertheless ought to be given to him. For superiority in wealth and good birth ought to contribute something to the work, but they contribute nothing. (1282b23-3a2)

It is as absurd for organizers of a concert to distribute flutes to the beautiful, free, or wellborn, regardless of their actual competency in playing the flute, as it is for the city to distribute offices on the basis of legitimacy or prior contributions to the city in other fields of expertise (1273b7-11, cf. 1290b2-7, *Rhet* 1393b3-9). To produce the best music, flutes should obviously be given to the flautists who play best; no other consideration is relevant. Indeed, when choosing someone for almost any important, difficult, or large task, the ability to do it usually is, and ought to be, the overriding consideration; its importance eclipses the relevance of any other good in our deliberative assessments and selection, including size, wealth, looks, rank,

freedom, or even citizenship. The ability to do something well is the criterion by which people assign and assess other jobs in the city, and it would seem all the more pertinent in regard to the most preeminent and integral of all vocations. Aristotle at first seems to be addressing the aristocrats in these remarks, but the democratic citizen who claims a natural birthright of freedom also makes a sort of claim to be "well-born" and naturally free. When claiming political rights, all factions appeal primarily to who they most essentially are and what they do by virtue of their very nature as the fundamental basis of their entitlement to citizenship or office, regardless of how any of these traits or contributions might actually equip them to exercise these innately deserved rights well.

Political community is an association of some reciprocal, proportional equality, and as such, every city wishes to be composed of similar persons, just as the democrats seem to presume (*Pol* 1295b24-25). But no city ruled by a regime of peers is ruled by its best members, since the truly best are so few and peerless. Indeed, one reason there are so many variations of different regimes is the fact that so few human beings are even capable of fully developing moral virtue or living well, let alone determining how others should live. Consequently, Aristotle can claim that every human association has self-sufficiency and living well as its end, but is unable to give any examples of any existing city actually fulfilling this purpose (1280b39, cf. 1252b28-3a1). Every city and faction defines and pursues living well differently because there are so many ways to miss the mark. This is why "political philosophy" is necessary to arbitrate their incommensurable and incompatible claims, and to discern and clarify the end of self-sufficiency at which every regime aims but only partially recognizes (1282b14-27, 1301a25-28, cf. 1280a9-14, 1290a11-13, 1328a34-b2). And although no existing regime can be said to be aiming at the genuine ends of all the city's inhabitants, different forms of rule are best judged according to

their actual outcomes, in terms of how they rule and the ways of life they engender (1278b8-11, 1279a25-27, 1289a15-18, 1295a40).

It is easy enough to demonstrate theoretically that considerations of personal competence are far more relevant to the determination of who ought to rule or is justly called a citizen than any customary standards of legitimacy based on birthplace or bloodlines. The political order itself is dependent on the less authoritative capacities and competencies of its subordinate arts and associations – therefore, political competence would include the best ordered arrangement and utilization of all its subordinate parts directed toward carrying out their proper tasks in light of their common final end. But applying this standard of technical know-how and function derived from the arts to the distribution of the political art is not so easy, since it is not so clear or indisputable to all who the most competent rulers are, since what we define as competence largely depends on a prior determination or consensus about the city's proper end. However, if we put off clarifying the complete and correct end by which competent rule can be determined, we can still gain some rough sense of different groups' comparative capacity for accomplishing anything at all, for themselves or others. In order to understand better what Aristotle seeks to demonstrate by attempting to apply this discomfiting rational standard to the customarily irrational political dispute about legitimate rights, it will first be necessary to distinguish the two aspects of what complete competence entails in terms of both expertise and performance.

Aristotle's arguments reveal a fundamental problem with the question of political competence: expertise and capacity do not necessarily result from or coincide with other traits or contributions that cities require and revere; there is no reliably consistent connection between the qualities that human beings tend to honor and the qualifications of a good citizen or ruler. While oligarchs tend to trace their entitlement to a legacy of citizenship rooted in the distant mists of

time, and the democrats maintain that the one person whose actions can most be considered the actions of the entire city and for which the entire city can be considered responsible is truly and justly a citizen, Aristotle dismisses both these standards and will instead look to the effectual ends of each regime to determine which defines citizenship best. The question of who is actually a citizen cannot be answered independently from the question of what the truly best purpose and order of the city actually are, which requires a consideration of the regime (cf. 1283b42-4a4). Who the citizen is, and what ends good citizenship will be steered toward, varies from regime to regime, because the content of political virtue is relative to the regime and dominant parts of the city that call upon it (1275b5-13, 1276b30-31, 1278a40-b5, 1289b26-90a13).

Both parties in this opening dispute would agree that rulers ought to be competent and rule well, at least to the extent that by definition the best rule is that which best secures the aims of a regime, but their conceptions of what good rule looks like clash because they look to opposing political ends. To define the city through its parts, then, will require a consideration of which regime correctly defines these parts, and how different citizens of different regimes use their authority in directing the life of the city and determining its purposes and policies. Aristotle judges the qualifications of the two main contenders for rule according to their own understanding of the city's purpose, then in their ability to actually realize this or any political end. I will consider these in order, focusing first on the aims and expertise of each competing regime, and then on their actual outcomes in light of these aims and the good.

Competence in Aim and Execution

Aristotle's resolution of the opening dispute of Book III over citizenship would seem to offer a less problematic and volatile standard for politics than the usual, customary grounds of

legitimacy. If, in practice, we could view regimes and rulers solely in terms of their competence, then politics would not be so rife with blame and civil strife, but would simply be a matter of accepting the most capable, qualified candidate for the job, rendering political rights and authority matters of education and the licensing of credentialed professionals, rather than irrelevant qualifications that arbitrarily constrict the scope of who can rightfully rule. From this point of view, failed regimes and bad rulers are not wicked or treasonous; they, like every human being and community, aim at the good but are simply not up to the task and miss the mark (1252a1-3). They are still commonly referred to as regimes and rulers, despite their poor performance. If their aim is off, or their execution is uneven and sloppy, it is simply because they lack the knowledge of the correct target or ability to hit it, and blaming those regimes and rulers who lack the ability to rule well would be as silly as moral indignation over poor music or cooking.

Competent rule combines the faculty and desire to govern with knowledge of the proper end toward which governance should be directed. Knowledge of the proper end of the city is the standard by which Aristotle makes his distinction between “correct” (*orthe*) and “deviant” (*parekbainei*) regimes in his famous six-fold classification. The three correct regimes are distinguished according to who rules: the one best man, the few best men, or the best possible multitude, which Aristotle calls kingship, aristocracy, and simply “regime,” or “polity” (*politeia*), respectively. The corresponding deviant regimes are tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy (1279a25-b10). Correct regimes aim at the common good of all the parts of a city, while deviant regimes look exclusively to their own advantage, as in the case of household rule and other forms of rule and authority within the city (1278b33-a1, 1279a17-20). In terms of the common good, which is the proper end of every regime, polity turns out to be the least good but

most possible of the correct regimes, while democracy is the least bad but most stable and common of the deviant ones (1289a38-b10, *NE* 1160b15-25). This would seem to be because the multitude of a polity is least competent in realizing its correct aim, while the multitude of a democracy comes closer than other deviant regimes to actually providing a lesser good that is still common by better maintaining security and long-term stability -- but only incidentally, despite their misguided aim to serve the majority alone (*Pol* 1296a13-16, 1320b29-1a3, cf. 1278b40-a1).

Aristotle's appeal to aptitude suited to the task as the defining trait of the correctly ruling ruler recalls the account of natural rule in Book I of the *Politics*. There, nature is at first portrayed as spontaneously providing and coordinating the differentiated roles for which human beings are best suited from birth, in order to do things like form households. The city is a fruit of the historical growth and development of these first seeds of community and is natural, Aristotle says, to the extent that these first relations are (1252b30-31). But a fundamental partnership of the household, between master and slave, is only natural when it is between a naturally born slave and a naturally born master, who share a naturally common good (1254a17-19). The glaring problem with this basis for the natural justice of slavery, the city, and rule in general is that there are no obvious examples of either a naturally suited slave or master as Aristotle describes them, as hunched, raw brawn built exclusively for labor, and upright, unclouded mind, innately devised for war and command (1252a31-35, 1254b15-26). These descriptions might sound familiar or resemble certain people we have encountered, but are hardly reliable signs of anyone's virtue or ability to rule. Less familiar are the soul and character that Aristotle attributes to each human type: one without foresight, but possessing just enough intellect to comprehend and carry out rational commands, the other consisting primarily of intellect without passion,

naturally and indisputably in charge of planning, ordering, and commanding what is to be done for both members of the partnership. No human being can be said to be entirely one or the other of these naturally complementary types described in Book I (1254b26-5a1). Each one of us is some mix of both, which accounts for the abiding political problem of our difficulty in reliably recognizing virtue and prudence or agreeing on who would most capably rule on behalf of the common good (1332b16-22). Nature “wishes but fails” to provide any consistent correspondence between human appearance or parentage and proficiency in ruling or being ruled that might clearly indicate how we should arrange our affairs and live our lives, just as every political community aspires but fails to become a union of equals (1255a32-b3, cf. 1261a12-25, 1262a17-24, 1283a33-37, cf. 1332b11-35).

To apply the criterion of competence to the controversy over rule would seem to assume that the city’s proper end could be made to harmonize with the intentions of the most able ruler as easily as the work of an able practitioner of any other art can be made compatible with his own interest and that of his patrons (1328a21-33). Although complete, masterful competence in rule would include knowledge of and dedication to what is good for a city, it does not necessarily follow that someone with this knowledge would want to rule or, if he did rule, that he would be dedicated to the common good instead of his own. It is not natural for human beings to prefer the good of others to their own good, which a dogged dedication to the common good would require of a city’s rulers. Political rule differs from the rule of fathers, masters, despots, or kings due to its defining orientation toward others’ good, which is also why political rule seems to promise a greater stage for exercising virtues, and earning higher honors than these more widespread, naturally fueled and enforced, smaller sorts.

Democracy, like all forms of rule, should ultimately be judged by its actual end (cf.

1252b32-35). But in terms of securing the best and noblest ends of life, democracy is most deficient since it tends toward mediocrity and promotes a concern for the low at the expense of the high (cf. 1318b13-17, 1319b31-32). Democracies confuse equal rule with the rule of a part, and aim at the genuine good of freedom, but only as it can be equally had by all, as the freedom to do whatever one wants, rather than wanting and doing what is truly good (1310a25-35, 1312b4-6, 1317a40-b13). The effort to expand the quintessential political good of freedom to everyone necessarily deforms and dilutes its goodness and, in effect, elevates only the most common materialistic concerns, distorting citizens' aim and focus in both their public and private capacities (1319b1-32, cf. 1321a40-b1). Democratic regimes are therefore prone to miss the mark of genuine freedom, and to prefer equality in all things to proportional equality, largely because of their overriding preoccupation with bodily and external goods (1280a9-14, 1280a21-24, 1301a25-28, 1334a35-39).

Although the intended ends of equality and freedom might be characterized as noble, in practice, the effectual outcome of democratic rule falls far short of these vague aims because of the ruling element's misunderstanding of these goods and their ineptitude in attaining them. In terms of knowledge and ability, the demos is the least qualified part of the city to rule. The greatest immediate problem with democracy is not its form or even its unfocused and unsteady aims, but that it amounts to the preeminence of those who are already necessarily absorbed in base pursuits and ignoble concerns (1278a5-13, 1290a30-b2). Accordingly, the thrust of Aristotle's criticism of democracy is not so much that it is the rule of many, or even the bare fact that the many are poor (for even a craftsman can be rich), as much as it constitutes distributing political office and authority to those who are already employed (1278a13-25).

A city is run poorly when its citizens are moonlighting. A citizenry of artisans and

laborers will tend to generate less virtue or expertise in rule than a smaller, leisured pool of equals who have opportunities for education and occasions to cultivate their character, deliberation, and judgment (1281b23-31). Because they misconstrue the ends of political life and desire freedom apart from virtue, democracies often empower and institutionalize inexpert and inept rule. The best regime presented in Book VII also establishes shared equality (for a select few) and aims at freedom, understood as the self-sufficiency attained through the development of man's highest capacities through leisure pursuits (1323a34-b6, 1328a37-b2, cf. 1313a41-b6, 1337a11-b3). But a distinguishing feature of Aristotle's best regime is the lack of a free demos with any share in political rights, since they would lack the leisure necessary for developing virtue or ruling well (1328b31-9a1). If looking to the correct end of the city is an essential part of competence, then no known or possible regime can be considered completely competent, since every actual regime mistakes some partially good end of the city as a whole (1279a10-15). Every faction and regime has its own notion of the good, and although some regimes come closer to defining and achieving their aims, none can truly be said to actually attain a truly common or complete good for the whole city.

Collective Prudence

Aristotle begins in agreement with his high-minded reader that democracy is indelibly flawed from the standpoint of its aims and its ability to rule well, but much of Book III consists of Aristotle's consideration of the inescapable role that the demos plays in political life and the extent to which adept statesmen must reconcile themselves to this. To make this case, he has to show why statesmen need to include and engage with the many in some political capacity as equals. In his most positive attempt to rehabilitate the image of popular rule, in Chapter Eleven

of Book III, Aristotle argues against the conception of the demos to which he had appealed earlier and asserts that, although individually they mostly lack moral virtue, collectively, the many possess surpassing virtue and good judgment. This claim, that the demos constitutes a whole much greater than the sum of its parts, is supported by a series of analogies:

The many, of whom none is individually a serious man, nevertheless can when joined together be better – not as individuals but all together – than those [who are best], just as dinners contributed [by many] can be better than those equipped from a single expenditure. For because they are many, each can have a part of virtue and prudence, and on their joining together, the multitude, with its many feet and hands and having many senses, becomes like a single human being, and so also with respect to character and mind. Thus the many are also better judges of the works of music and of the poets, some a certain part, and all of them all the parts. But it is in this that the excellent men differ from each of the many individually, just as some assert beautiful persons differ from those who are not beautiful, and things painted by art from genuine things scattered and separated into one, for taken separately, at any rate, this person's eye will be more beautiful than the painted one, as will another part of another person. (1281a41-b15)

Aristotle admits that no individual member of the demos is a serious man, but insists that their cumulative contribution to good rule is better than that of any individual in the city, just as a

banquet prepared by many is usually better than one provided by a "single expenditure" (1281a43-b4). This first analogy assumes that a banquet is necessary in the first place, that a large group needs to be fed. A potluck dinner is the most efficient way to feed and fill a large crowd because it relies on its own numbers to provide enough for each diner. A large group will always be more able to serve a large feast than the greatest chef on his own. Many chefs would be better at providing a banquet than any single person, but that is not to say that many chefs are capable of serving a better single meal than the greatest chef of all. To serve so many, even the best chef would need the help of so many others to supply, cook, and prepare all the food (cf. 1287b28-34). That is, even though a single cook may possess the most knowledge, skill, and judgment for food preparation and service, on his own he lacks the means to serve more than a few diners. The special faculty of many chefs would seem to boil down to supplying the expense and effort necessary to supply a big banquet. This is not nothing, especially when so many need to eat, as in a city, but it is also obviously not equivalent to expertise, good judgment, or fine food, no matter how many cooks are contributing.

The example of a pot-luck banquet helps illustrate the utility of employing many to feed many, but it does not convincingly demonstrate the competency of the many's judgment as Aristotle contends, and it seems to raise the further question of whether a banquet might be even better were a single chef to organize the many contributors so that there are not too many desserts or potato salad on the table. Later, in his discussion of kingship, Aristotle refers to the advantages of combining meals in his discussion of kingship (1286a21-37). A group, Aristotle says, is less likely to be corrupted or swayed by anger than an individual, just as a large amount of water is less easily tainted than a small amount. But the context of this remark is a discussion concerning the rule of a man of outstanding virtue -- someone who would not be as prone to

anger, error, or corruption as any other member of city. This argument might be valid if the contest were between one such man and a group of equally outstanding men, in which case aristocracy could correctly be said to surpass kingship in the quality of its rule, by virtue of its greater quantity of virtue (1286a37-b7). And although an aristocrat might be inclined to think so, Aristotle cannot make the same claim of moral incorruptibility here, about the many, who are far more prone to capricious streaks of passion and being easily deceived and led by flatterers to seek freedom even from the rule of their own laws, than any single serious man of virtue (*Rhet* 1354a35-b1, cf. *Pol* 1292a1-38).

But Aristotle goes even further here in Chapter Eleven, arguing that just as the many's cumulative size and wealth make them more capable of serving a large feast and making great expenditures than any single person, so does their cumulative virtue outweigh that of the most virtuous individual (1281b3-5). Even though each member of the demos only has some fraction of a few virtues and sound judgment, when joined together these different parts come together in just the right way to form complete virtue and prudence, since the demos becomes a single entity, capable of judging and acting more beautifully than any actual individual human being. This claim seems suspect, especially since, if anything, expanding the right to rule to a greater number and cacophony of opinions would only dilute whatever virtue, expert knowledge, and prudence did exist among some (1326a7-b7). Rather than explaining the circumstances or process by which such a wondrous coalescence might come about, Aristotle resorts to further analogies to defend this strange contention, citing further ways in which the asserted collective competence of the demos surpasses that of any individual.

One man only has four limbs and five senses, but a multitude, conceived as one being, has that many more limbs and senses. Aristotle evokes the image of a monstrous beast with a

swarm of limbs, eyes, ears, and mouths to depict the composite superiority of the many, before comparing them to a painting of a single human being (1281b3-8). These examples again seem to underscore rather than overcome the difference between an artificial aggregate and the naturally born and grown unity of individual bodies and minds. Such a creature would be foreboding, but not necessarily impressive or virtuous (cf. 1290b25-35, 1292a10-23). This positedglomeration lacks any ordering principle that could sort and arrange only the best features from each member in the best way, synthesized into a single ordered representation of the best parts of all, just as skilled painters can blend together the best features of the beautiful individuals around them to create perfected human forms and portraits (1281b8-15). As Homer writes, and Aristotle quotes later on in Book IV, regarding absolute democracy, “many-headed rule is not good,” since it results in spasmodic indecision and confusion rather than adept leadership (1292a13-14, *Iliad* 2.204). In the modern world, those who attempt to realize this communal consciousness by better organizing people into *a* people on a national level, in the manner of a master artisan, on the basis of a single identity and shared vision of a greater order and collective purpose, are called “totalitarian.”

As evidence for his claim, Aristotle observes that the many are capable of a reliably accurate, generalized assessment of music and poetry than any individual critic (*Pol* 1281b7-9). While a multitude lacks any proficiency at deliberation or decision, as well as any appreciation or understanding of the technical aspects of any higher virtuosity, it still might play a useful role as an imprecise but reliable gauge of who is most suited to such tasks, according to who plays the most pleasing tune. And it is perhaps true that any given expert musician or poet is likely to have more idiosyncratic and unreliable opinions on these matters than the reactive consensus of any given crowd. But if one person appreciates one aspect of a composition and someone else

another part, their separate judgments do not automatically result in a settled judgment that grasps the whole, except in the most unarticulated, crude manner, in the din of applause. That this crowd-sourced and tallied measure of melody and rhythm is the same standard by which officeholders are chosen and guided in a well-mixed regime makes the analogy of flute distribution in Chapter Thirteen especially fitting. However, the case Aristotle makes for the role of popular election and assessment in a regime on the basis of the many's good judgment is only as strong as music and poetry is akin to politics (cf. *NE* 1181a13-24, *Rhet* 1414b20-27, 1415a34-b24, *Pol* 1253a7-18).

The argument for the many's collectively surpassing and ably exercised virtue and prudence is unpersuasive because it describes a group of individuals that has never been seen, a multitude that somehow, as if by the foresight of an ordering artist, can spontaneously come to possess a single mind and purpose that draws upon the best qualities of each part. But this is to say that, as a group, the many are governed by some unifying principle or collective mind, a trait for which large crowds are usually blamed and called "mobs," rather than praised. More eyes, brains, and limbs only contribute to the virtue and capacities of a whole entity when they already belong to it by nature, as well-formed and integrated parts of that being's organic order. A person born with more functioning parts and senses would presumably be superior and more competent than other men, but only if these were natural extensions of a single, well-ordered soul, rather than a mere deformity or mutation of chance. Every animal's inborn formal and psychic unity is far more crucial to its proper movement, ends, and apt use of its parts than the number or variety of its parts. Simply grafting different kinds of limbs and organs to a person, even through the latest surgical methods and procedure, would not produce a superior god-like hybrid being with enhanced discernment, abilities, or beauty, but would most likely result in a

debilitating imbalance and lack of coordination (1287b24-35).

This argument falls so short of plausibility that it elicits an oath: "By Zeus," the same could be said for any beast, that although each cow, dog, and flea is lacking virtue and prudence individually, if enough of them were somehow combined together as equals they would be the wisest rulers we could hope for (1281b17-21). Aristotle meekly replies to this aristocratic interjection that nothing prevents it from being true of "a certain kind of multitude [*plethos*]"'. What kind of multitude (ants? gods? philosophers?), and how it could combine to surpass all other beings in virtue, is not said. And, as if to confirm the flimsiness of the exaggerated claims he makes on behalf of the many's collective prudence and deliberative capacity, Aristotle soon seems to retreat from this position, qualifying these claims as pertaining to a multitude that is "not overly slavish" and collectively will be "either better or no worse" at judging artistic performances than those who know the art, which is a far more open-ended and vaguely modest appraisal of their collective capacities (1282a13-17).

Aristotle insists that these arguments should help resolve the question of who should rule and over what matters the many should have authority in the city (1281b22-26). But in the midst of saying this, Aristotle seems to deny any basis on which we might still find the argument for cumulative virtue persuasive. In his defense of the many's authority and participation in political affairs, he seems to imply that he is talking about a certain kind of *demos*, who individually possess parts of different virtues that could add up like pooled monetary assets and somehow become the perfected virtue and prudence of the whole (1282a13-17). But after presenting the analogies of banquets and painting, Aristotle clarifies that he is talking about the same sort of multitude of free men found in every existing city, with whom his readers would be familiar, as lacking not only wealth, but also "any claim at all deriving from virtue" (1281b24-25). At best,

an existing multitude that is well armed, trained, and united by a common cause might display what Aristotle calls “military virtue” (1279a39-b2).

These arguments for the many's capacity for good rule attempt to correlate their cumulative wealth and strength with their cumulative virtue, but end up only revealing the stark difference between these types of goods. Virtue is not commensurable with or derivable from any other goods: no amount of money, strength, or physical beauty is equivalent to virtue, and no concatenation of partial virtue adds up to complete moral, intellectual, or political virtue (1282b36-a9, 1323a35-b5, cf. 1296b18-23). And while moral virtue largely presumes and lends itself to applying the same abilities and temperament necessary for leading others to their own good, due to their own lack of education and leisure, the demos has no real capacity for discernment, deliberation, or constancy and correctness of command. However, aside from their modest but handy ability to serve as a sort of hedonic gauge of the outcomes of rulers' actions and decrees, the many provide far more to the complete and competent execution of any regime's intentions. I will turn to examining the case for the many's crucial contribution to competent rule in the following section.

Collective Mass

Even while conceding the very limited extent to which the many can contribute the expert knowledge, practiced skill, and good judgment required for ruling well, Aristotle also defends this narrower but unique contribution of the demos, in the role of selector and auditor of ruling elites, under a mixed arrangement.

For all of them when joined together have an adequate perception

and, once mixed with those who are better, bring benefit to cities,
just as unprepared food when mixed with prepared [food] makes
the whole more useful than the small amount of the latter, but each
separately is incomplete with respect to judging. (1281b34-38)

The many are now portrayed as unprepared or impure food that is combined with a more refined or pure kind in order to make a more filling and fortified dish than either type of food could provide on its own. Uncooked, unprepared food is the preponderant part of a meal that sticks to ribs, but offers little real nourishment or fine flavors to the taste, while prepared, purified food is so small in portion that it is wasted if it is not supplemented by the weight and volume of more substantive but simpler fare.² Together, both forms of food make each other useful and essential parts of a complete meal (cf. 1296b16-18). The unprepared food is meant as

² My explication of this particular cultural culinary reference is based on one plausible meaning of the somewhat obscure terms “prepared” (*tes katharas*) and “unprepared” (*he me kathara*), as referring, respectively, to the enhanced flavor or nutritive impact conjured from or instilled into prepared food by some technique of reduction or cookery, and the raw, untreated heaps of bland feed or game.

But these words can also be used to refer to the amount of work that has already gone into the food before it is used by a cook (like cleaning, cutting, or sifting), distinguishing the more processed or refined sorts of food, like finely ground and degermed wheat flour (or perhaps even things like wine, cheese, smoked jerky, sausage, and Kobe beef) from the less transformed, unprocessed, and more “whole” foods and grains that are more appreciated by some today, but were more plentiful and not as pleasing to the sophisticated Greek palate. The same terms can also be understood as “pure” and “impure” in the religious sense, since they might be derived from some ancient rites or traditional preparation of food, as in sacrifices. It is entirely possible that these phrases already had a loose, varied, and contextually reliant meaning even in Aristotle’s own time, that he was aware of this ambiguity in the terms, and that he maybe even chose this specific analogy because of it.

However, regardless of how these terms are best understood, my main point would remain that prepared food provides the finer subtleties, textures, and variables of taste desired by the civilized palate cultivated by convention and leisure, while the more plentiful, unprepared food helps extend and bulk up a hearty and wholesome meal (apart from any question of whether one type is actually a more fortifying, healthy diet, according to either Greek opinion or our own nutritional knowledge).

filler, necessary for binding and expanding the portions of servings, which is particularly helpful when supplying a large banquet. So while prepared food provides what is most enjoyed and best for diners' health, the unprepared food provides itself, as the *stuff* of the food that satiates a diner. Similarly, the many are regularly able to lend themselves physically to their city as an aggregate mass by virtue of their great size, or bulk [*pelethos*].

Although virtue and prudence are individually exhibited qualities that do not necessarily or spontaneously increase with the addition of more individuals, the brute strength does correlate to the numbers and weight of an armed, trained, and self-ruling population, in the same way that cities ally together as discrete equal units of mass gathered together on one side of a scale, for the sake of maximizing their combined force (1261a24-27). Aristotle argues that a city is more than a multitude of equals because its purposes are better and nobler than that of an alliance, but it still cannot afford to neglect the basic need for this aspect of its own association (1276b19-7a11, 1280a30-b15). In terms of the bulk and force of political authority, the fundamental material equality of all human beings as possessors of bodies eventually becomes a fundamental standard unit of weight in the distribution of political rights, as the cumulative might of these units becomes crucial for defense, manpower, and enforcement (1273b35-4a15, 1278a28-34, 1290b38-1a22, 1304a17-34, cf. 1297b22-25). This is one contribution to the city that cannot be supplied by the capacity and expertise of the learned and virtuous alone.

The inertial force constituted by the demos through its numbers can be a threat to the city if they become discontent with and unfriendly toward the regime (1281b28-31). But the mass of the many can also benefit the regime by lending it popular support and consent in exchange for their participation, effectively making the regime's judgments and laws more authoritative and less reliant on force. The democratic features of a properly mixed regime, like the audit and

elections of public officials, gain the support of the bulk of the city, and the inclusion of this bulk in the rule of the city leaves the diners more satisfied and full than they would be under a pure oligarchy or aristocracy (cf.1277a23-25). When a large, centrally balanced bulk of a city's inhabitants are friendly to a regime, their weight helps stabilize and steady the city like the ballast of a ship. But aside from the practical advantage of winning consent and gaining strength, the mixing of food is meant to illustrate the essential role the many poor can play in the governance of the city – a role that cannot be filled by any other part of the city (1291b2-10). Good judgment requires both the discernment of the right course of action and an understanding of the means at our disposal necessary for carrying it out (1331b24-38). Just as the pilot of a trireme might steer but needs the efforts of an entire crew to go in his chosen direction, ruling well requires both the ability to know where to go, and the facility to actually make the whole city go in that direction without capsizing (1276b20-27, 1282b14-17).

The many complete good judgment and virtue, not by any special faculty of how to order and command others well (which they lack), but by making the regime's laws, decrees, and judgments effectively enforced (1293b41-4a7). The mere quantified power and resources of the demos make the judgments and decrees of magistrates more than an astute preference or mere advice by securing the city's general acceptance and obedience. So while prudence is the virtue most necessary for a ruler, bulk is necessary to make rulers' decisions politically efficacious (cf. 1277b25-27, 1276a10-13). Therefore, in addition to political virtue and finances, every city requires the force of numbers that contributes to military virtue, even during times of peace (1283a18-23, cf. 1279a38-b4). Even the doctor must have the cooperation and consent of a patient in addition to his ability to diagnose and prescribe, in order to treat him effectively. A doctor who knows a cure but cannot treat his patient can not be considered fully competent.

Because a regime needs some bulk to throw around in order to get things done and maintain civil order, competent political rule requires that the operative mass of the masses somehow be incorporated into the regime. Even a king requires a force at least equivalent to the collective strength of the many in order to remain in power, which best comes from the multitude's acceptance of his rule as being for their good, rather than his own (1286b30-40, cf. 1289a29-33, 1295a14-24, *NE* 1160b2-7). This is why Aristotle says that the great principle for preserving any regime is that the multitude friendly toward the regime outnumbers the multitude opposed to it, which requires somehow satisfying the demos (*Pol* 1296b15-17, 1297b2-8, 1309b14-17, 1321a32-b1). And because there is no good or honor the city can give that can satisfactorily substitute for the freedom, dignity, and respect bestowed by citizenship and political rule, such mixed and balanced arrangements cannot be wholly empty gestures, but must inevitably grant some form of real power to the many, effectively making them the dominant element in the regime (1283a9-18).

Aristotle refers back to the banquet analogy when he says that food's quality is properly judged not by the cook's taste but the diner's, just as the craftsmanship of the carpenter's rudder is best judged by the pilot, and the house-builder by the household manager (1282a13-23, 1328a21-b18, *Phys* 194a33-b8). By this account, statesmen are necessary, public subordinates who supply the best means for whatever ends the many fancy. And when the many is in charge and take part in judging the regime, their baser, common concerns and vulgar tastes will infect and dominate the entire city (*Pol* 1281b31-32, 1282a37-38, cf. 1294b19-28). When the composite diner judges according to his taste there will be many fine and subtle dishes that will be too rarely liked and neglected by the diners. Rather than fully using what is finest in the enriched, complex food – the best art, music, literature, and education – the general bulk of a population

lowers the tone of the whole to what is most accessible and low.

Only a large crowd can provide a city with the overwhelming might and general consensus that can serve as a reliable measure of the pleasure or pain of political outcomes and performances. But a large crowd will itself always lack the capacity to perform pleasingly or well. The most obvious practical solution is to divide these functions and utilize both the many's reliable aesthetic judgment and the more specialized expertise and virtue of individual rulers and officials with some knowledge of the good (cf. 1293b39-4a14). Such an arrangement would seem to offer the best of both groups, if they could agree to it. But in his discussion of this possibility, Aristotle gives us further reason to temper our hopes for any regular role or direct influence of expertise and reason in political rule, to which I will turn next.

Compromising Virtue with Consent

The sort of unity aimed at in politics, and by democracies in particular, is sought in different ways by the regimes of Plato, Polus, and Hippodamus in the first eight chapters of Book II, where Aristotle argues that such a goal is not fully attainable or desirable for cities (1261a12-b15, 1262b29-31). These proposed regimes of his predecessors seem to promise a more complete realization of justice in the city, but in practice would only make political life worse precisely because they do not heed the inherent limitations of political rule as a means to realizing justice or the good. The necessarily incompatible and often opposed private goods and interests of naturally separate individuals cannot be completely reconciled or subsumed by a community through the largely unharnessable powers of longstanding convention. It is impossible for any human being, each of us being individually attached to different set of friends

and family members, to perfectly align his interests with those of others, or to be rendered a fully integrated and dedicated part of a collective whole (1262b32-2a1, 1262b7-23, 1269a19-24).

Instead of seeking to realize the ideal of the city fully as a harmonious union of equals, Aristotle argues, laws, legislators, and statesmen should look to ways of curbing this political tendency toward complete political unity, equality, and participation in rule (1263b36-37, 1266b29-31, 1309a14-31, 1309b37-10a6, 1319b20-27, 1319b37-20a17). No regime aims at the complete common good and no regime is fully capable of attaining the partial good it does aim at, but every regime assumes that its aims constitute the complete common good and neglects the mean that makes it stable and lasting, instead pursuing its own deviant principles and inclinations without restraint (1309b13-29, 1310a2-12, 1310a19-27, cf. 1320a28-35). Democracy, like all regimes, benefits most from laws and practices that push back against its defining principles and predilections, and are directed more toward making the regime lasting rather than what it wants, and destroys it (cf. 1297a34-b1).

Aristotle ultimately defends democratic authority as just, but justice also demands an active effort to delay the process of democratization in order to stave off the city's debasement and self-destruction as it approaches completely universal suffrage and equalized freedom for all. So even as he recommends that every political regime must reconcile itself to the need for, and drawbacks of, including the demos in its rule, Aristotle advises legislators and rulers to tame or withstand its complete dominance over the city, and suggests that this need to capitulate to the many's demand for incorporation can sometimes partly be met and slowed down, while maintaining a degree of competence through different devices of inveiglement and diversion (1276b28-29, 1319b33-20b17, 1278a37-39). Real, effectual authority will still have to be extended far beyond the few with any knack in wielding it, but it may be possible to hide the fact

that you are excluding some, for example, simply by making political participation too costly, complex, or inconvenient for most citizens (1297a6-a35, 1308b31-9a14).

The mixed regime is presented in a favorable light, as a distinct and acceptable compromise between the few and the many, but Aristotle also makes clear that giving the demos any role in rule will always also lower and delimit a regime's aims and possibilities. Due to its size and strength, mixing the demos into the regime in any capacity ineluctably leads to the supremacy of democratic tastes, aims, and character in the deliberation, laws, and rule of the city (1270b13-17, 1296b24-28, cf. 1292b11-14). The preeminence of working citizens not only cheapens political authority and citizenship, as tasks seemingly suited to any non-slave, but also places severe limits on the ability of officeholders to administrate well. Having the incompetent choose and judge who is competent on the basis of opinion, even right opinion, necessarily results in less competent rule. Once those without musical discernment become the selectors and judges of flute-players, the entire mode of music will change to whatever Phrygian rhythm the people can dance to (cf. *Rhet* 1403b15-4a38, *Pol* 1290a12-29).

Aristotle indicates the problem with the many having the power of election and audit when he points out that correctly choosing and judging political officials often requires the same knowledge and expertise of those sought and selected.

But this arrangement of the regime involves questions. In the first place, it might be held that it belongs to the same person to judge whether someone has healed in correct fashion and to heal and make healthy one who is suffering from a particular disease, this being the doctor, and similarly with respect to other kinds of experience and art. Just as a doctor must submit to audit by

doctors, then, so must the others submit to audit by those similar to them. But ‘doctor’ includes the artisan, master artisan, and thirdly, the person educated with respect to the art, for there are some of this sort in the case of almost all the arts, and we assign the task of judging to the educated no less than to those who know. And the same holds with respect to election. Choosing correctly is indeed also the work of those who know – for example, choosing a geometer is the work of experts in geometry, and a pilot that of experts in piloting. If certain nonprofessionals share in some of these tasks and arts, however, they do not do so to a greater extent than those who know. So according to this argument the multitude ought not to be given authority over either the selection or audit of officials. (1281b37-2a14)

The many might be able to distinguish the skilled from unskilled, but as far as deciding what they ought to be skilled at, to what ends, or which candidate is most competent, the many's judgment falls short (1281b23-25, *NE* 1179a14-18). It is one thing to call the diner and listening audience final judges of food, music, and poetry, but choosing and judging a doctor, master craftsman, pilot, or general is best done by fellow experts who can judge not only the apparent outcomes of actions and commands, but also on the basis of a knowledge of causes, circumstances, and whatever alternative scenarios might have played out in a given situation. After all, expertise does not guarantee success: a patient might blame a doctor's treatment for his poor condition, for example, but he cannot know whether it was the best any doctor could do or even if it prevented a far worse outcome, like death.

In every regime the ends of every task and partnership are ordered to serve the aims of the city, as defined by the ruling element (1094a7-b7, *Pol* 1281a36-39, 1282b8-13). And in a mixed regime, the end-users and final judges of rule are the most inept members of the city. Because every art, even medicine, can be said to serve some further end of a customer, patron, or patient, who can be said to use it as a means and to define its ultimate purpose, in a democratic or mixed regime where competence in public affairs is assessed by the incompetent on the basis of apparent consequences, the influence of expertise and prudence can only have a limited influence. Officeholders chosen and judged by others with less knowledge of the good or the means of acquiring it will inevitably reflect that ignorance in their rule. Likewise, the inept populace has few opportunities to ever become educated enough to gauge and ascribe the blame or praise for their perceived quality of life. So even if a regime is “mixed well,” every area of policy, however technical, inevitably comes under the purview of the otherwise occupied and uninformed. As long as they wish to continue serving and doing whatever limited good they can, statesmen who do happen to be prudent will learn to temper their deliberations with a consideration of the misguided concerns of the many, so that their actions and judgments might please their own judges. Over time, all public officials and leaders will in effect become the servants of the lowest and most common priorities of the majority. So although popular rule may be a necessary ingredient in any stable, sovereign regime, it also constitutes the intrusion of vulgar misperceptions, ignorance, and gullibility into its policies. In light of the best end for man and the city, even a mixed regime ruled by law, which Aristotle later calls “polity,” can be considered inherently deviant in its own aims, regardless of its actual outcome effective stability (1293b21-26, cf. 1311a8-17). And because a mixed regime is mixed on the basis of a conventionally imposed equality between the rich and the poor, rather than strictly according to

relative measures of wealth or virtue, in practice polity is not only dominated by its largest element but is also predicated on and guided by fundamentally democratic principles of fairness, and is therefore cast as a superior mode of democracy (1290a7-19).

Mixed regimes also tend to become more democratic over time, and no institutional obstacle to this tendency can be counted on to preserve the regime for long if citizens do not remain constantly vigilant and self-controlled, which is why, in practice, such truly well-mixed regimes are so rare and do not remain well mixed for long (1295b18-24, 1296a21-b1, 1297b5-9, 1307b29-8a3, 1308b9-10). But, even the most incorruptible, refined multitude, seeking only the most qualified officeholders, will still select experts out of ignorance. If the multitude of a city tends to respect competence, and defer to expertise, some office-seekers will eventually exploit this sensible preference and gain undue authority by pretending to some knowledge or skill that the many necessarily lack, through impressive or pleasing speeches on the subject (*NE* 1181a12-24). So while a mixed regime can serve to stifle and slow the majority's influence on the affairs of the city, it also irreversibly dilutes the influence of expertise and competence on public affairs. Due to their politically essential bulk, the many's incompetence will infect every aspect of their city's rule under a mixed regime and will ultimately debase the way of life of all the citizens, both rulers and ruled, who honor and live for what the dominant element of the city honors and aims at (*Pol* 1273a38-b4, 1295a40). Even granting the many the least share in rule possible leads to the growth in their numbers and rights over time, as they become less needy and more ambitious to acquire more freedom to do as they want (1297b12-28, cf. 1286b11-13). And as later generations of the many become relatively richer and more leisured, citizenship must intermittently be expanded even further to make up for this indulgence and maintain the city's demographic proportions, whether through manumission or colonization (1273b11-21, 1278a31-

34, 1319a40-b1). Every further expansion of leisure, rights, and citizenship in the city eventuates the next deference to basic human dignity and claimed equality for new classes of laborers, artisans, and freed slaves, as it becomes necessary to maintain the city's accustomed economic and military might, compounding the incompetence of the regime (1297b15-29, 1318b17-20). By Aristotle's time, after many generations of this recurring need to incorporate bulk into the regime, the resulting size of cities' populations of free men had already made it virtually impossible to establish any sort of regime besides some variant of democracy (1286b19-22).

Not Just a Job

As mentioned, Aristotle's famous classification and ranking of correct and deviant regimes, in Chapter Seven of Book III, is arranged not only according to who rules the city, but more decisively, in terms of a regime's competency in attaining the common good for the entire city, which is simply just (1279a16-21). But this standard is derived from a view of political rule as a necessary service that some part of the city must carry out for the sake of the common good – a view that Aristotle associates with the older, “natural” view of primitive citizens, who saw ruling as the burden of tending to everyone else's good at the cost of neglecting one's own, and for which everyone else was willing to let others take full responsibility. However, as cities developed and became more burdensome to govern, it became necessary to compensate rulers for their services with more than salaries. But the public honor and benefits that became necessary to attract and satisfy competent rulers transformed their positions into objects of envy and desire among the ambitious. As the power and prestige of cities grew, citizens came to see this essential task as an incomparable good and opportunity for profiting from the common stock

of riches and renown. And, now, no one seeks ruling offices or authority with an eye to the true common good of all. All rivals for rule only see power and office as opportunities for personal gain or rectification in fame or fortune, and men seek political power as if they were ill, clamoring over the only known remedy for the unbearable affliction of being ruled by others (1279a10-15, 1297b15-28).

Aristotle tells us, however, that the demos would retain the older, more sensible view of office as a burden to be avoided, if they did not perceive ruling officials as gaining more than their fair share of recompense by abusing their privileged position (1297b5-12, 1308b31-40). But such an arrangement seems impossible, for no one, even the most respectable nobleman, rules or can be expected to rule for the sake of others without gaining some good for themselves in return (1273b1-7, cf. 1297b8-12). So even if conspicuous or excessive financial gain can be prevented, there must still be some public benefits afforded to decent rulers that will be prized even more than riches and will be desired by the ruled as well, who esteem whatever the authoritative element holds as just compensation for the most deserving (1273a39-41, 1295a39-40, 1309a9-14). All contending factions in a fully developed city seek the right to rule as something noble and good, and as a sign of their own nobility and goodness. But they all claim and exercise these rights in pursuit of only some partial good or aspect of justice. Aristotle's discussion of correct regimes helps reveal how far off target every actual and possible regime is in its aims, which is why later, when Aristotle next refers to "deviant" regimes, he means all those regimes that recognize only a single claim to rule, including claims of virtue or capacity (1279a24-25, 1283a23-30). So even though any lasting regime requires some measure of competence, there cannot be a completely correct regime as defined in Book Seven, as looking exclusively to the complete common good in its rule.

The complications and controversies revolving around political rule stem from its being both a job and an honor - the highest honor the city can bestow and to which no other commendation or prize can measure up. Unlike any other job in the city, political rule consists of telling everyone else how to live and what to do. The job of ruling automatically elevates the jobholder's personal status and moral authority in comparison to the rest of the city, because the city's official answer to the question of who should rule is at the same time an implicit assertion of the best way of life and who lives it (1323a14-16). Those who order everyone else's lives must be seen as somehow worthy of their position and our respect, which requires that, in some way, rulers must be seen as the best sort of human beings, worthy of others' honor and emulation; self-respecting citizens would presumably only willingly obey someone who best knows the highest ends of man and how to live the best life in light of them. Men commonly defer to others' authority in matters on which they are presumed to possess demonstrably greater practical knowledge. And in the political realm, a compliant, dedicated citizen presumes, on some level of consciousness, that his officials, or those who granted them their authority, has access to some sort of greater wisdom concerning actions that the city and that human beings generally ought to pursue. In other words, all willing obedience and standards of legitimately deserved rule are not the work of mindless instinct, but always rest upon a prior, unspoken, and largely unfounded belief in a general, overriding competence, governing the entire political order and correctly empowering certain men to lead others.

Competence may be the most sensible standard for distributing any job, including the ruling offices, but Aristotle himself indicates that the most sensible view of the situation is insufficiently political. The main problem with having only the most competent citizens run the city solely on the basis of their expertise in human affairs, therefore, is that those who lack this

knowledge and larger perspective of the whole will be offended by this most sensible arrangement. As Aristotle reminds his Greek readers, “we say that ruling offices [*arche*] are honors [*time*], and when the same persons always rule the others are necessarily deprived of honor [*atimoi*]” (1281a29-32). For the same reasons that rulers and citizens see their rights as signs of dignity and superiority, the ruled view their exclusion from authority as a sign of contempt, especially since it is never justified on the basis of competence alone, but in terms of inherent inferiority, or according to a natural or divinely sanctioned hierarchical order (1278a35-39, 1301b26-29, 1302a31-34, *Rhet* 1391a20-b3). Even if the many are incorporated into the regime in a limited capacity as reviewers and selectors of officials, they will tend not to see themselves as an authoritative audience, but as akin to flute-makers, providing for those who use the product of their work to enjoy making beautiful music in the spotlight (*Pol* 1277b28-29, cf. 1253b27-34).

Most non-musicians who are not given flutes or paid to play them on account of their lack of ability do not feel dishonored or insulted. Audiences may admire or even envy a great flute-player, but very few would despise his status or deny the noble propriety of his claim to play the best flute. Most people are content to enjoy and appraise the music of the most talented flute-players and do not expect a chance to play the instruments themselves at concerts just because they helped provide the flutes or the auditorium. Few audience-members get on stage with practiced musicians and insist on playing along, as their right as freemen, heroic veterans, or because they are wise, virtuous, rich, strong, or beautiful. But this is precisely how it is in the political realm. In contrast to the exclusion of most people from any other skilled position, the denial of political rule and rights are always more commonly seen as worthy causes of war and revolution than even the worst musical compositions or performances.

The City's Aversion to Reason

The standard of competence is limited in its applicability to actual politics because it is never a central political principle or priority in the actual distribution or exercise of political authority. If reason could rule communities with any real power on its own, then there would be no serious political disputes about parentage or heredity because rulers would run cities as hired experts, rather than partisan members of interested sub-communities; power would always be transferred to the next trained and qualified expert rather than remaining the privilege of any dominant faction or family. But the conditions necessary for reason's political preeminence would seem to require some radical overhaul of all human relations and priorities, akin to the complete domestication of the city, as described in Plato's *Republic*, in which rulers and officials supposedly identify the city's happiness with their own good, because they are free of any family or class ties that would confuse and distort their judgments about whom or what they own or belong to – conditions that Aristotle says would require “greater virtue than accords with human nature” (1261b16-2b34, 1263a40-b5, 1286b22-27, cf. 1264b5-25).

Politics might be made more rational by turning citizens' concerns away from specious grounds of legitimacy like parentage and consent, and more towards questions about the proper use of actual powers and rights, whatever their origin, in the present; arbitrarily imposed and inadequate but naturally rooted standards of legitimacy, however, like nativity or parentage, are unavoidable and often useful in politics. And as opposed to laws and determinations of legitimacy based on designations of birth and blood, the question of who is most competent in any particular city is never clear or indisputable. Claims of special expert knowledge or superior ability require the supplementary backing of longstanding laws based on naturally provided

distinctions, like heredity, to avoid or settle divisive questions -- like who is most fit to rule the whole -- according to less problematic criteria and a more civil manner. Appeals to common origins, presumptions, and cultural heritage offer more readily recognized and accepted justifications for authority that prevent everyday minor disputes from escalating into drawn out, acrimonious disputes over first principles and final ends. Of course, these more readily apparent traits lack any consistent correlation to men's actual abilities (*Rhet* 1390b15-30). The actual basis of anyone's entitlement to citizenship and rule cannot be made entirely unproblematic or indisputable, and considerations of competence can never be allowed to fully eclipse indiscriminate legal designations of legitimacy. Although these widely relied-upon conventional qualifications for citizenship do not correspond to good citizenship and rule, because they are also less contentious they provide a more orderly, consensual basis for the customary inclusion and exclusion of rulers and ruled, citizens and aliens, freemen and slaves, thereby lending some cohesion and durability to a polity by obviating the risk of regularly debating men's relative superiorities. Because men do assume, and must assume if they are to associate politically, that what is truly just has some bearing on reality, then prevailing political order must somehow be understood as more just than it actually can be. The established order of a regime, as well as the necessarily unequal status bestowed upon those partaking in it, must somehow be seen as ordained by, or a confirmation of, its actual justice.

As a noble, enviable, and transferrable good, rule must be distributed to those who are seen as deserving their greater status and freedom. And rarely are those who are perceived as such also the most qualified in terms of expertise (*Rhet* 1387a8-17). No faction in the city, even the virtuous partisans of aristocracy, bases its primary claim to rule, or to be most deserving of citizenship and freedom, solely on their ability to rule well. This is partly because the ruling

element of a city does not simply provide just another necessary public service for all inhabitants, but orders all other relations and activities of life in the city. Because it concerns a job that necessarily involves answering the highest questions of life for every member of a city, the question of *who* can rule well will never be as politically urgent as *why* they deserve to rule, in the genuinely political contest between regimes. Expertise in leadership is irrelevant and meaningless if issues of merit are not first settled by an empowered regime, since political authority stems primarily from principles of distributive justice rather than knowledge or prudence. Competence only seems to arise as a pertinent concern of a city within the framework of an already established and stabilized conventional order of common life that is defined, moved, and shaped by moral principles and ends. Only after the fundamental tenets of a community are officially hammered out, widely promulgated, and internalized as orthodoxy by the general public and citizenry – ruling and ruled members alike – by its constituting regime, can citizens then turn from the political struggle of justifying their right to rule and begin to focus on the managerial and administrative questions of who, among those already officially eligible candidates, would most ably serve and realize the regime’s already well-established aims. Therefore, only within the relatively stable reign of a single regime, where the citizens share a common understanding and aim, can competence ever emerge as a central common concern (as in most elections among different parties in the United States and other liberal democracies today, and in contrast to the polarized strife between factions). But in the more genuinely political, latent but core dispute between different factions and their ruling principles, this most sensible concern is drowned out by claims about the justice of distributing rule on the basis of contribution, dignity, and worth.

Complete political competence, correctly oriented toward the common good, requires

more than expertise, skills, and prudence because these are never a central concern in actual political disputes between opposing factions. And the truly expert and effectual statesman would know that the underlying political struggle for rule manifests itself more in terms of worth, merit, and obligation than the relative knowledge and ability of different candidates for public service. Even if the standard of competence could always be the primary principle by which political authority is assigned, the view of ruling as a mere job would not necessarily be a politically salutary perspective. Although they do not want to provoke envy of their rule, rulers also cannot afford to portray themselves simply as humble servants of the ruled, or to render them *so* sensible as not to view his political authority as an honorable, and therefore, desirable thing. The status of rule and office as a preeminent honor is necessary not merely for the sake of securing obedience and compensating rulers on the basis of their vanity, but also because being looked up to as a worthy role model with a good life and soul is essential for leading others to their own good and is, therefore, a key aspect of ruling well. So not only honor-loving tyrants, but even a just and competent ruler would perpetuate the view that ruling is unlike any other job in the city and that rulers are models for emulation, even while finding reasons to discourage the ruled from assuming their own entitlement to his office, because a certain amount of reverence for rule is necessary for rulers not only to manage the city, but also to lead its members to aspire to virtue.

Since ruling is the city's highest honor and an opportunity to guide others to the best life through one's laws and example, it might seem most reasonable that the one truly best man who most embodies the pinnacle of virtue – the wise man – would have the strongest claim to rule. But the standard of competence does not just fall short of political reality; it also disregards the claims of the best life as the pursuit of perfection higher than that of practical virtue (*Pol* 1282b37-39, cf. NE 1177b5-a8). In terms of competence, the highest human virtue may not

qualify one to rule. In other words, the most rational political standard would disqualify most of the preeminently rational individuals from any claim to political rights or rule. The philosopher's superiority is not earned through the practice of ruling because his is a private life requiring different capacities and higher aims. In terms of political competence there is no discernable difference between the private occupations of the tanner and the astronomer; neither necessarily allows for the adequate development of the political virtue, expertise, or public devotion necessary for ruling well. Therefore, the most architectonic science of human life, relations, and aims is not necessarily possessed by the absolutely best human being who, according to this standard, would be ruled by his inferiors – the very height of injustice (cf. *Pol* 1284b28-31). The standard Aristotle associates with political philosophy, then, is unjust to the philosopher himself – not that the philosopher would necessarily mind (cf. 1276b38-7a4, 1301a38-b1). But this means that no regime can cultivate or honor the best way of life for its citizens: politics cannot lead to the best or most complete life because no city can be ruled by the best or most complete human beings. Political philosophy is often presented as an effort to apply reason to public affairs, rule, and law, as Aristotle himself presents it in his discussion of the first political philosopher Hippodamus. But the application of reason to political questions leads to a demotion of the life of reason as the ruling standard for man as a political animal, in recognition of the impassable impediments in the way of realizing complete justice in any actual city (1295a25-30).

Only in a regime where the virtuous are the only citizens could it be said that being a good citizen is equivalent to being a good man (1293b2-7, 1296b6-12). But no regime can last without giving some share of citizenship to the necessary elements of the city in order to win their favor. Therefore, no existing regime actually aims at producing or following virtue or

wisdom (cf. 1293b5-7). The aim of every city is inevitably distorted and every good citizen is only relatively good, falling short of genuine virtue (1294a14-19). A city's self-sufficiency and independence is conditional on being inhabited mostly by a wide variety of occupants who are not very serious or concerned about virtue, happiness, or living nobly, but rather with living day-to-day and providing the basic material things necessary for mere life, vulgar pleasures, and the perdurance of the regime (1276b20-7a1, 1290b39-1a10). Because cities keep their gaze low, the means and urgency for developing or exercising complete virtue are not so readily at hand in the political realm for political actors, as they might be for the individual leisured gentleman. Virtue requires equipment, but in the public sphere, the proper equipment at the right time is not always easy to come by or use nobly, and when it is, virtue uses it almost exclusively for attaining and securing more equipment for others, in service of their material interests (1331b39-a35, cf. 1323a39-b35, 1325b12-13, *NE* 1122b6-33, 1124a21-24, 1178a35-b3).

Political science aspires to be the comprehensive practical science and ordering art of all human things but, like every other practical art in the city, is ultimately subject to a particular ruling regime. Its practitioners, therefore, must always accommodate themselves and their knowledge to the facts on the ground, recognizing that the truly just cannot completely or directly govern what is real by merely applying that which is best simply to a particular city, or to every city in the same way (cf. *Pol* 1265a17-19, 1296b6-12). The proper application of reason to politics does not consist in mandating that citizens abide by reason, but in first recognizing that this is not possible and why. Aristotle's consideration of the rational view of rule shared by primitive citizens and political philosophy leads us to find a new, modified way to realize the best possible, or least bad, part of the genuine good at which good rulers can aim. Because citizens friendly to a regime see and must see rule as an honor rather than just a job, in actual

politics, its distribution is also unavoidably more a question of desert than of the common good. So, in order to be truly competent to any extent, able and prudent rulers take into account the need to harness other capacities besides expertise. The common good at which the legislator and statesman should aim must be conceived as a less robust end than the complete happiness of a city as a whole and, to be practical, must be sought by more flexible and indirect means than simply by appealing to the same standard in the same way that we distribute and judge other jobs. A realistic, prudential approach to politics starts in the awareness of the irrational aspects of human affairs, but still apprehends how particular cities might approximate a more sensible and tranquil way of life among its citizens, or at least provide for its possibility.

Aristotle associates his emphasis on effectual outcomes and the need for physical capacity with political philosophy, which seems necessary to provide a neutral perspective, from which the dispute over regimes, rule, and citizenship might be correctly judged (1282b20-23). In practice, considerations of good rule are perpetually entangled in the currently authoritative opinions and moral issues of a community, and ideas of consent, merit, and legitimacy can rarely be separated from actual controversies of rule and citizenship. Therefore, in order to realize any degree of competence in politics, we must partially suspend our objections to the prevailing irrational view of ruling as a good that must be distributed, and then try to understand, take on, and challenge the main perspectives and claims of the political actors on their own grounds. Political science itself cannot be learned in the more direct way that Aristotle approaches other fields of knowledge and skill, but involves an immersive inquiry of actual controversies and understanding of political justice as they actually arise out of political opinion and activity (*NE* 1180b28-1b12). Good rule can only be addressed and approximated under the distorting hegemony of less rational claims and authoritative moral standards of desert. And for the sake of

elevating our own political opinion to the level of science through the rigors of reason, we must first address the predominant conditions, authoritative claims, and paradigmatic presumptions of right opinion under which practical reason must actually operate before we can rise above it and turn to defining the good and just rule with any clarity (*Top* 101a31-b4). Only through an assessment of actually voiced and believed political opinions can we determine how competent we could expect any actual regime to be and how common and good the common good that can actually be attained is. The most prevalent and powerful claims commonly made for political rights are expressed in terms of worthiness earned through contributions to the city or based on a person's inherent dignity and relative moral superiority. Aristotle's consideration of these claims will be examined in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: According to Merit

“Justice is itself the great standing policy of civil society, and any eminent departure from it, under any circumstances, lies under the suspicion of being no policy at all.”

-Edmund Burke

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

“A good compromise, a good piece of legislation, is like a good sentence, or a good piece of music. Everybody can recognize it. They say, 'Huh. It works. It makes sense.'”

- Barack Obama

In customary usage, the term “justice” is often applied to determinations of the right ratio of goods distributed among two or more people that most reflects each one’s relative merit. Common opinions about the fair distribution of goods – what the good things are, and what constitutes anyone’s right to them – underlie and inform all disputes, policies, and laws of any political community. A regime can distribute a variety of good things in a city, but everyone who clamors for their just due of distributable goods agrees that the most incomparably noble good available in the city is the position of the head distributor of all goods, with exclusive right to decide how and to whom all things are allotted. Since the ruling offices of deliberation and command are commonly considered the greatest distributable goods due to the preeminent honor attached to preeminent political authority, the centrality of this controversy concerning who

should rule to all political conflict often seems to suggest – especially to those political participants who actively dispute the question and claim their own desert – that receiving and distributing honors in recognition of men’s superiority is the central purpose of political life (cf. *Pol* 1278a35-38, 1278b8-23, 1281a13-17, 1316b21-24 *Top* 145b34-6a2). Far from being content with any finite portion of power for themselves, self-respecting human beings do not ultimately want to possess political honor as if it were just another scarce commodity, but also to deserve it, and to have that desert recognized and confirmed in the assent of others. As Aristotle puts it, when first broaching the topic of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,

Cultivated and active men, on the other hand, believe the good to be honor, for honor is almost the end of the political life. But this is clearly too superficial an answer: for honor seems to depend on those who honor more than the one honored, whereas we surmise that the good is something that is one’s own and difficult to take away. Furthermore, men seem to pursue honor to confirm to themselves that they are good: at any rate, they seek to be honored by judicious men and by those who know them and for virtue. Obviously, then, according to them at least, virtue is better than honor. One might even go so far as to consider virtue rather than honor as the end of political life. However, even virtue proves to be imperfect as an end. (*NE* 1095b22-33)

In this chapter, I will examine Aristotle’s discussion of the just distribution of political rule and rights in Book III of the *Politics*, especially as it relates to the overriding political conflict between the few and the many, over who deserves such unmatched honors. I will

argue that, according to the highest standards of distributive justice, it is the most decent, serious, and virtuous few who have the best claims in terms of both moral superiority and contributions to the greater good, but that the many and the wealthiest few also have valid, though lesser claims of merit that demand their own just due and deference. In discussing these claims, Aristotle confronts us with the aporetic perplexity that no common basis of distribution seems able to satisfy the opposing, incommensurable claims and principles that each faction rallies around separately. Because the deserved ascendancy of any single principle of distribution is unavoidably unjust, inasmuch as they all claim absolute universality and would exclude the others, the fairest and most feasible arrangement for any well developed city is to deny the sole authority of any single principle or claim, and equally to incorporate the main parts of the city into a common, mixed regime; this would channel the best capacities and interests of each (while also stemming their worst tendencies) for the sake of securing if not universal fairness, at least some other, lesser, but more necessary aspects of reciprocal and legal forms of justice. A consideration of what distributive justice itself calls for in light of its own incoherence demonstrates the need to succumb to the claims and influential bulk of the many, however much is necessary to satisfactorily honor their useful contribution of their strength and themselves. At the same time, the arguments Aristotle puts forward on behalf of mixed rule bound by authoritative laws reveal severe and fundamental limits on the possibilities of political life and justice, especially in regard to cities' inability to recognize the superior worth and public asset of their most virtuous members.

After reviewing Aristotle's discussion of distributive justice in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I will first turn to Chapter Eight in Book III of the *Politics* to lay out Aristotle's correction of his definitions of oligarchy and democracy, this time according to their relative economic status

rather than each regime's size or aims. When Aristotle takes up the competing cases for the different grounds and distributions of political power most directly, he focuses mainly on the claims of these two, most commonly predominant political factions, but attempts to arbitrate their dispute from the higher, less common perspective of the very few best men of virtue – the aristocrats – whose own opinions are also gently corrected in the process (cf. *Pol* 1290a12-29, 1291b7-13, 1301b39-40). Aristotle identifies these principal factions according to what they each claim constitutes the relevant equality and inequality between the members of the city. Democrats put forth the fact of their freedom against the oligarchs' claims of wealth or blue blood, while the aristocrats insist on virtue, as most decisively determinant of proportional merit.

After examining these definitions, I will turn to comparing the grounds of desert for each of the main contenders for rule, and the distributive justice of their respective regimes as discussed in Chapter Nine of Book III. The arguments on behalf of each faction's claim of merit can be made either on the basis of their superior, innate goodness and distinguished worth, or as the result of their special contributions to others. My second section will focus on the innate moral superiority and deferential worth claimed as grounds of desert by each disputant. All three claim to possess the nobility of self-sufficiency that is actually only realized by the man of outstanding virtue. In terms of innate moral worth, then, the aristocrats have far and away the best case for deserving rule on the basis of their noble, well-balanced souls and perfected capacities for virtue, of which the posturing of contending oligarchs and democrats are but vague intimations.

However, just distribution is not only determined by the goodness of possible recipients, but also by the quality and extent of the good that their goodness provides and secures for others – and to an even greater extent, since justice most essentially concerns the good of others. In my

third section I consider the claims of contribution that Aristotle makes on behalf of the democrats and the oligarchs. When judging contributions to the entire city we should not consider each and every contribution whatsoever, but only those that contribute to what the city most essentially is and needs, as revealed by its central purpose. Although both factions provide unique and substantive provisions for their city, Aristotle argues that their contributions toward the city's freedom, might, and prosperity miss the true target of political aims and actions. This argument concerning final ends is addressed in my fourth section, in which the virtuous lives and deeds of aristocrats are shown to be the most meritorious contributions to any city, which is, most essentially, an association dedicated to the cultivation of virtue. Since cities that neglect this primary end are not truly cities, it would seem that oligarchy and democracy are not truly regimes.

However, after analyzing the claims of the three contending factions, Aristotle says that all of them – in contrast to the earlier simple bifurcation of regimes as correct or deviant – lay hold of some part of justice (1279a27-31, 1280a9-11). So, although neither oligarchy nor democracy aims at complete justice, their aims are also not entirely unjust. These “deviant” regimes are not simply self-serving and politically divisive, but actually grasp some partial truth of justice, and only deviate because they each mistake their own particular part for the whole (1281a9-10). Even though all three factions' claims to rule are at least partly just, the full adherence to any one of the principles by which they claim it is simultaneously a rejection of the moral priority of every other contender's principles. This inextricable problem of mutual exclusivity at the heart of political conflict is the subject of my fifth section. The impossibility of satisfying the valid distributive claims of every faction means that distributive justice cannot be adequately realized or pursued by a political community because the various ways in which men

can merit the same goods do not fit together. None of these principles of just desert can be the sole political standard that their adherents contend, because their denial of others' desert according to other incompletely just principles makes abiding by any one of them completely unjust and untenable.

The only way to uphold any degree of distributive justice in a regime is to recognize each party's incomplete principle incompletely, so that the rule of all three factions can be accommodated in such a way that each perceives the prevailing order as denying *all* factions the complete authority and recognition stipulated by their principles, equally. I take up this solution to the incommensurability of claims and principles in my sixth section concerning the mixed regime's dependence on general concord and rule of law. In this section I note that the mixed regime Aristotle endorses is essentially a sort of democracy, without the complete dominance of democratic principles of desert – that is, a corrected “polity” in which the demos enjoys effectual dominance under legally constituted conditions that favor no single distributive principle. Even though the democrats have only a partly just claim, political realities and justice itself – which always involves or takes its bearings from some basis of equality, whether numerical or geometrical – seem to favor their rule. And a well-mixed polity that constrains and balances factions' opposing principles and predilections sustains itself through the establishment of fair proportional equality, required for political community.

In the end, distributive justice calls for the partial recognition and political participation of the demos under the equitable compromise of all factions for the sake of peace and stability, under conditions of neutrality and the strict, pervasive rule of law -- where the true ends of virtue that distinguish real political community from lesser forms can only ever be a peripheral public concern at best. The compromise of an authoritative neutrality that legally trumps all other

distributive principles of desert and reciprocal tolerance of the factions in a well-mixed regime must be elevated in the minds of its citizens as the source of their general welfare and common purpose, above all other political causes and claims. In my final section I will turn to considering the possible reaction of Aristotle's Greek gentlemen readers to this line of argument. Although he does not endorse any regime without qualification here in Book III, Aristotle's portrayal of democracy's case in terms of distributive justice makes it more acceptable to his readers on respectable aristocratic grounds. Concurrently, he demonstrates the shortcomings and undesirable outcomes of those grounds, or any possible grounds, for claiming rights on the basis of merit. In this way, the conditional case for the superior few to share rule with the much larger, stronger, and less virtuous multitude is also a sobering discouragement of vainly seeking the truly good life in political affairs.

To see how the initial promise of distributive justice – that each receive his due – leads Aristotle to propose the legal justice that compromises all distributive principles under a mixed regime, and how his reasoning might curb the political expectations and ambitions of some of his readers while turning others away, we must begin by turning to Aristotle's discussion of distributive justice in Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, then to his reformulated definitions of democracy and oligarchy, and finally to the messier issue in the *Politics*, of applying this sort of justice to the question of who should rule the city as a whole.

Defining the Main Sides More Precisely

Despite the prevalence and political significance of men's claims for their deserved share of the good, the question of which goods each person is rightfully owed is but one aspect of the whole of justice. Distributive justice belongs to that type of justice that Aristotle calls "partial

justice” in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There, in Book V, justice is treated as both a distinct moral virtue (“partial [*merei*] justice”), to the extent that it concerns the virtuous man’s actions and standing in relation to others, and also as the composite summation of every other virtue that it calls upon in its fulfillment (“complete [*teleia*] justice”), by which we are obligated to do the right thing in every situation (*NE* 1129a33-35, 1129b19-35, 1130a11-15, 1130b14-25, cf. *Pol* 1283a38-40). As a distinct moral virtue, partial justice is uniquely oriented toward the good of others, and the proper basis for men’s interpersonal moral credit or deficit, setting it apart from all the other virtues, which take their well-executed exercise and the manifestly noble perfection of the virtuous agent as their proper end (*NE* 1130a2-11).

The category of partial justice comprises distributive justice, corrective justice, and, to a lesser degree, principles of fair exchange (1130b29-1a9). Although fair exchange is not expressly defined as a form of partial justice, it also employs similar ideas of equanimity and reciprocity, but in regard to more conventionally relative commercial standards of transaction that arise in particular communities and contexts (1133a6-b28). Each of these aspects of partial justice looks to the correct proportional balance between two or more people and the good, harm, profit, or cost they each deserve. Corrective justice pertains to a person’s due punishment, meted out according to the proper amount of harm required to restore a preexisting equilibrium between parties that some transgression had upset; distributive justice, however, concerns each person’s due reward of supplementary goods in relation to everyone else, according to the proper proportion of goods most suited to them and the relative merit of their character and deeds (1131a10-20, 1132a1-18).

One form of partial justice and of what is just in this sense is found
in the distribution of honors, of material goods, or of anything else

that can be divided among those who have a share in the political system. For in these matters it is possible for a man to have a share equal or unequal to that of his neighbor. (1130b29-34)

Aristotle goes on to define distributive justice as the determination of reciprocal fairness between people, rendered by the correct geometrical proportions between a certain number of human beings and dispersible goods of varying kind (1131a31-b12). Justice requires that the difference between the amount and quality of goods allotted to any two or more people equals the difference in merit that exists between them. Each person or group deserves a distributable good either due to their outstanding praiseworthy qualities and way of life, or as recompense for whatever positive contribution they make to however many others. The controversy over applying this standard to the proportion of goods and honors across an entire community stems from the wide variety of traits and actions for which different parts of the city can claim merit, which differ not only in their extent and nobility, but also in kind:

Everyone agrees that, in distributions, the just share must be given on the basis of what one deserves, though not everyone would name the same criterion of deserving: democrats say it is free birth, oligarchs that it is wealth or noble birth, and aristocrats that it is virtue. Consequently the just is something proportionate, for proportion is not only applicable to abstract number but also to number in a generalized sense. (1131a25-31)

In order to determine if there might be any basis for establishing some potentially just, proportional mean of distribution between these very different authoritative proportional standards that can satisfactorily help in the public dispersal of goods to the members of an entire

city, it is necessary to develop a more theoretically precise understanding of political matters. And to arrive at a clearer view of things, in light of their most essential causes, we must go beyond the six-fold classification of regimes laid out in Chapter Seven of the *Politics*, and instead consider the alternatives favored by each faction according to more than their relative size and the selfishness of their aims. There are no declared parties of the whole and parties of only a part of a city. The two variables by which Aristotle had designated the six types of rule – the proportion of the population that rules in each, and whose good they rule for – are, more precisely, functions of each regime’s underlying distributive principles of desert by which it defines and justifies its respective aims and citizenry (*Pol* 1279a26-b15, cf. *NE* 1095a14-17, 1103b26-30, 1179a35-b1). To this end, in Chapter Eight, Aristotle revises his definitions of the two most common, deviant regimes in every city, concluding that,

The argument seems to make clear, therefore, that it is accidental that few or many have authority in oligarchies on the one hand and democracies on the other, and that this is because the well off are everywhere few and the poor many. Hence it also turns out that the causes of the differences are not what were mentioned. What makes democracy and oligarchy differ is poverty and wealth: wherever some rule on account of wealth, whether a minority or a majority, this is necessarily an oligarchy, and wherever those who are poor, a democracy. (*Pol* 1279b33-80a2)

Political disputes over who deserves the singular honor of political authority are never simply between proponents of deviancy and those who favor correctness. Nor are they ever simply between a majority or minority but, more precisely, almost always arise between those

already in possession of more goods and those with less, who rule as oligarchs and democrats, respectively (1279b15-33). If the many were the richer party, their rule would more accurately be called an oligarchy according to this more theoretically rigorous definition, while a regime composed of an impoverished few would rule in the manner of a democracy, with characteristically democratic ineptitude directed at aims grounded on democratic principles. It does turn out that the rich are few and the poor are many in every city, but this is not the essential cause of the difference between these factions (1290b16-20). Their economic status and corresponding ways of life, as opposed to their numbers or selfishness, most of all determine and inform the character and rule of both oligarchs and democrats (1290a30-b16).

This means that the many's greatest asset, in terms of competence and practicality, is incidental to their most distinguishing characteristic. But the sheer size of the many's numbers, which they have in common with the masses of any multitude whatsoever, is also not a noble or persuasive basis for why they justly *deserve* rule as their rightful prize. Their collective strength is an integral contribution to a city, especially militarily, but by itself is not equivalent to military or political virtue, as Aristotle's gentlemen readers would be quick to point out (cf. 1283a19-23). Large numbers of bodies contribute greatly to a city's actions, security, and cohesiveness, but only when everyone is also disciplined, well armed, and commanded by experts of military protocol and strategy (cf. 1297b9-19). Because it requires and fosters some degree of virtue, military service to a city might make one worthy of some amount of honor, but universal conscription would justify universal suffrage in the city only as much as it would justify ruling the city like an army under one general and chain of command, or ruling an army democratically.

To be sure, great bulk is exceedingly useful for realizing political aims, and it may also be useful for regimes to compensate the many for their usefulness, but it is not a particularly

honorable trait from the standpoint of moral worth. Although physical might and size can be somewhat impressive, and often does translate to actual political authority in practice, in terms of distributive justice, the capacity for brute force alone does not make anyone truly deserving of the highest honors and devotion of the city, and only moves others to obey on the basis of fear and intimidation. Offering one's body or life in the service of one's city, as the demos is often called upon to do, is certainly an immeasurable sacrifice that incurs a debt. However, claiming the same bulk or numbers by which the demos contributes to the city as the moral grounds of their innate worthiness to rule is tantamount to claiming that might makes right -- that, regardless of whatever ends its exercise serves, effectual power is automatically sanctioned and deserved power (cf. 1276a9-16, 1281a15-18, 1283a40-42, 1283b22-27, 1286b17-18, 1319b5-9, 1321a14-20, *Top* 145b34-6a2). So, although he later refers to the utility and implied threat of the many's collective weight in regard to competence and contribution in Chapter Eleven, Aristotle initially cites their freedom at the end of Chapter Eight as the motivating grounds for their claims of innate moral worth:

But it turns out, as we said, that the former are few and the latter many, for few are well off, but all share in freedom – which are the causes of both disputing over the regime. (*Pol* 1280a2-5)

Aristotle's statement of the two main causes of contestants' dispute over rule reflects the asymmetry of their defining characteristics: while oligarchs are said to be most of all characterized by and to rule "on account of" their wealth, democrats are characterized as rulers who happen to be distinguished by their poverty, but rule on the basis of the indistinctive trait of freedom (1279b37-80a5). The many do not rightfully rule or claim to deserve office on the basis of their most defining feature, because that would amount to grounding political authority on a

detrimental deprivation, in terms of what they lack. While the essential distinguishing feature of oligarchy also constitutes the oligarchs' advantageous material self-sufficiency and positive contribution to the city, the democrats' distinctive poverty is an inherent shortcoming with no corresponding benefit to anyone. So, rather than their incidental size or distinctive poverty, democrats are said to rule on account of the freedom that they share in common with the few (1280a2-24, cf. *NE* 1131a26-28).

Aristotle acknowledges this disproportion in the factions' defining traits when he discusses the principles by which they claim their rights, in the next chapter. What he and the democrats mean by this open-ended, ambiguous term of "freedom" as a basis of fair distribution becomes clearer as he proceeds to assess the merit of each faction and their claims. Aristotle first considers the distributive claims made on behalf of these two most prevalent regimes in light of a third party of aristocrats. All three factions claim their right to rule both on the basis of their innate superior worth, and as the due honor of the manifestly positive contribution they make to the whole. In my next section, after examining Aristotle's account of the two predominant regimes' defining traits and principles, I will consider the case for the three factions' justificatory claims to rule on the basis of their innate moral worth. After that, I will turn to Aristotle's assessment of the special contributions they each provide for their city.

Pretensions to Goodness

The indeterminate claim that Aristotle puts forth on behalf of the democrats – that they rule on account of their freedom – is not as obviously creditable or formidable as the oligarchs' wealth, or the many's own collective potency. In most of his discussion of distributive justice, however, Aristotle seems to downplay the many's military might; he distances their moral claims

of desert from matters of material welfare and security, which, in Chapter Nine, he associates more with the oligarchs, who now claim their collective financial bulk as the justificatory grounds of their rule, as opposed to their noble birth, as the legitimate basis of citizenship (*Pol* 1280a29-30, 1290b16-20, cf. 1283b14-29, *NE* 1131a26-29). In addition, Aristotle associates claims of natural, inborn merit more closely with the moral superiority that the democrats say belongs to all who would claim it, as free men (cf. *Pol* 1281a4-5, 1283a33-37). He thereby ennoble the democrats' own case by grounding it on an ostensibly more profound and impressive claim than their incidental numbers: to share in a native, manly sense of dignified self-worth, by virtue of which they are the moral equals of the few and definitively distinguished from slaves. These slaves, according to the same line of reasoning, are enslaved due to their own nature, as evidenced by their effectual status and characteristically slavish deference to others' unconditional authority over them.

The democrats' bold declaration of their equal freedom with all other non-slaves in the city is the proud, self-assertive claim not to be bred or born for servitude. Democrats' *de facto* status as freemen, according to this view, is based on a presumed natural right not to be involuntarily ruled without recourse or choice in the matter like some mere slave who lacks any inclination or standing "to pay back" like for like, or to resist those who command, harm, or use him in pursuit of their own ends (*NE* 1132b34-3a1). Accordingly, democratic freedom is a negative freedom, oriented toward simply not being bound to serve any others' good except by choice, as seen "in those democracies which are held to be most particularly democratic." Of these, Aristotle later says, "What has become established is the opposite of what is advantageous."

The cause of this is that they define freedom badly. For there are

two things by which democracy is held to be defined: the majority having authority, and freedom. Justice is held to be something equal, equality requires that whatever the multitude resolves is authoritative, and freedom and equality involve doing whatever one wants. So in democracies of this sort everyone lives as he wants and ‘toward whatever he is craving,’ as Euripides says. But this is a poor thing. (*Pol* 1310a26-34)

The democratic conception of freedom, as the absence of restraint, corresponds to the view that the most fundamental distinction between men boils down to that between master and slave. All men are essentially one or the other, leaving no real or sustainable middle ground or status between ruler and ruled. The many tend to view all forms of rule as equivalent to freedom and indistinguishable from the prerogative of a master or despot (1324b32-37). Implied in the democrats’ claim is that their right to rule stems from and is confirmed by their innate aversion to being ruled by others: that freemen’s freedom is an inborn, self-enforcing trait and status shared by every rightful member of the city able to stand up for himself, regardless of his financial holdings or capacity for virtue. This is due solely to the stubborn, quintessentially Greek temperament by which they resist absolute authority of any stripe, even at the cost of their own lives (cf. 1285a17-21, 1327b19-a7).

The many’s freedom is earned by their very willingness to insist on or even fight for it. For the democrats, then, the city is most essentially the equal partnership of those who are equally free of slavery and slavishness (1317b10-15, *NE* 1161a31-b10). Whatever other assets or refinements they may lack, the many can always claim that they also lack any instinct of servility or compliance (cf. *Pol* 1295a19-25). From this perspective, whatever contingent causes,

enabling agents, or circumstances might have actually led to their currently enjoyed freedom from subjugation, freemen are not rightly called *freemen*: the right to rule themselves has not so much been bestowed by anyone else out of generosity or necessity as it has been rightfully won by their own ability and inclination to stand up for themselves. The democrats' appeal to freedom as a principle of distribution, then, rests on the view that no one is authorized to wield and command them like limbs, tools, or beasts – not being slaves, they are rightfully their own men and deserve to share equally in the collective autonomy of the city (1274a10-15, 1328a27-36, cf. 1280a31-33, 1291a5-10, *Rhet* 1393b9-23). This claim, which derives men's desert from whatever actual status and power has in fact been distributed to them, is predicated on the belief that freemen's moral superiority has a natural, effectual power and authority, of which the actual self-assertive strength and freedom displayed by some can be taken as ample evidence (cf. *Pol* 1291a5-10). "When they say this, however, they are in search of nothing other than the slave by nature of which we spoke at the beginning," Aristotle declares in Book I, in regard to all those who ascribe moral superiority and rightful authority to effectually empowered free men over their subjects, families, and slaves (1255a28-32, cf. 1254a14-17). Because they wish virtue had a real, naturally sanctioned, clearly perceptible power in the world, people often try to confirm it by attributing the authority and prevailing order of things to virtue's moral might.

The different segments of a city's population to whom oligarchy and democracy distribute political authority and citizenship are a function of what each regime considers the most decisive distinction among men: as either free and slavish, or rich and poor. Both sides in the dispute, Aristotle says, accept the same basic formulation of distributive justice as a proportional equality based on desert, and so likewise agree that political equality should exist between moral equals and inequality between unequals, and that, therefore, each deserves to rule

in proportion to his equality or inequality to others (*Pol* 1280a11-13, 1301a25-28).

First it is necessary to grasp what they speak of as the defining principles of oligarchy and democracy, and what oligarchic and democratic justice are. For all fasten on a certain sort of justice, but proceed only to a certain point, and do not speak of the whole of justice in its authoritative sense. For example, justice is held to be equality, and it is, but for equals and not for all, and inequality is held to be just and is indeed, but for unequals and not for all, but they disregard this element of persons and judge badly. The cause of this is that the judgment concerns themselves, and most people are bad judges concerning their own things. And so since justice is for certain persons, and is divided in the same manner with respect to objects and for persons, as was said previously in the ethics, they agree as to the equality of the object, but dispute about it for persons. They do this particularly because of what was just spoken of, that they judge badly with respect to what concerns themselves, but also because both, by speaking to a point of a kind of justice, consider themselves to be speaking of justice simply. For the ones, if they are unequal in a certain thing, such as goods, suppose they are unequal generally, while the others suppose that if they are equal in a certain thing, such as freedom, they are equal generally. (1280a6-24)

While the democrats adduce their equal merit from their equal capacity for resisting

others' authority, the oligarchs similarly insist that their own unequal net worth denotes unequal moral worth (1301a25-38). Oligarchs construe their greater self-sufficiency in terms of basic needs and external goods as a reflection of their noble inner-worth on the basis of the same presumption made by the democrats: that merit must have some real, perceptible power by which men can be guided in assigning honors, goods, and rank among themselves. Having dismissed the customary claims of legitimacy made by the native and wellborn as insufficient and arbitrary standards, in the first five chapters, Aristotle restricts the grounds of the oligarchs' claims mostly to their contributions to the city's financial capital, in the rest of Book III. However, by omitting any possible claims of innate superior worth from the oligarchs' arguments, he helps distinguish them from the even fewer morally serious and virtuous men of the city whose claimed merit stems more from their fully developed virtue rather than the socioeconomic conditions necessary for it, and are more accurately called aristocrats.

Except for the homonymous "polity," the terms by which Aristotle originally identifies the major types of regime in Chapter Seven are already politically charged and are routinely thrown around as derogatory or flattering, by both the few and the many, in reference to themselves and each other (cf. 1274b33-35, 1276a6-13, 1295a25-34). Certainly from the democrats' perspective, for example, whatever form the absolute rule of a small group of men takes, no matter what grounds of superiority they claim for their authority, their regime looks like just another tyrannical oligarchy. And, at the same time, oligarchs often refer to themselves and their rule as aristocratic (cf. 1281a33-34, 1307a5-33). Aristotle is well aware that, in practice, there is often considerable overlap of the actual factions and claims of the wealthy, wellborn, and virtuous, and that "in most places the well off are held to occupy the place of gentlemen" (1283a33-38, 1294a15-25, 1301b1-4, cf. 1278a20-24). In Book IV he acknowledges

the slipperiness and elasticity of the term “aristocracy,” in light of the fact that it is not customarily used in its most precise, literal sense, to designate the truly best (*aristoi*) men of the city,

Only the regime that is made up of those who are best simply on the basis of virtue, and not of men who are good in relation to some presupposition, is justly referred to as an aristocracy, for only here is it simply the case that the same person is a good man and a good citizen, while those who are good in others are so in relation to their regime. Nevertheless, there are certain regimes, which differ both from those that are run oligarchically and from so-called polity, and are called aristocracies. For wherever they elect to offices not only on the basis of wealth but also on the basis of desert, the regime itself is different from both of these and is called aristocratic. For, indeed, where virtue is not made a common concern there are still certain persons who are of good reputation and held to be respectable. Wherever, therefore, the regime looks both to wealth and to virtue as well as the people, as in Carthage, it is aristocratic, and so also those which, like the Lacedaemonian regime, look to two alone, virtue and the people, and where there is a mixture of these two things, democracy and virtue. There are, therefore, these two kinds of aristocracy besides the first or the best regime. And there is a third: those forms of so-called polity that incline more toward oligarchy. (1293b1-20)

Later, when discussing the different variations and combinations of the form of regime (*politeia*) that he confusingly dubs with the name common to all regimes – “polity” (*politeia*) – Aristotle accounts for the blurring of these two minority factions’ claims by noting that noble birth, refinement, and wealth usually go together and are often all enjoyed by the same persons.

Simply speaking, polity is a mixture of oligarchy and democracy.

It is customary, however, to call those [polities] that tend toward democracy ‘polities,’ and those tending more toward oligarchy ‘aristocracies,’ on account of the fact that education and good birth particularly accompany those who are better off. Further, those who are well off are held to possess already the things for the sake of which the unjust commit injustice; this is why they are referred to as gentlemen and notables. Since aristocracy tries to assign preeminence to the best of the citizens, it is asserted that oligarchies too are made up particularly of gentlemen. (1293b33-42)

In every city, the number of truly serious and morally virtuous aristocrats makes up a tiny subset of the oligarchic few (1306b21-27). However, most oligarchs already consider themselves noble and aristocratic on account of the superior ancestry or sophisticated taste for and access to fine things (1291b14-18, 1306b27-7a5). The oligarchs view their money and possessions as signs of their superior moral worth, by which the relative merit of everyone in the city can be gauged, and that oligarchs can confirm for themselves by holding political offices in addition to their material assets (1301a31-37, *Rhet* 1390b31-1a13, cf. *NE* 1124a19-b3, 1125a27-32). The oligarchs’ conflation of the most prominent and quantifiably measurable economic

conditions for virtue with the more elusively appraised exercise and cultivation of it is understandable, since the causal association between these attributes is somewhat complicated. Equipment and leisure are prerequisites for living an active life of virtue and, conversely, some virtue seems necessary for gaining wealth in the first place since, as Aristotle later declares, “men do not acquire and safeguard the virtues by means of external things, but the latter by means of the former” (*Pol* 1223a40-b1, 1265a29-37, 1329a17-27, cf. 1307a33-34, *NE* 1122b27-34). However, the spurious conclusion the oligarchs draw from these observations of correlation – that prosperity either presumes or gives rise to virtue, and can therefore be treated as its corresponding equivalent – is based on the strong but unfounded hope that material and moral self-sufficiency are inseparably conjoined by nature, and that riches are never attained by, or at least never foster, vice (*Pol* 1329a17-27, cf. *NE* 1120a5-21).

Their strong sense of their own superior worth obscures from the merely rich, well-born, or free that, according to their own logic and standards, both democrats and oligarchs ought to serve and honor the surpassing merit of the most virtuous among them. The aggrandizement of the oligarchs’ wealth from which they derive much of their pride and self-respect pales next to the true beauty of a well-ordered soul. And the freedom from slavery and submissiveness that the democrats ignorantly equate with license is more completely realized by the aristocrats, who act only for the sake of the truly noble and good through their hard-won self-mastery of body *and* soul (cf. 1125a18-27). The claim of innate moral worth that Aristotle makes on behalf of the democrats – to deserve rule on the basis of their equal capacity for self-determination – also crudely resembles the claims he makes on behalf of the aristocrats – to be self-possessed and fully human, and, therefore, qualitatively superior to others who remain stunted and constrained by their own slavishness.

Like the democrats, the aristocrats base their case on their innate ability to choose their own best end and their freedom from slavishness (1124b31-5a3). The democrats' call for equal respect and recognition of their equal independence from any other motive or purpose beyond their own stems from a spirited republican pride that has been kindled through recurring acts of self-sacrifice and martial valor – through these they acquire an inkling of the noble self-regard born of moral virtue and the natural authority of the aristocrats' more complete self-sufficiency. Both democrats and aristocrats define their claims in reference to a noble view of man as a political animal and the city as the distinctively human home of the naturally dignified and self-possessed, who associate for the sake of living freely according to and for the sake of virtue and the good life, in contrast to the less noble, but necessary, external goods of common life emphasized by the oligarchs in Chapter Nine. However, in comparison to the aristocrats' completely realized, genuine freedom from vice that allows for their pursuit of the truly good, the demos comes up short, able to emulate only some aspects of complete virtue or, at best, military virtue.

Unlike the aristocrats, who can claim freedom from all false ends through self-mastery and deliberate choice, democrats conceive their own claimed freedom only in terms of what it is not, as the absence of any externally binding commands or compulsions, like those imposed on slaves with no recourse (cf. *Pol* 1283b17-26). In practice, this sort of freedom consists of slavishly following one's most passionately felt desires as they arise, willy-nilly, while the positive freedom of aristocrats constitutes the realization of their natural perfection and good, through the disciplined application of virtue in a condition of leisured relief from the most basic necessities (*NE* 1095b14-22, 1113a16-35, cf. *Pol* 1337b4-22, *Meta* 982b23-33, 1075a18-23). The aristocrats' moral virtue endows them and their actions with a dignity, autonomy, and self-

regard that transform and transcend the ordinary capacity for independent voluntary action (cf. *Pol* 1254a35-b2). Because they want what they think they already know is good, the many are easily led to believe that physical forces and material conditions outside of their own desires are the only factors that could prevent their impulsive pursuit of the most apparent pleasures from resulting in their satisfaction (*NE* 1095a22-26, 1111a15-19). And consequently, when they actually do gain control of the ruling offices, democrats tend to relax or undo many of the city's customary constraints on their appetites (*Pol* 1310a25-35).

So, from the standpoint of a virtuous gentleman, though perhaps somewhat more dignified and admirable than appeals to monetary assets, democratic claims and principles are still, at best, based on misplaced, deluded feelings of individual self-worth derived from a strong sense of their collective potential, leading them to mistake their misery and deprivations for noble sacrifice and grounds of desert. What the democrats call freedom and understand as dignity, then, amounts to only the barest prerequisites for the complete self-sufficiency and moral worth of the aristocrats. Therefore, like the oligarchs, the democrats' claim to deserve rule as equal masters is amiss, because they also mistake virtue's soil for its noble bloom and the incidental appearances of freedom and enslavement as the most morally distinguishing inequality between men (1318a17-26). Aristotle later says, in regard to all three contending factions, that "they all claim to merit on the basis of some superiority, though not the same superiority" (1288a17-24). And because they each take their own superiority as a sign of the complete justice of their rule, but can also recognize, on some level, the greater nobility and meritorious worth of true self-sufficiency, all contending factions draw the same conclusion and "lay claim even to virtue and suppose themselves capable of ruling in most offices" (1291b4-6, 1323a33-38). However, although both material wealth and physical freedom are necessary preconditions, they

are hardly sufficient for the possibility of moral virtue – an end that only a small fraction of the few, wealthy freemen in a city ever even pursue (1301b34-2a7).

Special Endowments of Bulk and Clout

Although the innate moral worth of the aristocrats clearly surpasses the vague airs of nobility effused by the merely wealthy or free members of the city, much of the attestable grandeur and merit of their virtue depends upon the particular occasions and outcomes of its exercise. Despite virtuous activity being its own end, in the *Ethics* it is also depicted as an essential element of the good man's happiness, in the greater moral context of his pursuit of extrinsic conditions and ends that are worthy of his virtue (*NE* 1123b2-7, 1169a6-13). For instance, the most outstanding, morally serious man, doing the most fitting things in the noblest way, but in service of the deplorable aims of undeserving people, hardly shines forth as meritoriously as the outstanding man whose actions promote and attain noble purposes worthy of his virtue; through these his innate nobility is made manifest to all and affirmed in the opinions of those his actions most fittingly benefit. So although the innate worth of a man's character might merit something in itself, the extent of what it merits largely depends upon the particular results by which his worth is made apparent to other decent men (1131b27-33, cf. 1120a21-23, *Pol* 1285b3-9, 1286b7-11). Accordingly, rather than simply leaving it at acknowledging the superiority of the aristocrats' innate moral worth, in his discussion of fair distribution of office, Aristotle mostly emphasizes the unique contributions each group has made and can make, not just to a part, but toward the most authoritative and comprehensive ends of the entire city.

To settle the question of who makes the most essential contribution to the city's existence and political life, and thereby deserves the highest honor of preeminent authority, requires

specifying the content of the main parties' claims and any common grounds of agreement between them by which they can be comparatively assessed in reference to what the city most essentially is, as determined by its most essential purpose (1283a14-16). Both oligarchs and democrats seem to believe that whoever most contributes to and reflects what the city and its functions are should be granted rule. And each faction cites its own special contribution as the proper basis for just compensation, based on the shared presumption that the primary causal agent of something has the most rightful claim to be its steward (1280a14-24, cf. 1282a14-24). They further agree that the ruling offices are the best and highest distributable goods and most fitting reward of true merit available in the city. But they disagree over the application of this standard, especially in regard to determining which equal or unequal contribution is most politically pertinent and expedient (1280a16-18, 1301a28-37, 1301b34-39, 1332b16-22, *NE* 1131a24-29). And despite their general agreement about what determines political fairness and due reward, *who* each faction thinks most deserves the most authoritative honors accounts for how oligarchic or democratic their regime is (cf. *Pol* 1288a19-24). And whom each identifies as deserving rule, in honor of the defining qualities that constitute the best contribution to the city and its ends, stems from both factions' somewhat similar and incomplete conceptions of what the city is and what its end should be (cf. 1328a34-b2).

While democrats would contend that the most fundamental distinction among human beings is that between freemen and slaves, and that political community is most essentially the associative work and equal partnership of the free, the oligarchs' claim of wealth seems to reflect a view of the city as being essentially a lucrative partnership in material resources, currency, and goods necessary for survival and living well; on this basis they claim authority in proportion to the many advantages their wealth purchases and provides the well-equipped city (1280a21-b4).

A city cannot thrive, let alone survive, if it consists of only fully occupied, impoverished laborers, artisans, and slaves (cf. 1259a18-35, 1283a16-19, 1291b6-10). Wealth in the hands of the wealthy helps pay for the necessary undertakings, infrastructure, and projects of the city, including its temples, statues, walls, arms, cavalry, fraternal meals, and more. The oligarchs claim, then, that those who have the most material possessions to give and use for the city deserve to rule, according to the principle that men should have a say in what their city does with its contributions and resources to the same degree of their stake in its well-being.

In terms of material needs and prosperity, the demos of any large, highly developed, and diversified city also makes an important contribution, albeit in a different capacity from the wealthy, through lifelong, full-time careers, as artisans, farmers, and sometime soldiers (1261a14-29, 1328b15-24). And Aristotle could mention here, as he does later, that as an aggregate, the democrats often own more property than the oligarchs (1283b29-34, 1305b22-33). However, as part of his effort to elevate and ennoble democratic claims, in Chapter Nine, Aristotle attributes material contribution mostly to the rich. When he mentions cities' need for military defense, Aristotle places more emphasis on the simplistic yet dignified, democratic principle of equal freedom than the many's contribution of manpower. But Aristotle is well aware of the link between the democratic claim of freedom and this martial manifestation of their merit in helping secure the fundamental integrity and sovereignty of the city and its regime through their collective superiority in strength (1279a40-b2, 1283a19-23, 1321a14-20).

As a common capacity of all freemen, the democratic conception of freedom, defined in terms of what it is not, as being ruled by one's own fancy alone, can also be understood in the more robust, civic republican sense, as a capacity essential to every regime of equal citizens ruling over all (1317b1-12). The many both aim at and contribute to the independent self-

determination integral to every political community (cf. 1324a38-b32, 1325a5-13, 1325b29-31). By contributing to the city's needs, glory, and freedom from others, most conspicuously on the battlefield, the demos regularly embodies the proud agonistic spirit and bond of political community by displaying a distaste for even life itself if not lived according to one's own preferred principles and ends (cf. 1278a29-31, 1291a7-10). In other words, the many contribute themselves and their lives as rightful natural masters of their own bodies and actions.

In terms of contribution, the many are owed a share in the city's hard-earned freedom in recognition for employing their natural autonomy and propensity to "pay back" like for like on behalf of the city's own self-determination – valorously putting their very bodies and lives on the line – costs that far outweigh the most magnificent gestures of ambitious oligarchs (cf. 1279b9-12, 1304a17-34). And such an unsurpassable contribution is essential to the purposes, potency, and pertinacity of any city – and not just in times of war: the many's opportunities for nobility and leisurely cultivation are sacrificed daily, even during times of peace, in less-celebrated, but as necessary, life-consuming roles of service and production (1258b35-39, 1283a14-23). That is to say, the deficient moral worth and personal incompetence of the many are the direct consequence of their most unique and vital contribution to the whole. Due to the poverty and full-time labors of their station, the many lack the virtue of aristocrats, since "it is impossible to pursue the things of virtue when one lives the life of a vulgar person or a laborer. In oligarchies, on the other hand, it is not possible for a laborer to be a citizen, for sharing offices is on the basis of large assessments, but it is possible for a vulgar person, since many artisans become wealthy" (1278a20-21, 1323b7-29, 1329a17-27, 1334a15-34, *NE* 1099a30-b8). Of the contending factions, then, the demos contributes to the lowest ends, but in light of the complete happiness of virtuous activity that their necessarily vulgar way of life denies them, theirs entails the greatest

sacrifice of all – a sacrifice compounded by the fact that they are even deprived of the basic dignity of ever having voluntarily chosen to dedicate themselves to their menial roles for the sake of a sense of nobility or the greater good.

Despite the partial justice of their claims, both dominant factions seem to overlook the most “authoritative” commonly harbored conviction that most moves them to justify the power and prestige they seek for themselves – as their right, rather than simply an object of their yen for possessing rare and enviable sources of pleasure and gain.

For if it were for the sake of possessions that they participated and joined together, they would share in the city just to the extent that they shared in possessions, so that the argument of the oligarchs might be held a strong one, for it is not just for one who has contributed one mina to share equally in a hundred minas with the one giving all the rest, whether from those who were there originally or the later arrivals. But it’s not only for the sake of living but rather primarily for the sake of living well. Otherwise there could be a city of slaves or animals – as things are, there is not, since they do not share in happiness or in living in accordance with deliberate choice. Nor is it for the sake of an alliance to prevent their suffering injustice from anyone, nor for purposes of exchange and use of one another – for otherwise the Tyrrhenians and Carthaginians, and all who have agreements with one another, would be as citizens of one city – at any rate there are compacts between them concerning imports, agreements to abstain from

injustice, and treaties of alliance. But no offices common to all have been established to deal with these things, but different ones in each, nor are they concerned what sort of person each other ought to be, or that none of those under the compacts should be unjust or deprived in any way, but only that they should not act unjustly toward one another. (*Pol* 1280a24-b4)

Both factions misconstrue what most essentially defines and distinguishes the city from all other types of association, but their common motive for claiming rule seems to suggest they share a notion of the city's nobility that makes it worthy of their moral contribution, sacrifice, and claims to rule it. As discussed in my last chapter, much of the fierceness of the competition over political rule and the prestige of victoriously attaining it as a prize stems from the contestants' view of the task of ruling as the most venerable, distributable honor in the city, rather than merely selfless community service or drudgery. Deep down, all contenders see political rule and citizenship as far more estimable forms of authority than the mastery of patriarchs and despots, who merely manage incomplete subjects, slaves, or family members (1278a35-37, 1325a23-30). Because of the all-encompassing, absolute authority of the political order, fellow citizens genuinely do care about the complete character and wellbeing of each other – far beyond each other's usefulness and trustworthiness – partly because they see each other as extensions of themselves, each identifying with and representing every other and the community as a whole, in a way that no member of any other conventionally arranged association can. Their shared presumption about the elevated nobility of the city and citizenship is what leads both factions to vie for power in the first place, and it is the reputable opinion on which Aristotle relies to adjudicate their dispute (cf. 1302b10-14).

The True City's True End

Before Chapter Nine of Book III, Aristotle has defined the city in various ways at different turns in the argument. At the very beginning of the *Politics*, he distinguishes it from those more common despotic associations by pointing to its more complete, self-sufficient end of living well as the most authoritative community of all, composed of and originating from smaller household communities (1252a1-6, 1252b27-3a1). Then, later in Book I, he reformulates this distinction between political and despotic rule, citing the interactive process of ruling over and with one's free equals as the fundamental defining feature of the city (1255b16-20). In Book II, he describes the constituent parts of the city in a more detached manner and in general terms, with a view to its most basic corporal conditions, as being first and foremost a partnership among a heterogeneous multitude of citizens sharing a common territory (1260b39-42, 1261a17-20). And at the beginning of Book III, Aristotle elaborates on this account of the city as composed of citizens, observing that the proper and just definition of the citizen is relative to his regime, which leads him to redefine the city again, as most essentially its formative, authoritative regime (1274b38-5a41, 1276b9-13). Every city, its constituent citizenry, and way of life are most defined and shaped by its regime, which renders the very task of defining the city a provocative political act, invoking the inherently volatile moral question of which things, men, and actions are best and deserve the most, including the right to define the basis and purposes of the entire city. But now, in Chapter Nine, Aristotle offers his most theoretically precise and noble explanation of the core distinguishing feature that most sets genuine political community apart from and far above all other kinds of human association, according to its most exalted, consummate end:

Whoever takes thought for good management, however, gives careful attention to political virtue and vice. It is thus evident that virtue must be a care for every city, or at least every one to which the term applies truly and not merely in a manner of speaking. For otherwise the partnership becomes an alliance, which differs from such between those who are far apart only by location. And law becomes a compact and, as the sophist Lycophron says, a guarantor among one another of the just things, but not the sort of thing to make the citizens good and just. (1280b4-13)

The same elements of self-sufficiency and noble living that Aristotle had before argued most epitomize the political community and fundamentally distinguish it from a household, tribe, village, and nation, in Books I and II – against those who insist ruling a city is essentially only another form of mastery and management, no different from running a large household or small nation – are now cited against those who would debase the defining political principles and purposes that would distinguish it from the coalitions of convenience and mutual interests formed by allied business partners already living under the auspices of some framework of conventional standards of fairness. Sophists like Lycophron reduce the scope and purposes of political community to a simple consensual arrangement of reciprocal material utility by defining it according to only the most rudimentary conditions of its most apparent tangible aspects – purged of all temptations to find one’s own good in making everyone else good rather than simply leeching off each others’ self-interested services for the sake of goods. This depiction of political community, as simply the broad advantageous agreement to refrain from acting unjustly toward each other, would seem to conceive of political conflict as a matter of finding some

generally acceptable code of conduct in the distribution of a finite amount of resources to a certain number of consumers.

In contrast to this approach, Aristotle attributes to the disputants a more genuine attachment to justice that informs their honest, though misdirected and insufficient, appeals to it in their contest for goods, honor, and power. He does not deny that these lower aspects of community are always necessary political concerns, but insists that they are, at best, means that find their end in service to the more essentially political project of rising above such concerns in order to pursue some sort of higher, more comprehensive, and fulfilling good. Accordingly, Aristotle puts forward a more admirable and complete conception of politics, which, as it is, can already all too easily devolve into small-minded class struggles over economic interests, even without the influence of simplifying ideas advanced by conventionalists like Lycophron and others. He does this by posing the question of fair distribution from a loftier, public-spirited perspective, far above that of the merely rich and free, with a view more towards what the incontrovertibly eminent nobility of the city itself deserves than towards the much more cursory and negligible desert of its agitated factions. That is, Aristotle addresses the controversy over who deserves to rule the city by looking to whose principles the city deserves to have rule it.

In this way, then, Aristotle derives the nobility of the city from the disputants' own deep-seated belief that ruling it is such a preeminently authoritative honor, and is, therefore, especially suited to the most worthy and dignified contributor to the city's end. The nobility that reputable opinion commonly attributes to political community can only persist so long as it is at least partly correct opinion, made respectable to the degree that it is corroborated by the political fact that the city and its citizens do somehow aspire to a higher, more important political goal than safeguarding their relations of utility. In light of their own evident reverence for the desert of the

city to be ruled by the best for the best purposes by right, both these factions ought to recognize and defer to those who base their claims on the more noble contribution of virtue, who most embody and contribute to the highest ends of man's associative endeavors. The party of virtue just so happens to consist of and serve the ideal type to which his serious gentlemen readers would aspire: those who most contribute to realizing the highest political goal of cultivating virtue and decency among the citizenry, through their performance of well-executed, noble actions that advance the noblest and best ends, and by serving as edifying models of true nobility for the rest of the city in the process. This element is so integral to the most essential meaning and purpose of genuinely *political* association that, even if everything else were in place for common life, without a general, overriding concern for virtue and the good life among its constituent members, such a community of men would still not correctly be called a polis in the strictest sense of the term:

But that the matter stands thus is evident. For even if one were to bring the locations together into one, so that the city of the Megarians were fastened to that of the Corinthians by walls, it would still not be a single city. Nor would it be if they practiced intermarriage with one another, although this is one of the aspects of the partnership that is peculiar to cities. Nor, similarly, if certain persons dwelled in separate places, yet were not so distant as to have nothing in common but had laws not to commit injustice toward one another in their transactions – for example, if something else of this sort, and the multitude of them were ten thousand, yet they had nothing in common except things of this

sort, exchange and alliance, not even in this way would there be a city. What, then, is the reason for this? It is surely not on account of a lack of proximity of the partnership. For even if they joined together while participating in this way, but each nevertheless treated his own household as a city and each other as if there were a defensive alliance merely for assistance against those committing injustice, it would not by this fact be held a city by those who theorize the matter precisely – if, that is, they participated in a similar way when joined together as they had when separated.

(1280b13-23)

The oligarchs' claims would most clearly be correct if the city were essentially an elaborate business partnership, arranged solely for securing the material sustenance, prosperity, and convenience of its members. Having given the most, and liable to the greatest risk of loss, it is only fair that the most invested partners reap the greatest and most goods, honors, and say in determining the ruling standards, actions, and policy of their partnership. And the democrats are correct to the extent that the city serves primarily as a sort of fortified strategic defense coalition and guarantee of citizens' mutually secured domestic peace (1261a17-29, 1283a14-23, cf. 1261a22-29). Sophists like Lycophron are correspondingly correct in depicting every city as a sort of mutually advantageous compact that serves to supply what is necessary for the security and comfort of its citizens. But if this were all a city ever was or could be – merely an association of utility, serving to secure its members' private exchange and common defense – then it is not so clear why the question of who deserves the right to arrange and attend to it

through further selfless contribution would warrant all the agitation that contending factions think it does.

It is evident, therefore, that the city is not a partnership in a location and for the sake of not committing injustice against each other and of transacting business. These things must necessarily be present if there is to be a city, but not even when all of them are present is it yet a city -but the partnership in living well both of households and families for the sake of complete and self-sufficient life. This will not be possible, however, unless they inhabit one and the same location and make use of intermarriage. It was on this account that marriage connections arose in cities, as well as clans, sacrifices, and the pastimes of living together. This sort of thing is the work of friendship, for friendship is the deliberate choice of living together. Living well, then, is the end of the city, and these things are for the sake of this end. A city is the partnership of families and villages in a complete and self-sufficient life. This, we assert, is living happily and nobly. The political partnership must be set down, therefore, as being for the sake of noble actions, not for the sake of living together. Hence those who contribute most to a partnership of this sort have a greater share in the city than those who are equal or greater in freedom and family but unequal in political virtue, or those who outdo them in wealth but are outdone in virtue. (1280b29-1a8)

The contributions of commerce and security are necessary for a true city, but neither can be held as its *true* purpose. For it to be worth anyone's loyalty and efforts to preserve or reform it, the city "must be set down" as noble and existing for the sake of men's flourishing and superiority in virtue (1281a1-2, cf. 1291a21-32). A city, in the truest sense, is not merely some partnership of utility or a common means to privately engendered ends, but the architectonic, authorizing source of every member's end and concern for the lives and quality of his fellow citizens (cf. 1280b1-10, *Rhet* 1366a7-12). Material welfare, preservation, and civic splendor all seem rather empty and pointless if they do not at least somehow facilitate the truly best way of life. The city is many things, but it is noble only if it is above all else an association dedicated to living well (*Pol* 1280b34-40). Aristotle goes so far in concurring with the aristocrats as to declare that even if a community shares a common location, defense, and currency and exchange, and even if it mandates public sacrifice and intermarriage between families, it would still not rightly called a city in the most theoretically precise sense if it does not also make virtue and noble actions its central concern (1280b29-34).

The distinctly political fellowship and dignified moral concern that mark a true citizenry are only fully instilled among men living together as legal peers under common standards of reciprocation (1277b6-16, 1325a36-b15, 1327a34-36). And if cities and citizenship are seen as mere contrivances of mutual consent and advantage, when the same arrangement becomes disadvantageous or inconvenient for any one of the signatories and it is no longer in his foreseen interest for him to keep his word, then there remains no readily apparent reason for him not to change his mind and go back on his assent, just as his city itself would justifiably break with any treaties, alliances, or deals with each other for the sake of its own more pressing domestic concerns. Only where there is some basis for and degree of concord – where there is some

pervasive common purpose among the rulers and ruled – can a regime hope to command authority in both thick and thin times (1295b22-24). But any city worthy of the name must somehow be seen as constituting a distinct authoritative good, which alone provides for the complete realization of its contributing members' natural ends.

Both the oligarchs' and democrats' deficient claims of innate worth and public contribution both reflect and reinforce their cockeyed aims, as well as the shallow sophistical view of political association as essentially akin to any other alliance based on necessity. And, because they are unable to distinguish between political rule and mastery, in practice, each faction despises being ruled by the other as something only suitable for slaves, and is only able to rule in a despotic manner when in power (1295b17-22, 1321a32-b1, 1325a31-41). But the serious citizen rightfully views ruling and serving a city as the most eminent honor conceivable for a political animal with an inborn capacity for speech and apprehending the good and the just – a position of authority over fellow citizens that fundamentally differs from ruling a large, self-sufficient household or serving a coalition of individual interests. It is not so impressive to risk one's life on behalf of stockholding business partners or to preserve a business deal, and men have little concern about the moral development of their present allies of tactical expedience (so long as they and their interests can be trusted enough to maintain their prior agreements). Cultivating moral virtue is the right and proper final end of all of the other more necessary things citizens share, and it alone makes the city truly worthy of their devotion and sacrifice. Therefore, the question of who most deserves to rule should be determined by which faction most contributes to the most essential political purpose of securing the self-sufficient flourishing of the city and its citizens, which is accordant with the standard that whoever is the primary cause or maker of something has the prime claim to it. Therefore, because the virtuous

contribute the most to the noblest, best end of what the true city most essentially is, they would seem most of all to deserve the noblest and best things the city has to offer, including the honors and opportunities that rule confers, as it alone seems to call upon all of man's noblest capacities for exercising the full spectrum of moral virtue on the greatest stage of all (1325a30-b1, cf. 1283a36-40, *NE* 1130a1-3).

Fair Enough

Because the most decent few surpass the other contenders for rule in merit – both in terms of moral worth and contributions to the best ends of the city – Aristotle can heartily agree with his aristocratic readers that they offer the noblest and best way of life, character traits, and ends at which the city most essentially aims; they, therefore, deserve a reward in proportion to the incomparably great good that only their innate moral superiority can epitomize and provide. And yet, at the end of Chapter Nine, immediately after so staunchly affirming their claims and how far other regimes fall short of true aristocrats' superior principles, Aristotle steps back from fully endorsing *any* faction's exclusive right to rule. Despite his preceding insistence that a city is most truly distinguished by its highest end of cultivating virtue and noble actions, Aristotle concludes inconclusively: "That all who dispute about regimes speak of some part of justice, then, is evident from what has been said" (*Pol* 1281a8-10).

The virtuous men of the city who most directly contribute to its highest possible end do have the *best* claim for the highest honor, but theirs is not the *only* unique or essential contribution, and so theirs is not the only just claim. *All* of the contenders for rule appeal to only one aspect of justice (1281a9-10). Therefore, despite the inferiority of the oligarchs' and democrats' claims, they are still partly just, and the superior claim and rule of virtue by itself is

not completely just, and can even be considered unjust to the extent that it would deny these lesser, but valid claims (1281a10-21). Although the aristocrats have the strongest case for meriting authoritative rule in terms of both their exceptional moral worth and contributions, they – like everyone else contending for political preeminence – judge poorly in their own case, blinded by the laudability and urgency of their own desert. The aristocrats go too far in claiming that the city should be seen *only* for the sake of noble actions and not at all for the sake of merely living together (1281a1-3). Even if virtue could rightly be made the central driving concern of a city, it can never be its sole concern. Every city – even the best one possible, run by the most high-minded, qualified rulers – must make its wherewithal to defend and augment its holdings a persistent preoccupation (1334a16-34, cf. 1307b29-8a35, 1320b7-12).

So, despite the fact that Aristotle endorses and justifies aristocracy on the basis of the other factions' own arguments, his final verdict is not so firmly in favor of any one side over the others because no group's case for rule is completely just. The full realization of distributive justice would seem to require that all these claims somehow be reconciled – that every faction somehow rule in proportion to its unique contribution and dignity. But such reconciliation would depend upon some widely recognized basis by which virtue's merit could be made commensurable to the merit earned by others' necessary contributions to common defense and affluence, and on whether oligarchs and democrats would both consent to this indeterminable division of duties and authority, and furthermore, could agree with the aristocrats about exactly which individuals are most virtuous and deserving of the greater amount of which goods. And Aristotle indicates that all of these conditions necessary for reconciling the principles of freedom and wealth with virtue are impossible, and perhaps even inconceivable.

The city has a limited amount of goods and honors at its disposal, which must be collectively dispersed (equally or unequally) by a few or many, or else by one alone (cf. 1287b25-34, 1313b6-16). Because all factions make valid and just, but incomplete, claims for their right to rule, a politically inexperienced legislator might suppose that he need only put each part together in such a way as to complete them all with aspects of each other. But the partially just claim of each faction only establishes that they each merit the same exclusive, eminent honor. And none of their principled claims can be fully honored along with even the partial recognition of the others' partially just claims. Nor is the paramount honor of rule that they all claim easily shared or regulated by others, if only because not everyone can rule together simultaneously; this requires legislators and statesmen to continually divert and allay men's anxieties by concealing many of the benignly unfair discrepancies in distributions and rights in the city through ploys of misdirection and chicanery (1278a35-39, 1297a6-13, 1298b30-34, 1307b39-8a). However, the effectiveness of rhetorical, procedural, and legalistic tricks is severely limited by the fact that there are no lesser rewards, public posts, or small honors that even come close the preeminence of the ruling offices. And no amount or combination of the lesser, symbolic tokens of appreciation at a city's disposal (public praise, honorific titles, security, comfort, or prosperity) could ever satisfactorily compensate disgruntled, excluded claimants in any proportion to what they deserve. All of these shoddy substitutes are infinitesimal in their worth next to the honor of distributing all goods according to one's unfettered judgment of what is advantageous and just for all (1295a40). Therefore, even though we can discern, along with Aristotle, the vastly superior contributory attributes of virtue in comparison to freedom, strength, or wealth, we are still faced with the intransigent political problem that no lesser goods or honorary public positions outside of the ruling offices

corresponds to any intelligible ratio between the merit of virtue and the inferior, but still substantial, contributions of the rich and the many (1283a15-22).

In addition to the fact that the singular honor of supreme ruling authority for which they contend cannot be truly shared and exercised simultaneously by all according to a fair ratio of desert, the contributions on which each faction stakes its claim to deserve office – of their superior strength, property, and virtue – are themselves incommensurable (1283a4-9). The claims and aims of opposing factions cannot all be adequately acknowledged or neatly combined and prioritized like other sorts of opinions and goods in the city because they are grounded upon incongruous principles of justice, each demanding its own complete and comprehensive realization (1295b12-24). Because all contending factions justly deserve the right to rule, but in qualitatively unequal ways, any attempt to fit all claimants' principles of distribution together into one consistent system of justice acceptable to all is in vain (cf. 1267b22-30). No natural baseline or comparable standard exists by which these parties' disparately advantageous traits and contributions could be properly balanced according to some single, non-arbitrary, and coherent axiom of reciprocation.

Aside from the controversies over which part of the city is innately superior and *has* contributed most, is the more sensible question of which part most deserves to rule for the contribution that their political preeminence *would* secure for the city -- that is, what they merit on account of their special ability to provide better rule to all. After all, rightfully honoring the most deserving rulers' just due ought to be good, both for the rulers and for the city that they deem worthy of themselves and their contributions. The just desert of the just man cannot be harmful to the quality of his life, character, or contributory accomplishments, lest his elevated position of authority seem an undeserved punishment rather than his justly owed tribute. But

actually establishing in a real city any of the partially just principles of desert as the foundational maxim of complete justice for all – as each of the competing principles would oblige us – would irreparably sabotage both the city and regime (1261a22-1302a2-6, 1310a2-12). As Aristotle observes at the beginning of the next chapter, “There is a question as to what the authoritative element of the city should be. Either it is the multitude, the wealthy, the decent, the one who is best of all, or the tyrant, but all of these appear to be troublesome.” (1281a11-15)

Because every faction’s principle is only partially just, the exclusive rule of any one of them is completely unjust and detrimental for everyone. The aims and outcomes of each disputant’s competing principles are antithetical because satisfying any one of them would, at the same time, unjustly deny the others’ claims, precluding the possibility of any coherent standard by which we might reckon a truly fair proportion of distribution between factions’ claims. No single principled aim, therefore – not even the natural aspiration to manifest our complete human perfection – can ever be the actual exclusive end of any possible regime (1283a23-42, cf. 1295a8-25). So, although each of the main contenders for rule has a just claim, none of them is correct – all of them are in effect deviant, since granting any one of them sovereignty over the entire city would be untenable, unjustly preventing even the most deserving rulers’ adherence to any principle of distribution whatsoever, including their own (1309b17-10a35, 1317a34-38). As Aristotle later states, less equivocally, “All of these things seem to make it evident, then, that none of the defining principles on the basis of which they claim they merit rule and all the others merit being ruled by them, is correct.” (1283b26-29)

Because every claim for the recognition of desert flows from each claimant’s insular and incomplete conception of universal justice, actual politics in actual cities is mostly a pathetically volatile affair, rife with envy, grudges, and bombast, rendering statesmanship in even the best

possible city a matter of managing quarrels that spring from the irreconcilable controversies, conflicts, and outrages of distributive justice. And because so much is at stake over who rules, strife and revolution are not only precipitated by factions' claims of equal or unequal desert, but also by the anger aroused by others who get more than they deserve, which each faction sees as their loss and at the city's expense (1297b4-9, 1302a24-30, 1302a36-b14, 1317a34-38). The largely vindictive, self-destructive, and single-minded devotion of both oligarchies and democracies to their respective political causes of consolidating or expanding equality or inequality is due to the fact that, in practice, principles of distributive justice are not so clearly separated or conceptually distinct from ideas of corrective justice and fair exchange as in "the discourses based on philosophy" in Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1282b16-20). Political disputes over distributive justice are often intertwined with a corresponding concern to correct injustice, rectify past wrongs, punish impudent opponents, settle debts, and set things straight, all of which only compounds the oppression and resentment of one's rivals (cf. 1320a5-12). As Aristotle later notes, men often "engage in factional conflict through fear, both when they have committed injustice and are frightened of paying the penalty, and when they are about to suffer injustice and wish to forestall it" (1302b20-23). For all factions, then, establishing the just political order that properly exalts its most deserving members at the same time also entails the distributive comeuppance of those who had unjustly ruled before, as well as the contempt and preemptive persecution of those who would unjustly dare to seek rule according to opposing principles of desert (1296a27-b1, 1302a30-34, 1310a2-12, cf. 1279a12-16, *NE* 1104b16-19).

To break this vengeful cycle of retribution into which politics can so easily descend, all factions must be restrained by a greater urge to preserve whatever share of rule they already have, which depends on all contenders being equally satisfied that no other principle or faction is

too dominant (*Pol* 1301a36-38). And this requires that regimes refrain from any explicit attempt to skew their laws in order to distribute offices according to the merit of one faction alone, but instead, to include all factions in the process as discrete, equally legitimate parts of the whole.

For some raise the question whether the legislator who wants to enact the most correct laws should legislate with a view to the advantage of the better persons or that of the majority, when what was spoken of turns out to be the case. But correct must be taken in the sense of equal, and the equal as correct with a view to the advantage of the city as a whole and to the common of the citizens.
(1283b35-42)

In Books Four, Five, and Six of the *Politics* Aristotle elaborates on how such an arrangement might work when no particular party or person is seen by anyone else as somehow unduly profiting from office, and while both the few and the many civilly occupy themselves with their own affairs (1294a30-b13, 1308b19-31, 1318a11-28, cf. *NE* 1134b1-8). Introducing some agreeable basis of equality by which differing factions and principles might be balanced in the same regime is easier than persuading those who already hold political authority, and see it as the rightful prize of their victorious ascension, to be just toward the ruled or moderate in their adherence to their principles, but it is still “very difficult” (*Pol* 1318b1-5). However, since fully honoring any faction’s principled claim of merit would be unjust and unfeasible, the only fair arrangement left available to cities is to recognize all distributive principles of desert insufficiently, so that all factions are wronged and offended to roughly the same extent. And once issues over who most deserves rule are effectively suspended and bracketed from political deliberation, and each faction treated as an equal interest group of the city and corporate

component of the same regime, their distinct tendencies, characters, and contributions can then be better channeled and fit together on conventionally sanctioned grounds by decent and legislatively enabled statesmen (1301b25-2a15, 1318a1-10, 1318a25-b1, cf. 1296b16-7a7).

The one form of rule that Aristotle omits from his list of seemingly “troublesome” candidates at the beginning of Chapter Ten is polity – the regime that was originally categorized in Chapter Seven as the “correct” form of rule of a multitude. Polity turns out to be more correct in its aims than the corresponding deviant form of democracy and less troublesome than all other regimes in practice, because of the countervailing influence of the wealthy few, who share in it with the many. Aristotle originally proposes and occasionally argues for the mutual compromise of democratic and oligarchic principles on the grounds that they both neglect cultivating or justly honoring virtue, and must, therefore, be prevented from absolutely dominating each other or the city to make some room for virtue (1283b1-4a3, 1302a2-6, 1334a14-18). He later refers to this last hope for a viable form of correct rule as a type of “mixed regime,” in which all competing principles of distribution play some part but none are ever allowed to predominate (1293b33-4b40). A mixed regime is the most correct and just form of rule because it is the only possible associative ruling arrangement that could long sustain *any* degree of justice among men.

Equal freedom, strength, good birth, wealth, or virtue do not decisively or consistently determine the distribution of political duties, rights, and offices in a well-mixed regime. Instead, each principle is only employed and relied on to the extent that invoking it might correct or reinforce the city’s makeshift balance of goods and honors between the good and few and many (*NE* 1130b13-17). A polity succeeds by finding a way to acceptably elevate neutrality itself as the authoritative principle of distribution, trumping every faction and their own partially just, but deviant and impulsive, moral claims (*Pol* 1294b33-39, 1295b39-6a8). Rather than abiding by

any partial, complete, or coherent principle of desert, the mixed regime relies upon maintaining the inadequate and *un*principled standards of an unbending regulatory system or, as is the case in all existing cities, a tangled heap of laws as authoritative, on separate grounds of legitimacy (1319b33-20a12).

Deaf, Mute, and Blind Legal Justice

Each faction has different destabilizing features that Aristotle tries to diminish or exclude from his depiction of the equitable harmony of a well-integrated polity. The mélange of a well-mixed regime is not simply some hodgepodge of random elements taken from democracy and oligarchy, but consists of the most acceptable balance between the political equality of the poor and the unequal private property and public rank of the few (1265b26-29, 1294b13-33, cf. 1310b3-6, 1311a8-18, 1312b33-37). Unchecked by other interests, principles, or laws, the many are inclined to pursue the complete leveling of all property as the promise and perfection of justice, paving the way for lawlessness, wasteful incompetence, and unbounded tyranny (1292a15-32, 1309b38-10a2, 13191325a31-35, cf. 1264b19-21). And because oligarchs look to material prosperity as a more reliably determinate and quantifiable standard than the virtue that it is taken as a sign for, their inegalitarian principles and conventional measures of financial clout lend themselves to evermore stratified hierarchies and chains of command, fostering ambitions for further distinction, with no natural limit among all ranks. The frenzy of unending competitive accumulation and aggrandizement that results from the rule of the wealthy soon leads to their own tumultuous downfall, by revolution, intrigue, or tyranny (1310a2-26). Oligarchy's constrictively high standards for citizenship and office inevitably engender fierce resentment and enmity – not only between the rulers and the excluded multitude, but also within

the regime between the oligarchs themselves, as fragmenting sub-factions of rich and super-rich emerge. Long established oligarchic classes extend the distributive logic of their distributive principle of merit to themselves, as the mark of each one's personal preeminence within the preeminent group. According to the same standards of qualification by which oligarchs justify and orient their rule, the net worth and presentation of an individual oligarch's amassed regalia of good fortune would qualify him to rule most of all, as the most oligarchical of oligarchs, and earn the future dynastic rule of his wellborn family (1305b22-23, 1320b30-38). This innate seed of its own discord and destruction, borne out by the unchecked adherence to their principles, is unique to the rule of the few, since the proportional principles by which they claim their rule as a group are as applicable to assessing the relative rank of the individual top owners and earners within their regime as they are to whole segments of the population (1283b14-26, 1302a9-10, 1318a21-24).

In this regard, democratic equality, although inherently self-destructive in its own way, is more conducive to communal cohesiveness, peace, and stability than any natural or conventional standard of inequality, since democratic regimes tend only to make enemies of the (usually weaker) few, and democratic principles only tend to inspire those sharing in the regime to strive to be more ordinary, alike, and equal, as opposed to outstripping each other in achievement, prestige, and power (1302a7-15, 1320b39-1a3, cf. *NE* 1161a25-29, 1161b9-10). Accordingly, a well-mixed polity relies heavily on the easygoing natural tendencies of an economically engrossed multitude (cf. *Pol* 1320a32-b10). As long as they are allowed to remain unaware of and unprovoked by any one man or group's excessive monopolization of all public resources, the demos does not even normally contend for their right to rule (1297b5-10). And when they do dispute over their status and rights, the many's claims and principles of desert are articulated on

their behalf by others, like Aristotle. For the sake of the regime's stability and resilience, then, the multitude must somehow be incorporated into the process of governance and officially recognized as political equals in such a way as to satisfy their sense of equal dignity, check the oligarchs' myopic self-aggrandizing, and yet still preserve the unequal allotment of resources and responsibilities (1281a21-34, 1308a3-10, cf. 1279a30-33, 1294a30-b13, 1320b19-30).

This form of regime is most tranquil and lasting when the demos itself is large and stratified enough to contain a considerable subsection of relatively less impoverished craftsmen and merchants with their own distinct characters, who are able to stand between and offset the main antagonists' more extreme tendencies (1295a40-b3, 1296a6-22). Even pure, unmixed democracies can be relatively long lasting in larger, more developed cities, because the inflated regime also often includes a sizable middling element of self-employed, self-arming artisans, who can mediate, soften, and buffer the often oppressive command of the many (1265b26-29, 1295b35-6a17, 1297b18-28). However, although some middling element exists in every civilized city, Aristotle cites no example of a middle class actually wielding political authority or acting as a separate third party of moderation and compromise (1286b11-14, 1287b27-31, 1296a20-40). He himself often indicates the unlikelihood of ever harmonizing the opposing aims and claims of the few and many through any sort of general consent to a well-designed legal system, pointing out that, in the actual practice of politics:

The ones do not know how to rule but only how to be ruled, and then in the fashion of rule of a master, and the others do not know how to be ruled by any sort of rule, but only to rule in the fashion of rule of a master. What comes into being, then, is a city not of free persons but of slaves and masters, the ones consumed by envy,

the others by contempt. Nothing is further removed from affection and from a political community, for community involves the element of affection – enemies do not wish to have even a journey in common. The city wishes, at any rate, to be made up of equal and similar persons to the extent possible, and this is most particularly the case with the middling elements. So this city must necessarily be governed in the best fashion if it is made up of the elements out of which we assert the city is by nature constituted. Also, of citizens in cities these most particularly preserve themselves. (1295b18-29)

The delicate equilibrium of a polity is preserved by its predominant non-principle of neutrality, requiring that all of the regime's parts be equally subject to and limited by authoritative laws. The crude utility of law is vital for any regime's long-term maintenance, as it helps guarantee and reinforce some principles that both oligarchs and democrats claim as important factors in just rule, but in different ways. The blind impartiality and the equal standing of those living in the jurisdiction of its rule are democratic features, in that law necessarily ignores all particular moral excellencies and inequalities existing among the men to whom it applies (cf. 1261a29-b10). The rich also have reasons to defer to the rule of binding law as an inherently conservative institution that favors precedent, which is essential for maintaining existing property lines and personal holdings. And while the claim of wealth made by the oligarchs presumes the legal definition of ownership, strict adherence to the principles of democracy and aristocracy, which would deny the connection between property and merited authority, are far more subversive to prevailing conventions, in comparison. Any scheme for

rightfully redistributing goods, honors, and authority, whether it be according to democratic or aristocratic principles, no matter how just toward the deserving, is even more unjust, to the extent that it would overturn or violate many of the most traditional and fundamental laws that preserve the oligarchs' defining material advantage (1263a20-24). And even though law mostly preserves the unfair distributions of the status quo, whatever is lawful is also always in a sense just (1255a21-24, 1309b14-16, *NE* 1129b11-13, cf. 1130b9-13).

The rule of law is problematic to anyone serious about distributive justice and good rule because laws are written broadly and simply in order to be generally comprehensible and applicable to everyone, rather than to be flexible or fair to anyone (1287b17-22). The law's inherent ambiguity is necessary to establish a secure sense of a consistently dependable public order, but precludes any hope of the full application of perfect justice to any particular case of proportional merit. Since the law is not active, perceptive, or knowing, but dependent on men to apply its abstract code of blunt categorization and command, its rule necessarily prohibits the fairness of giving each what he truly needs or deserves, which varies according to shifting circumstances, relations, and contexts that laws can never fully anticipate (1137b12-24, cf. 1180b8-28). Instead, law tends only to set out standardized formal procedures for the correction of transgressions, for restoring the status quo between parties and sustaining the established order of equalities and inequalities in property and rank.

Aristotle endorses the rule of law because laws are resistant to change, thereby helping to preserve the existing political order, which is always far better for everyone than the alternatives of anarchic civil war or lawless rule (1129b13-19, cf. *Pol* 1253a27-38, 1282a42-b6). No matter who wrote it or for what purposes, and whatever distribution of goods the law lays down or effects, it is generally a better and fairer limitation on men's rule than any contending faction's

principled judgment and counteractions could be because, along with passion and perception, the law lacks all distorting concern for any particular outcome (1286a15-21, 1294a4-8). Although laws cannot clearly announce their own intent or proper application to a given situation, written words are usually committed to tablet after more reflection on the feasibility and desirability of ends than most decrees uttered in the thick of the moment (cf. *NE* 1129b24-25, *Rhet* 1354a32-b16). And even badly written laws that do harm are still just to the extent that they are laws, standing apart from their authors and applying to all with an authority earned over time through tradition and, therefore, still better than regimes that do not recognize, enforce, or rule by law (cf. 1161b6-7).

The indispensable political utility of the law is not due to its rationality or to men's rational acceptance of it, but because we can become habitually accustomed and irrationally deferential and devoted to it. Longstanding laws help maintain the overall conditions of a community, not by mandating the manifold obligations and logical implications stemming from any single principle of partial justice, but rather by simply standing for a long time and gathering the august sheen of an ancient patina that men naturally take for timeless wisdom (cf. 1130b7-15). This is why the art of legislation is the only field of expertise in which inferior but older artifacts are preferred to new and improved versions (*Pol* 1268b26-9a24, 1324b28-32, cf. 1329b24-35). The law always holds a more revered and less controversial status than any human ruler of a city, due to the same inflexibility and blindness that makes it fall short in establishing the most fitting order that could be for the best conceivable way of life for all (1324b4-9, *NE* 1180a24-33).

It is precisely its impersonal inability to discriminate in regard to particulars that makes the law a sufficiently inoffensive, non-partisan standard for a city (*Pol* 1287a16-b8). Submission

to the laws does not seem as undignified or slavish to most people as following another human being's direct orders (cf. 1295a14-18, 1286b30-34, 1322a8-20, *NE* 1180a14-24). The law limits even those who write it by placing particular issues within its dominion, effectively removing many volatile issues from the scope of rulers' deliberations. It can, therefore, also serve as a neutral and uncontested arbiter familiar to all, to which both rulers and ruled may appeal in the enforcement of its mandates in order to avoid public odium or resorting to argument, or worse, over their personal motives, loyalties, and principles (cf. *Pol* 1322a7-21). In this way, the rule of law offers a counter-weight to the volatilities and uncertainties of politics, which conserves the city by helping to forestall the complete dominance of any single principle of distribution in the city (1307b30-38).

However, even under the best, most clearly written, most nuanced and fitting legal code, a well-mixed regime can only work when a preexisting, widespread commitment to the city's good already exists among its members, as more urgent than any of their own conceptions of desert. Regimes' competing principles and ends can only be effectively limited by each other when factions first consciously recognize their own good and due honor as subordinate to the good of the city and its members. And citizens' recognition of a common legal authority that is unable to recognize fully any distributive principle by which they might deserve more honor depends on their general acceptance of the regime's partial rejection of all distributive principles equally (1276b29-35, 1277a16-20, cf. 1277b25-29, *NE* 1168b8-10). That is, the political advantages and authority of law require that all factions already share in a bond of common concerns that might be elevated above each of their own claims of desert as somehow constituting a greater justice – or at least that all factions are more willing to put up with the

necessarily imperfect political order that prevails than not (*Pol* 1294b13-40, 1295b20-24, 1309b14-18, 1320a14-16, *NE* 1155a20-29, 1159b26-60a9, cf. 1180a29-b1).

Merit's Worth

The very mindlessness from which it derives its stabilizing power prevents the law from ever having virtue as its primary purpose – a fact that Aristotle's more serious readers might be dismayed to discover, especially after reading his strong suggestion at end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the law is our most authoritative teacher and should be studied as the means to becoming virtuous and making others virtuous (1099b29-100a3, 1103a34-b6, 1130b22-26, 1179b31-80a18, 1180a33-b25). But even there, Aristotle states that the law makes “use” (*chresthai*) of virtue, rather than cultivating its *exercise (energeia)* (1129b19-30a1, cf. *Pol* 1263b4-14). The law does not and cannot command men to be fully virtuous or completely just in their character and way of life (1310a12-37). Law is limited to commanding clear and specific acts of common decency that almost anybody can perform, and to prohibiting or rectifying generally unjust or vicious ones. And rather than prescribing an effective plan for cultivating citizens' capacities for complete virtue, the law usually only requires a smattering of minimal duties and civility that prevent the greatest harm to others. Genuine, psychically fulfilling virtue always goes above and beyond what is merely useful, expedient, or expressible in written statutes, because its exercise cannot be reduced to any universal formula, tenets, or procedure. The best laws do foster wholesome pursuits and even address issues of character, but they only educate anyone to the extent that they habituate men to refrain from most acts of injustice and to live in ways conducive to the good of the whole community, rather than their own complete moral or intellectual perfection.

And although the polity must be officially mixed in an equal spirit, ostensibly denying the unconditional authority of all factions and suppressing the full realization of all principles equally, no matter how harmoniously mixed it is, none can completely integrate or truly balance opposing principles of distributive justice equally; this is because any possible attempt to reconcile and combine all three and their principles as distinct elements of political community will inevitably favor one faction in the most decisive matters of deliberation and command. No regime can authoritatively honor moral equality and inequality simultaneously because, however it is divided, whether in equal or unequal portions, any dispersal of divided rule will unavoidably grant some greater advantage and authority to one of these faction's competing principles over the others, governing the distribution of every other good in the city (1318a1-33, cf. 1277b17-25, *NE* 1168b24-33). And any viable mixed regime will inevitably incline toward democratic justice in its arrangement and tendencies. Besides the fact that polity is predicated on a relation of equality between the major segments of the population, the mixed regime further favors democratic justice simply because, no matter what their official role, the demos constitutes the largest, strongest part of it (cf. *Pol* 1264a12-13, 1317a41-b10). So, despite its inclusion of competing principles, polity is accurately categorized in Chapter Seven as the correctly balanced, legally restrained, and moderated rule of the multitude, because the predominant faction of the ruling regime most determines the ways of life for everyone in the city (1273a38-b4, 1283b1-9, 1294a19-25, 1295a40, 1297b18-28, 1307a5-23, 1309b14-18, 1316b39-7a2, cf. 1291b35-37).

The mixed polity's reliance on reciprocal and numerical equality between factions and citizens, as opposed to their proportional merit, amounts to the preeminence of democratic ruling principles of fairness and the effective denial of virtue's true desert (1301b26-34, 1318a1-10, 1318a25-b1). And, while authoritative law is able to hem in and moderate even democratic

rulers, it does so on the basis of a posited interchangeability of individual citizens, precluding any real assessment of the relative worth of competing claims or parties, except in the most expressible, verifiable and, thus, inadequate methods of legally defined procedural demonstration and standards of proof. By granting the low some authority over the high, the mixed regime is fundamentally unjust according to aristocratic principles (1273a39-b1, 1282a23-32, 1284a8-11, 1284b29-35). When the mean, which serves as a guide for the virtue and happiness of individuals, is applied as the ruling standard of the entire political community, it does not result in the same sort of excellence and flourishing, but merely its members' general contentment, steady mediocrity, and resistance to idleness, feverish faction, and strife (1295a25-b13). Aristotle is willing to compromise the claims of virtue for the sake of long-term stability, however, because only when the claims of wealth and equal freedom are recognized and held in check to some extent is it even possible that virtue might find any room to thrive, arising to preeminence at first as a necessary element of a regime's survival, and then over time, as its own impressive end and superior basis of merit. The well-mixed regime does not aim at fully satisfying any faction's just claims, but at simply leaving all contenders equally dissatisfied, which is the best it can do. But, since compromised justice can only ever be considered unjust by any serious adherent of the distributive principles that polity combines, it seems doubtful that this preliminary case Aristotle makes for compromise of admixture in Chapter Thirteen would persuade very many of his morally minded readers (1320a14-16, cf. 1294b33-35).

Aristotle declares in Chapter Nine that a community lacking a concern for its members' character and way of life is not even correctly called a city. But no existing city can truly be said to be dedicated to this highest end. At best, cities make moral and intellectual virtue possible, and more by accident than design (cf. 1277a12-25). Certainly most regimes can be said to

encourage “political virtue,” but this differs from “virtue” simply (1280b5-8, 1281a5-8). By using both of these terms – political virtue and virtue – both times he raises the issue in Chapter Nine, Aristotle reminds us that, unlike moral or intellectual virtue, which are practiced for their own sake and take their bearings from nature and reason, the character and content of political virtue is relative to a particular ruling regime’s advantage. Those with political virtue are the most competent and useful members of their city, but also far outnumber the party of moral virtue, because political virtue is relative to the regime – and, therefore, more universally attainable and less universally impressive than virtue simply. Rather than aiming at nobility itself, or the unqualified perfection of any individual in the city, the active patriotism of political virtue exercised by all good citizens is contingent on whatever the regime they happen to live under requires of them for its own immediate interests. The ongoing habitual conditioning and cultivation of political virtue is indispensable to legislators’ and rulers’ efforts to ensure that citizens will find their regime noble enough to serve it well over the long haul (1276b19-a12).

Therefore, if we presume, along with the most serious and correctly devoted citizens, the preeminent, justificatory worth and noble purposes of true political community, and yet acknowledge that no lasting regime can possibly foster anything more robust or impressive among its citizens than political virtue, then it seems to follow that no actual or possible city is truly a city (cf. 1265a16-26, 1330b32-1a18). That is, if actual cities can only promote virtue to the extent it is useful, like the institutions of exogamous marriage and public sacrifice that help to develop a general solidarity and friendliness toward the regimes, then no city, whatever we call it, hardly seems worthier of our devotion and sacrifice than any other cooperative agreement of self-interest between pragmatic trade partners or military allies (cf. 1252b28-3a1, 1261a24-29). And if all regimes and laws can have no real or possible purpose beyond the necessary

channeling of the city's members' most useful activities toward providing services necessary for their cities to secure their freedom to do only whatever they collectively think they want, without regard for justice toward anyone beyond their walls, then the most morally virtuous men owe it to themselves and their nobility to find some better cause for which to exercise their virtue (1334a13-b5, cf. 1324a38-b32, 1325a5-13, 1325b29-31, *NE* 1177b31-a5). And to be sure, men of the highest moral caliber and aspirations often do disdain the honors available to them as too ordinary, but they turn from these meager testaments precisely *because* they have a strong sense of virtue's true merit (1123b27-33, cf. 1169a18-35).

Condescending to strive for the lesser good of lesser men's respect could only detract from an already complete, self-sufficient life. Office, therefore, would only reluctantly be accepted when truly necessary by such outstanding men of exceedingly complete virtue, and only at the bidding of others. These exemplars of complete virtue will accept only the highest positions of political power, and only when such honors might complement the greatness, glory, and splendor of their virtue (1124a5-8). The honor that virtue most fittingly and rightfully deserves is to rule alone and absolutely, but in order for the most decent and contributory members of a city even to share in any part in actual political rule requires regularly shortchanging them most of all, for the sake of serving the inferior goods of others who are less deserving (1101b32-2a4). At the same time, aristocrats can only expect to win over and effectively rule in a mixed arrangement along with the multitude through a variety of deceitful tricks and ruthless coercion, which waste and debase the dignity of a ruler's virtue, undermining the very basis of his merit (*Pol* 1278a35-39, 1297a6-b12, 1321a26-40). And their great award for staining their virtue is to rule over, with, and alongside those of lesser character – consisting mainly of the thankless managerial frustrations and administrative tedium of addressing various

needs, which is only partly ameliorated by the great profit and honors that public officials are sometimes allowed for their services (cf. 1261b34-37, 1297a7-14, 1304b5-19, 1308a3-10, *NE* 1134b1-8). Ruling a community that is necessarily oriented toward vulgar interests rather than noble causes is not a just reward or worthy pastime for the truly deserving. It seems, then, that no human community can ever be all that those who contend for rights of office and citizenship seem to think or wish their city were. And any actual or possible city would only seem to differ from other apolitical compacts of mutual utility due to its distinctively political but mundane elements of common offices, walls, intermarriage, and religion, rather than living nobly and well through the practice and cultivation of virtue as the aristocrats had insisted in Chapter Nine. Therefore, truly decent men usually refrain from claiming their rightful due, as it would be base and beneath them to do what would be necessary to assume it (*Pol* 1325a36-b12).

So even at its peak, moral virtue is not completely self-sufficient, to the extent that it entails a concern for the justice of its purposes and the proper recognition of others. Moral virtue seems to require and point to justice as the promised fulfillment of its own crowning completion and affirmation of its true worth (cf. *NE* 1123b12-15). The outstanding man of moral virtue cares about the just acknowledgment of his merit perhaps more than any faction in the city, seeing the highest honor as the most fitting crown of his own perfection, and its receipt as a comforting sign that the world at large respects and endorses the incomparable worthiness of beautifully ordered souls (1123b33-4a4, *Pol* 1257a30-31, 1328a8-12). Such a man is painfully aware that he alone deserves to amass the greatest goods and honors available because he, most of all, acts only for the sake of the noble, in lieu of goods or honors (*NE* 1124a8-19, 1124b18-26). He seems, then, both to care and not care about his own desert simultaneously, because he misunderstands himself and sees moral virtue as both a self-sufficient end in itself and a

conditioned capacity, only completed and truly rendered good by its engaged advancement of the best ends beyond their own activation, in performing the most authoritative functions of the highest offices on behalf of the greatest number of deserving others.

Aristotle does not always clarify exactly whom he means by the “best” (*aristoi*), or most serious, decent, and virtuous men of a city. In Chapter Nine in particular, he seems to intentionally muddle the issue of whether the party favoring aristocracy is composed of men of “virtue” simply, or citizens with “political virtue,” without pausing to dwell on the significance of the qualification (*Pol* 1280b5-8, 1281a3-9). Genuine, unalloyed virtue would seem most of all to merit the best things the city has to offer, even though the truly virtuous men in any actual city are too few to form a competitive faction or viable regime (1301b39-2a2). But by specifying in his concluding statement of Chapter Nine that “all those who dispute about regimes” are partly incorrect in their claims, Aristotle raises the possibility that only those who do not contend for power and do not wish to be recognized as deserving rule can conceive of and abide by justice simply (1281a9-10). And perhaps only those who see these matters clearly can be truly virtuous and just precisely because they refrain from lowering themselves into the political fray and engaging in ignoble disputes over moral worth, credit, and fair shares (cf. 1304b3-5).

Moral virtue incommensurably surpasses military and political virtue in nobility and goodness, but does not approach the more complete self-sufficiency of intellectual virtue. Only the wise man, whose more incessant and sustainable activity is most truly its own end, can wholeheartedly turn away from the struggle to rule others as a matter beneath his virtue (*NE* 1177a23-8a5). If there could actually be some honor that were suited to or could enhance the worth of wisdom, beyond its own unencumbered exercise, it would not be found among the

distributable powers or rights of the city, which a wise man could only consider trappings and burdens rather than genuine goods. In light of the far purer self-sufficient goodness of the contemplative life and the elusiveness of what it could merit, it seems that all principled grounds of desert by which men are owed good things for already doing and enjoying the good on their own are fundamentally unintelligible (*Pol* 1325b15-29, cf. *NE* 1125a10-13). The dubious worthiness of office and rule as fitting honors for the most virtuous and deserving men in the city raises a peculiar paradox about virtue itself. True virtue is its own end and reward, so we should not expect true aristocrats – truly noble and good men – to clamor and contend with everyone else for any extraneous goods, which wither in comparison to their already well-lived lives (*Pol* 1301a38-b1).

Furthermore, it is not immediately clear exactly how or why any superior quality or good deed would thereby render anyone meritorious of any good or honor in the first place – especially if it is in fact already perfectly good to be and do good – or why anyone’s noble superiority and happy perfection would necessarily obligate his inferiors to serve, honor, or obey him, even if they can readily recognize and assent to his superlative worth and contribution. Someone with a beautifully ordered soul seems only as obviously entitled to political office as a beautifully proportioned body would merit the finest flute (1282b30-3a14, 1290b3-7). If anything, we would seem more obviously obliged by our natures to imitate the best man’s character and actions while pursuing our own personal good and perfection, rather than to obey him – performing only those less political, impressive, and important tasks that he commands, just because he and his deeds are so awesome (cf. *NE* 1165b10-29, 1177b31-a5, *Pol* 1254b15-36). However, since part of what marks the meritorious worth of the best man is that he does not insist on his just desert from others, we might consider the possibility that perhaps all claims of

deserving are unsound, and that any single bedrock principle of distribution is an absurd, destructive standard to apply to politics, especially when there is nothing truly great at stake to be gained (*NE* 1124b7-10).

Aristotle's arbitration of the dispute over who most merits political rule between the most uncompromising partisan positions helps reveal why any possible resolution to this dispute would unavoidably be unsatisfactory, due to the inherent dissonance and discrepancies in the underlying precepts, notions, and logic of distributive justice itself. To the extent that his presentation of even a moderate, mixed democracy remains repugnant to some of his most serious gentlemen readers, and it becomes clear to them that only a democratically imbrued form of rule is feasible, fair, and sustainable, Aristotle undermines much of the apparent promise of active political life as a proper honor of their virtue, by showing the unjust and ignoble qualities of democracy as essentially ingrained in political association itself. In this way, Aristotle's critique of democratic claims serves the rhetorical purpose of debunking much of the worthiness of the city as an end of human endeavor, while at the same time presenting the corrected democracy of the mixed polity as an acceptable price to pay for a city's long-term stability, and for the possibility of its citizens' development of virtue through private, leisurely pursuits of virtue and happiness rather than the public glories of political action. And while offering the more serious lovers of the noble and good with reasons to reject the compromises of politics in favor of the pursuits of virtue and happiness, Aristotle's disparagement of the perceived nobility of the city, political life, and political rewards in the eyes of his readers would also help moderate the hopes and aims of some who might still be drawn to politics, by helping them recognize the limits of realizing justice, in light of the recalcitrant material with which statesmen have to work (cf. *Pol* 1266b28-7a13).

The initial assessment of aristocratic principles as superior to those of oligarchy and democracy in Chapter Nine, therefore, is somewhat misleading, since true virtue is the least possible guiding principle of any real city or its laws (1295a25-34). Because every faction's claim of desert is partly correct, but also mutually exclusive, it is impossible even to formulate a complete and coherent theoretical conception of distributive justice, let alone distribute goods to all on the basis of what is most fitting for each in practice. Even virtue, then, proves to be an imperfect political end. In fact, virtue can only ever arise as the central concern of a very few, and only incidentally, in some well-developed cities, where the common cause of maintaining the order of the whole overrules all partially just distributive principles -- where members of every faction, household, clan, and deme show greater affection, loyalty, and esteem for the regime than their own concerns (1293b1-18, 1331b39-2a3, *NE* 1167a21-b4, cf. 1168a33-b8, *Pol* 1325b24-28). Realizing any degree of distributive justice in politics requires a preexisting general concord and lawfulness among the populace. A well-mixed regime ruled by law can only last as long as it denies the complete satisfaction of every faction's sense of fairness by preventing otherwise valid principles of desert from becoming the sole basis of its authority and actions. And this is only possible on the basis of a conceptually larger and higher conception of justice, oriented toward a more common, but less complete good than that sought by any of its constituent parts, which can be elevated and ennobled in their minds as consisting of more than their mere survival and amiable tolerance of each other (*NE* 1133a23-24, 1133b16-18, 1161a10-b4). Ultimately, the city's laws and customs cannot be for the sake of realizing any of its competing factions' consistent but narrow conceptions of complete justice. Rather, as I will argue in my next chapter, all aspects of justice find their final end in the common good of the city itself.

Chapter Four: According to the Common Good

“What is becoming to a city is manpower, to a body beauty, to a soul wisdom, to an action virtue, to a speech truth, and the opposites of these are unbecoming. Man and woman and speech and deed and city and object should be honored with praise if praiseworthy and incur blame if unworthy, for it is an equal error and mistake to blame the praisable and to praise the blamable.”

- Gorgias, *Encomium to Helen*

“Our troops are the steel in our ship of state.”

- Barack Obama

I have argued in the previous two chapters that the question of who should rule is not adequately answered merely by applying the most straightforward, rational standard of competence, because the actual contest for rule is bound up in questions of fairness and desert, and yet no single principle of distribution can be considered wholly just, since each would deny other valid claims of fairness and desert (*Pol* 1283a14-42, 1283b26-29). In my second chapter, we saw the severe limitations on the operative rule of reason and expertise in political affairs that stem from rulers' reliance on the coordinated actions and might of a critical mass of a multitude. Therefore, the best intentions of the most clear-sighted men seem almost incidental to the task of actually carrying them out, because a multitude can only be led according to what they can already discern as their good (namely the profit and honor attending political office) and their fair share of it. Even the most competent men with full knowledge of the best way of life for man would always have to aim at and operate partly on the level of incomplete and incommensurable -- but powerful -- moral ideas of desert. Intellectual virtue, reason, technical

know-how, and science are practically impotent within the political realm, and can only effectively command or adjudicate political affairs indirectly, in terms of fairness, equity, and desert.

In my second chapter, I considered the case for and against the demos in light of the standard of correct rule, cited in Chapter Seven of Book III strictly in terms of the capacities required for collectively aiming and politically commanding in the name of all, for the sake of any purpose whatsoever, aside from any assessment of accuracy and goodness of the disputants' aim. In this chapter, in order to judge the three main regimes that Aristotle considers on their own terms, in regard to the ends at which they each aim and the actual outcome that their aims bring about – that is, *if* they could forego actually securing the power necessary to wield the absolute moral authority they claim for themselves – I will address the standard of correctly oriented rule by presuming the effectual, uncompromised, principled rule of each contending party, regardless of how their aims might deviate in the process of actually realizing them, as the legitimately recognized commanding part of the whole.

In my preceding chapter, the question of the city's purpose was raised in the effort to answer the question of which factions' capacities, assets, or characters contribute the most to making the city as good and complete as possible (1282a14-24, 1283a14-26). Rulers can never be seen as bumbling, fortunate fools by those they rule (at least not exclusively), but as somehow legitimately sanctioned according to some generally recognized measure of their devotion to a good that the ruled can share in. In Aristotle's determination of who deserves to rule, the appraisal of different groups' contributions tends to eclipse considerations of their innate moral worth and dignity, partly because the goodness of public works and contributions are more readily apparent to and easily shared by more people than splendors of the soul (cf. *NE* 1094b7-

11, *Rhet* 1364b28-5a16, 1365a38-b20). His assessment of the opposing factions' claims presumes that justice is something supremely good and beneficial – something that does not result in widespread harm or a more ineffective, miserable, discordant city, like disputes over justice often do (*Pol* 1282b12-18). And, as something good that exists only in our relations with others, justice is the greatest good that can be widely shared by a political community and is equivalent to the common harmonization of every man's ends and claims. The only accurate and reliably authoritative gauge by which we can assess the many disparate moral claims and opinions at odds in the city is by appeal to goodness for the city as a whole. In this way, although reason and science carry no weight and can only hold any sway in politics and political disputes over rightful authority in terms of imprecise, impassioned, and incoherent notions of nobility and justice, justice itself would seem to defer to the authority of reason's naturally derived standard of the good, in the end.

As I have shown, Aristotle identifies three integral political contributions provided by the qualities and capacities of the wealthy few, the even fewer men of surpassing virtue (whose membership overlaps with the first group's roster), and the many poor (whose membership overlaps with neither) (1294a8-23, 1301a25-b6). The moral measure of inequality or equality which each contending faction claims as decisive for reckoning an equal proportion of political rights and honor to all are only politically valid – and, therefore, actually and truly just – to the extent that it contributes to the most definitive, essential ends of the common good. In my last chapter I looked at these distinctive contributions as selfless claims of sacrifice and service that earned men a right to the respect and responsibility of political authority. But these same politically advantageous traits and assets can also be seen as leverage, with which each can

uniquely deprive the city in the give and take of the regime's efforts to realize its own most complete good.

In this chapter I will argue that Aristotle shows how and why the common good is the most essential part of complete justice and that, in general, of the contending factions' favored regimes, moderated democratic forms and reforms most reliably and consistently secure the most common and essential parts of the common good. The common good defines the very purpose of law and competent statesmanship, and is also the most determinative meaning and end of justice, by dint of which it is the most urgent and comprehensive virtue of all (1252a1-6, 1307b28-40, *NE* 1103b3-6, 1179b32-a5). What the common good consists of and why it is the most comprehensive, sovereign standard of justice are made apparent in scattered discussions throughout Book III. I will examine the explicit and intimated arguments Aristotle offers in support of the common good, as it relates to the political conflict between the factions of the city.

First, it will be necessary to define this notoriously ambiguous standard better, by turning to the discussion in Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, to which Aristotle refers in the *Politics* as a account of justice "based on philosophy," where the common good emerges as the primary purpose of the law and its authority (*Pol* 128216-20). In the *Ethics*, however, we find that what the common good entails in the political realm always depends on practical considerations of particulars, rather than unwavering theoretical concepts, in determining what is best for a given political community. After this, I will further define and discuss the common good as it is first raised as a comprehensive standard of rule in Book III of the *Politics*, where it is more practically depicted as the harmonization of all goods and interests, at which all correct forms of rule aim. This harmonious convergence of a city's members' individual opinions, desires, and advantage with that of the common order is first put forward in Chapter Six of Book III, with the example

of the earliest inhabitants of cities taking turns in office, out of a shared responsibility to fill a necessary job that no one wanted (1278b14-9a21). Because all members of early cities shared the same view of rule – as a necessary but inconvenient stint of subservience to others’ good – the fairest possible arrangement among them of ruling in turn was perfectly aligned with everyone’s best interest and desire to tend to their own affairs, rather than manage those of others. The common good exemplified by these early citizens is said to encompass the three fundamental purposes for which we are told men associate politically: for the sake of their preservation, camaraderie, and living well. But each faction that now contends for rule can only claim the partial aspect of justice that its own vaunted principle illuminates from its own limited perspective. In the final analysis, the determination of who should rule a city must be made from a more encompassing perspective whereby we might consider and rank the separate, partially good parts in light of the complete common good, at which all regimes aim and attain to varying degrees.

I will then discuss the complicating tension between these different components of the common good that trouble every regime. Outside of unsubstantiated political histories, most citizens do not see ruling as a burdensome civic duty or necessary public service so much as an exclusive, enviable honor. And as a preeminently respected and sought-after honor, ruling itself, in whatever form, is the source of most of its own problems. Since everyone now sees office as a scarce and exclusive good “of the common,” considerations of whom officials deprive of the offices they fill is as important as who fills them, and regimes must take continual care that the ruled accept the prevailing order (1294b34-40, 1299b14-16, 1309b14-18). Therefore, in practice, no matter how correct or pure the rulers’ aim, the common good cannot be secured if there is not a general affection or respect for the regime. Although democratic rule is least able

to attain the best and highest goods of common life, the *demos* is more capable than any other faction of maintaining a stable and long-lasting regime. And the same unrivaled might of the masses makes oligarchies and aristocracies far less capable of securing these same basic conditions of civil peace and stability required for pursuing any of the other, higher goods at which they aim most of all. Even though democrats are least competent, least virtuous, and most easily led into excess on the basis of their principle, their collective strength also renders their rule most secure and lasting, due to the simple fact that, unlike wealth or virtue, this superior quality of their mass does not so easily admit of being surpassed by some smaller group or individual who might upset the civil order on the basis of its own principles.

Finally, I will turn to examining Aristotle's suggestion for how this tension between the different parts of justice and the city might be justly resolved. Whatever political end actual cities, factions, and regimes might aspire to, they must always include or presume in all their endeavors the secured existence of the authoritative associative order that gives rise to and allows for such aims in the first place. The common good of maintaining the general security, order, and welfare of a city also makes possible whatever degree of distributive and corrective justice that city can attain. From the authoritatively just perspective of the common good of the political community, the principles of distributive and corrective justice themselves are only conditionally just, insofar as they are essential contributing parts of the common good. Legislation or action that is detrimental to a city as a whole cannot, in the final analysis, be considered just, even if done in the name of justice, because justice is upheld and honored as both noble and good; it is ignoble and unjust to characterize justice as something bad, or injustice as good, or call something just that is disadvantageous to all.

The Simply Good, Simply Just, and Common Good

In the most precise sense, Aristotle tells us, a city is its regime, which constitutes the most essentially *political* association of its leading citizens who order and direct the city and the lives of everyone in it. Throughout the *Politics*, the term “regime” [*politeia*] is used ambiguously, with different connotations depending on context. “Regime” sometimes refers to the official governing body and the most powerful officials serving in it, by which it is distinct from the rest of the city; at other times, however, it is used more generally in reference to the entire city, both citizens and non-citizens, or rulers and ruled, whose ways of life have been fundamentally shaped by the prevailing principles of the regime. Since the city is most essentially defined by its regime, it behooves us to identify the most essentially political regime of all in order to define the true city in the most precise sense.

Before, in the discussion of Chapter Nine, which follows upon Aristotle’s appeal to philosophic exactitude in Chapter Eight, he insists, along with the aristocrats, that, notwithstanding its necessary elements and origins, a city that is worthy of being called a city is most of all characterized by moral virtue as its ruling principle and final end (1280b4-8, 1280b24-1a3cf. 1279b11-15, 1280a9-17). Only this unique display of its members’ noble actions truly distinguishes the city from every other lower form of human association (1252b26-3a18). And therefore, only those communities whose rulers ruled exclusively on the basis of their own moral virtue and for the purpose of cultivating it in all members are “truly” cities, in the most precise sense of the term. But immediately after offering such a clear and adamant statement of support for both aristocracy and the political centrality of moral virtue in Chapter Nine, Aristotle begins to back away from what is most truly distinctive about the city, and begins to consider the actual implementation and manifestation of introducing such narrow precision

into political affairs. Already by Chapter Eleven, he seems to have reversed himself, concluding that perhaps there is “some truth” to the admittedly “questionable” claim that the greater multitude of the city should be authoritative rather than the best few, and he proceeds to rehabilitate the many’s reputation in terms of collective virtue, knowledge, and prudence, in the rest of the chapter (1281a39-42).

The dramatic reversal of these chapters reflects their disclosure of the fact that precision and theoretical rigor reveals very little of the actual practice of politics, which is inherently imprecise and irreducibly inconsistent in its adherence to any principles or ends no matter how distinctive or essential (*NE* 1094b12-26). Aristotle must refine and reformulate the end of the city on the basis of general principles to which no faction can lay sole claim. Concern for the moral virtue of its members may be what most distinguishes a true city, in the most precise sense, from a household, trade alliance, or federation, but since no city is ever free of the need for intermarriage, military might, wealth, and the material sustenance that these lesser associations concern and provide, no actual regime can ever make this highest and most essentially political purpose their top priority. The end of political community must be generalized and made more practicable in order to preserve the integrity and distinctive nobility claimed for the city, as a unified, unique entity worthy of our study and contributory actions on its behalf. Accordingly, now appealing to “*political* philosophy” as the proper purview of these matters, Aristotle restates the essential purpose of political association and rule (*Pol* 1282b14-27). Rather than the noble actions of virtue, the city’s end is now declared to be summed up by the specific but comprehensive virtue of justice, at the beginning of Chapter Twelve. By this, all other virtues are directed toward the more common concerns and purposes of lower but necessary elements of human association, which are dismissed in Chapter Nine but in practice

regularly absorb the greater attention and energies of all existing cities and citizens, who are referred to as such.

Because every art and science has some good as its end, Aristotle tells us at the beginning of Chapter Twelve, the main purpose of the political association governing all other human ends is “the greatest and most especially good” end of justice, understood as the culmination of all moral virtue, by which the good of its parts are harmonized and made subordinate to the common good (*koine sumpheron*) that can be shared by all – as opposed to the “true” purpose of moral education through noble actions suggested in Chapter Nine (1282b14-17, 1280b39-40a3). The common good constitutes the purpose of all law and good rule, and is therefore the proper standard by which we may definitively judge, classify, and rank regimes and their rule as just or unjust (1282a42-b14, 1307b29-39, cf. *NE* 1129b11-22). The proper adjudication of what constitutes the greatest possible common good at any given time, therefore, takes into account all available considerations, including claims of competence and distributive justice; this is not as final standards of good rule, however, since whatever someone can do well or deserves can still be bad for everyone else, aside from their nobility and intent in doing so. The comprehensive political purpose of the common good and its relation to justice as a whole are part of the discussion of justice as the peak of the virtues in Book V in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, to which Aristotle refers us for some background on the precepts of proportional reciprocity (*Pol* 1280a6-18, 1282b16-20).

In that discussion in the *Ethics*, Aristotle observes that, besides corrective justice, distributive justice, and standards of fair exchange, we also call that which best preserves or serves the general welfare and security of the entire political community just (*NE* 1129b27-30a11). Just laws and actions that are fair can also be called good *because* they are fair; aside

from its fairness, however, a common system of justice is also good due to the civil peace, order, and many other advantages it provides for human beings – who need it, and the civil order it holds together, even more than they desire it, and can only fully enjoy and appreciate as partners in its execution for a whole community (cf. *Pol* 1283a18-22). Fully realized, unqualified, and absolute justice, or “justice simply” (*haplos dikaion*), encompasses two fundamental aspects of justice: first, ensuring that each receives what he deserves as determined by “partial justice” (which includes both corrective and distributive justice) and laws of exchange; and second, “using” virtue to benefit and safeguard the entire community (*NE* 1129b17-30a1, 1130b13-1a2, 1132b32-3a4, cf. 1131b23-25). Aristotle associates the second meaning of justice – as the integral good of the city -- with the rule of law and all that the law prescribes, which is always just “in some sense” (1129b12-13, *Pol* 1255a23, 1292a32-33).

Since a lawbreaker is unjust and the law-abiding man is just, it is clear that everything lawful is in some sense just, for the laws make pronouncements on every sphere of life, and their aim is to secure either the common good of all or of the best, or the good of those who hold power either on account of their virtue or something else of this sort. Accordingly, we say that those things apt to produce and preserve happiness and its parts for the political community are, in a way, just. (*NE* 1129b11-19)

Of course, some laws are patently irrational or unfair, and all law is blind to particular circumstances and traits of character, which is appropriate to matters of corrective justice but not to the fair distribution of goods and honors to particular groups or individuals according to their merit (1130b8-16, 1131b27-2a17, *Pol* 1282b1-6, 1284a12-27, 1286a9-21, 1287b18-25, *Const*

Ath 9.2). All laws, however, whether good or bad for any individual or group, can also always be considered just in terms of their contribution to the most widely distributed advantages of the political community's peaceful order and preservation; this is because they are generally better than the social uncertainty, disorder, and reign of violence that even bad laws prevent (*Pol* 1294b4-7, 1268b33-9a25, 1307b27-39, *NE* 1129b11-24). By the same criteria, it seems that the arbitrary but necessary common measures of fair exchange also qualify as a form of justice, since they are indispensable for political community and the welfare of those belonging to it (cf. 1133a24-31, 1133b16-19). The common good is the most authoritative meaning and complete part of justice simply, trumping the strict adherence to all principles and claims of distributive justice, and even the law, in those particular instances when they come into conflict. The overriding priority of the common good is essential to reckonings of justice because whatever is deemed to be right or most fair, no matter how immediately disadvantageous or harmful, is at the same time deemed to be somehow good or integral to an even greater good, at some higher level or in a larger scheme of things. As the most comprehensive and essential meaning of justice in the most general sense, the common good can be said to include distributive and corrective justice.

The common good of a city is not a real, perceptually distinct, single good that can be fully had or enjoyed by any single, naturally generated entity, except metaphorically. However, to qualify as *good*, the common good must also always be tangibly beneficial for and enjoyed by actual, living human beings who share in the common (cf. *Pol* 1264b17-21, *NE*1096a8-29). As the constant, principle, and governing end of the city and its habituating conventions, justice must always encompass at least the greatest and highest good possible for the whole that it binds, sustains, and directs. For every other virtue, then, justice is not only an end but also, in its more

“complete” sense, constitutes the means necessary for securing “the common good, either for all or the best or those who have authority in accord with virtue or on some other basis,” bringing people together “insofar as they might partake in living nobly,” and maintaining that community peacefully (1129b13-17, 1129b25-33, *Pol* 1278b18-26). That is, unlike every other virtue that is oriented primarily by its own noblest exercise and display, the all-encompassing, authoritative virtue of justice has the greatest possible mutual advantage in the city as its end – an end that is not separate, but constitutes the most essential core of justice itself (*NE* 1130a2-5). As an impersonal and elusive final end of political action, its pursuit best provides room and opportunity for as many individuals to live safely and well together as possible, which is always only a minority of the total free population in a city -- most of whom lack any potential or opportunity to “partake in living nobly” to any real extent -- supported by the menial labors and stunted lives of those denied the same fulfillment by the prevailing political order of things.

To determine the complete common good of a city or regime, then, requires some knowledge of what is good for its members. The natural end, order, and way of life to which man is best drawn is, by itself, completely powerless; it must constantly consequently be discerned and striven for by incomplete and uncertain mortal beings with limited faculties living under imperfect conditions (*Pol* 1254a35-5a1, cf. 1255b1-3, 1256a19-30, 1256b5-22, *NE* 1097a13-8a34, 1140b26-1a3, 1142b7-36). The greatest good for man – as in, that which is best for the most fully developed, perfect specimen of humanity under the most ideal conditions – is good simply and surpasses all other human purposes, but that which is best in an unqualified sense is not necessarily what is best for each particular person in every particular circumstance (1094b16-22, 1129b2-7, cf. *Pol* 1254a35-39). That which is best simply may even be harmful for most people most of the time (cf. 1294a3-8).

The best conditions and outcome for an entire community, for example, would consist of the distribution of exactly that sort of goods and activities each individual member requires for his own optimal flourishing. However, this hypothetical ideal of collaboratively generated and universally shared self-sufficiency is beyond the capacity of any city, and beyond justice itself, which orients itself not by what is truly good for each, but by what most people suppose is good simply, regardless of its actual advantage or utility (*NE* 1129b1-7, *Pol* 1279a12-16). Simple justice is absolute, complete, and uncompromising, but would still fall short of what is simply best for each, which is defined by who actually needs which good thing and for what purpose. But even this second best, ideally just arrangement of men's affairs is far beyond man's reach; it would require some greater collective spontaneity toward political community among human beings and their aims than that exhibited wherever real-life human beings rule over and with each other in cities according to flawed, arbitrary conventions and coercion (1254b26-5a3, 1255a39-b15).

Under normal circumstances, most people do not usually distinguish what is good for all from what is deserved by each. Instead, they tend to assume that certain principles of distributive justice supply the complete standard of the common good, understood as the most perfectly just order of things (1282b16-23). And this makes some sense, since the complete common good of a political community would necessarily include the greatest possible degree of reciprocal justice. The common good, however, even in its fullest sense, is only ever as good as the most commonly shared goods, and falls short of both the simply good and simply just, because it is defined in light of how particular men and cities actually are, and it is always circumscribed by what is actually possible and just in practice. That is, in practice, both distributive and corrective justice – which are necessary in the first place because nature fails to

provide what is simply best for us – are based upon mistaken opinions about which goods are best and commensurate to the worth and desert of those presumed to be good men, rather than what particular goods would actually be most suited to or truly beneficial for a particular person or people (1253a7-19, cf. 1332b11-3b3). Actual ideas, policies, and actions in pursuit of architectonic visions of complete justice are necessarily derived from citizens' crude suppositions and approximations of what is simply best and how it is earned, rather than what anyone actually needs, is best suited to, or would benefit from. So what actually gets called justice in practice is rarely very good for everyone, and sometimes for no one, in the city (*NE* 1134a26-34).

The constant core and most commonly applicable aspect of the common good always remains that by which it is defined and associated with the comprehensive purpose of law in the *Ethics*, as the preservation of a community from corruption, civil war, lawlessness, and intrigue (1281a18-21). Any degree of reciprocal justice is only possible for anyone in the first place when the common goods of a city's general peace, order, and stability are well established. And from the more pragmatic standpoint of the *Politics*, where rule is discussed more as an ongoing activity than merely an arrangement, measures of distributive and corrective justice are just only to the extent they are truly essential contributing parts of the more fundamental and common aspect of the common good (1261a29-31). When the demands of nobility, fairness, and goodness conflict, the goodness of justice is revealed as its more essential aspect, trumping any and all claims of desert or dignity. Distributive justice itself derives its rightness from some presumed order of things governing the greater whole, and cannot correctly be considered justice in instances when its mandates are destructive of that larger order; in the final analysis, justice

must be good and right in the big picture from which it derives its own significance and goodness. The nobility of justice, then, is contingent upon its goodness.

The City's Tripartite End

The common good is first invoked in Book III of the *Politics* as the distinguishing orientation of the three correct forms of rule, in contrast to the three corresponding deviant ones that aim solely at the good of the ruling citizens, who are said, most of all, to constitute the regime (1279a27-31). These regimes perceive the true end of the city clearly and align their rule with it accordingly. The standard of political correctness applied to rulers' aims in Chapter Seven is derived from the older, more "natural" view of rule described in Chapter Six as serving others' good. At first, the standard of the city's common good seems to offer a single, more comprehensive political vision and purpose, shared by the just, the able, and the discerning, as a superior substitute for the earlier dual ends of sustenance and living nobly, posited in Book One (1252b27-30). The complete common good that most "accords with nature" and that correct rule aims at is exemplified by the ideal, harmonious arrangement of the primitive yet sensible citizens presented in the brief anecdote of the earliest cities at the end of Chapter Six (*Pol* 1279a10-16, cf. 1268b37-9a9). That is, the complete common good presumes a correctly discerning, thoroughly rational, psychically "healthy" population which, if it ever was, can no longer be found in any known city (cf. 1281a42-b1, 1283a27-29, 1308b31-9a9). As in the case of the individual moral actor discussed in the *Ethics*, legislators, statesmen, and regimes must aim at the optimal mean of justice like an archer, taking into account circumstantial factors like wind and distance; the shifting, unsteady aims and perceptions of a community, however, are always distorted and blurred, unable even to locate a proper target (*Pol* 1295a34-40, cf. *NE* 1094a18-24,

1106a31-7a2, 1109a24-b27). Rulers cannot mindlessly abide by what they conceive to be simply just, but must also possess the prudence, acuity, and alertness necessary for taking into account the best that their particular community might achieve or require at a given time (1106b25-7a15, *Pol* 1286a35-37, 1288b21-9a7, 1325a7-14).

Behind the standard of correct rule that Aristotle goes on to use in his bifurcated classification of regimes seems to lie a presumption that the good shared in common by the ruling members of a regime is wholly distinct from and opposed to the good of the city as a whole, and that rulers' pursuit of the one is always completely opposed to and at the expense of the other. Later in his discussion, however, although he retains this underlying tension between the separate good of rulers and ruled, Aristotle defines correct rule somewhat differently, as aiming equally at *both* the advantage of the city as a whole and of the regime; that of the ruling body is associated with the ennobling pursuits of virtue that make up the highest purpose of human community (1283b36-4a3). We can, of course, distinguish many different and often opposing goods and goals held in common by a wide variety of separate and overlapping groups within the walls of any city (*NE* 1129b13-17, cf. *Pol* 1303b17-4a17). However, because the ruling citizens of the regime compose the core political community that most orders the entire city, its concentrated common good crucially depends upon the perceived good of the ruled and whatever greater good might be most common and recognizable to them all (cf. 1276a40-b13, 1278b6-12).

The all-encompassing common good is itself not a single, universal constant by which every city and regime can be correctly ruled, judged, and classified, but a composite of different scopes of commonality and fundamentally distinct kinds of goods. Aristotle characterizes the

political good at which all cities aim, inasmuch as they are cities, as consisting of three shared human purposes:

It was said in our initial discourses, where household management and slavery were discussed, that man is by nature a political animal. Hence [human beings] strive to live together even when they have no assistance from one another, though it is also the case that the common good brings them together, to the extent that it contributes to each a part of living nobly. It is this above all, then, which is the end for all both in common and separately, but they also join together, and maintain the political partnership, for the sake of living itself. For there is perhaps something noble in living by itself, provided there is no excess of hardships. It is clear that most men will endure much harsh treatment in their longing for life, the assumption being that there is a kind of joy inherent in it and a natural sweetness. (1278b17-30)

The good of the entire political city consists of three main components: for the sake of companionship, living nobly, and living itself. Above all, a political community's ultimate purpose is that each of its members live as nobly and well as possible, but the same community also provides for satisfying man's desires for company, camaraderie, and friendship, as well as meeting the most basic needs for sustaining mere life (1252b27-3a1). As authoritative peers who rightfully share in more common purposes and loftier activities than those they rule, those who most of all rule the rest can also be considered to most fully enjoy the higher political ends of living nobly and friendship. But a fraternal amiability among the opposing factions themselves

and the general recognition of the ruling order's legitimacy among the greater multitude of the city members are also essential conditions and forms of political friendship (1280b32-39, 1294b34-39, 1308a3-11, cf. 1295b22-25).

The preservation of mere life is the most commonly shared but least impressive of these three political purposes that constitute the complete common good (cf. *Rhet* 1364a25-38). But Aristotle is quick to rescue this end from the baseness some readers might associate with its commonness. He argues on the contrary that mere life, absent any other good, has a natural sweetness to which we cling not just out of a fear of death's negation; we might even call our mere preservation "noble" by nature, considering how much men regularly endure to secure it (*Pol* 1278b25-30). This observation may seem a dubious proof of mere life's nobility, but does at least show that not much proof is necessary to establish its goodness, given how much of time and energy are already devoted to simply prolonging it, even if only as the precondition for any other good or noble thing (cf. 1294b35-37). After the standard of correct rule is presented in its "natural" pristine form, its actual application to the controversy over who should rule casts some doubt on the possible cohesion of these elements and the conceptual coherence of the common good as a practical standard of political deliberation and action, since Aristotle goes on to illustrate the various shortcomings of all regimes that aim at a single aspect of justice (cf. 1278b17-9a21).

Aristotle associates companionship and assistance in preserving mere life with nature, but foregoes any mention of nature in regard to the more aristocratic end of living nobly. Security and camaraderie are more urgently felt and spontaneously met by human beings and seem to be the natural roots and bulwark of a political community. And although peace and concord are ends that are good by themselves, they also point beyond themselves to the unequal good proper

to each member, beyond their common voyage. These more naturally grounded and met ends are most fully justified as the necessary means to the higher, more completely human, and dignified life to which aristocrats aspire. Because security and friendship are more immediately pleasant and urgent ends by nature, living nobly cannot be the sole or central concern of any existing city in practice, so long as nature, with all its failings, cross-purposes, and unreliable tendencies, necessarily remains active within it and its denizens. So, while the most supremely noble, enlivening, and serious life, lived in accord with virtue and justice, might be possible for a lucky few individuals, the cause of virtue on its own never constitutes a viable common goal of politics in any actually existing so-called city.

Immediately after establishing the primacy and parts of the common good, Aristotle refines its meaning as a standard and end in its practical application, transforming it from a matter of correctly discerning and hitting the target to a balancing of various incorrect, narrow-minded aims in order to sustain only the most basic aspects of the complete common good. The simplicity of gauging correct rule according to the naturally recognizable good of a city as opposed to that of the rulers, in Chapter Seven, is muddled in Chapter Eight, when Aristotle points out that the number of those who rule in the regimes of the few and the many correlates with wealth; the many are always poorer and the few rich (1279b13-80a5). This unavoidable economic fact of political life distorts both groups' view of what is common and good – for themselves, each other, and the whole. Regardless of the good at which they actually aim, a regime composed of a few will always be seen by the many poor as ruling on behalf of moneyed interests, while the wealthy few will have difficulty distinguishing a proud republican majority of a vibrant polity from the lawless, looting rabble who impudently equate their cause and good with that of the whole city.

Necessary Deviations

Every ruling regime requires, in the same city, a diversified, ruled multitude larger than it in order to sustain itself. And the variegation of ways of life that every political order necessarily imposes on its members means that, under every regime, we can find at least two competing visions of the city and citizen, which different segments of the population favor (1291a15-b13, 1328a21-b23, cf. 1316b6-10). And as long as a political community remains a well-defined and bounded entity, some of its members will, by necessity, always live on its fringes (cf. 1328b29-40, 1330a9-24). Contending factions and their incommensurable merit necessarily persist in the same city under rival regimes, so that all cities contain some unfulfilled, vanquished portion of its population that constitutes a potential source of grumbling, discord, and enemies of the regime (1283b1-13). Therefore, ruling with a view only to the consistent application of the regime's core, ruling principle – distributing all honors and privileges only to the rich or to the poor, for example – will only result in the further alienation and systematic oppression of the other side, excused by whichever principle of distribution is preeminent (1309b37-10a10).

But since those who are equal in one thing alone should not have equality in everything, nor those who are unequal in a single thing inequality, all regimes of this sort are necessarily deviations. It was also said previously that all dispute justly in a certain way, but not in a way that is simply just. The wealthy because they have the greater part of the territory and the territory is something that is common, further, for the most part they are more trustworthy regarding agreements, the free and well-born as being close to one

another, for the better born are more particularly citizens than the ignoble, and good birth is honorable at home among everyone.

Further, because it is likely that better persons come from those who are better, for good birth is a virtue of a family. In a similar way, then, we shall assert that virtue has a just claim in the dispute, for we assert that justice is a virtue characteristic of partnerships, and that all the others necessarily follow on it. Finally, the majority in relation to a minority, for they are stronger and wealthier and better when the majority is taken together in relation to the minority.

(1283a26-42)

All regimes that incorrectly ascribe moral equality or inequality to its members, based on a particular equal or unequal trait or asset they share, “are necessarily deviations,” because they confuse their partially valid but mutually exclusive principles of distinction and contribution for the whole of distributive justice, and conflate distributive justice with justice simply (1283a27-30, 1301b39-2a15). The central and defining political dispute over just rule, therefore, is not between selfish partisans of a part and selfless partisans of the whole, but between clashing moral visions of the whole and its good, warped and clouded by opposing principles of fairness and reciprocity. Deviant regimes are not wicked but incorrectly oriented, misidentifying their own principle of fair distribution as what is good for the whole city (1280a9-21, 1317a34-37). And their confusion makes some sense; since what is just is necessarily best, they often take their own good as ample evidence of a more general prevailing harmony (cf. 1281a18-21, 1282b14-17). But this same error of perspective renders all unmixed form of rule, based on any single exclusive principle, equivalent to tyranny (1283a26-30, 1301a36-39, 1302a2-8, cf. 1302a2-7).

No principle, faction, or person deserves to be honored at the expense of everyone else's good and possible happiness.

The absolute rule of any one principle, including virtue, is unjust in terms of distributive justice, because it unavoidably denies other rightful claims of desert and consequently harms the entire city. But all such orders of rule are also unjust *because* they are detrimental to the city, and are, therefore, destructive of any possibility of virtue or desert. Of the six basic regime forms laid out in Chapter Seven, only polity is excluded from this ignoble likening to tyranny, which would seem to be because it is the only one with no single-minded purpose or dominant principle of rule (cf. 1312b34-36). Since they all aim at their own conception of the common good, as defined by their own principles, the purity and selflessness of a ruler's intentions and care for the whole city are almost completely irrelevant to the practical workings of political rule and community. No matter what moral basis they cite for their authority or their primary aims, what most of all matters and determines successful political rule are the deeply rooted, principled, and mostly implacable opinions and perceptions of the ruled. All cities' ruling factions rule with the genuine conviction that their own good contributes to the common good, but they will inevitably be supposed by those they rule as aiming only at their own good. And this distrust of their rulers' intentions makes sense, since it lies far beyond the reach of human nature and what we mean by justice to expect or stipulate rulers to act *only* on behalf of others' good without having a rewarding, self-fulfilling career of their own by doing so (1263a40-b5).

Because a city is most essentially defined and determined by its regime, and its regime by whom it calls citizen and ruler, the classification of regimes as correct and deviant presented in Chapter Seven is based upon a morally simplistic, false dichotomy between the good of the ruler and that of the whole. In politics, this same elegant simplicity of moral categories and

perspective often impedes any common cause between rival factions and fuels the cycle of misperception and mistrust that can erupt in instances of civil strife and crisis. While rulers' good may have once been separate and distinct from the good of the ruled in the distant, unrecorded past, when ruling was seen as a subservient job, "now" the two goods are almost symbiotically reliant on each other in every city. It is a fatal mistake for rulers to view their regime's own good as completely independent of the city's good (cf. 1276a34-b13). Regimes are preserved when their predominant tendencies are moderated by looking to the needs, perceptions, and passions of the city as a whole, rather than only their own ruling principles and aims (1309b18-10a12).

If the rulers also happen to be the best men of the city, capable of the greatest virtue, then it becomes much less obviously good or correct for them to neglect their regime's more concentrated and nobler good for the sake of others' incorrect ideas of the collective good (cf. *NE* 1168b24-9b1). Of all the contending parties, the aristocrats are most likely and able to aim at all three ends of the city in the clear light of their virtue and prudence, if they could actually come to rule by their own power, according to their own virtue and principle of distribution, which as we have seen, they cannot. For, although virtue may not constitute the complete common good, it at least supplies the best part of it and would be most conducive and accommodating to the other parts. But even in this case, when a regime's ruling principle overlaps with and contributes so much to the common good, the common good itself must take priority over the full desert of its benefactors, since it constitutes the very conditions for even the possibility of making the noble the central or highest purpose of a city. Aristotle even seems to imply as much while defining the six regime-types in Chapter Seven, in regard to the clear-sighted, serious rulers of aristocracy, who alone are said to rule correctly – not because they rule

“with a view to the common good,” like the kings of kingships and statesmen of polities – but “either because the best persons are ruling, or because they are ruling with a view to what is best for the city and for those who participate in it,” as two naturally distinct and conventionally opposed, but interdependent, goods (1279a32-38, cf. 1283b39-42).

And yet, the dominant factions vying for rule in every city overlook this vital link of interdependence between the city and regime, and instead tend to see and appeal to the common good as a sort of aggregated slush fund of all goods and honors, to be had and dispersed by the rulers alone (1279a30-32). The resulting fight for the common good, therefore, often looks like a struggle by the parts over the privilege to pillage the whole, but from the vantage of those in the thick of it, their struggle is not for monopolizing scarce, commonly esteemed commodities for themselves and their friends, but for the sake of *saving* the common good from the true pillagers on the other side, before *they* allocate and waste it all on themselves. Like Jason the tyrant, those who contend for rule in the city exhibit a feverish political appetite for command and complete justice, to the partial extent that they are able to conceive it. And like Jason, each clamoring faction and its leaders see the viciousness and injustices often required to acquire and wield power as justified by the opportunities that they also secure to do even greater acts of justice, rectifying other worse injustices and crimes, which would excuse and make up for all the regrettable but unavoidable transgressions necessary to get and stay at the top of the heap (*Rhet* 1373a18-27, *Pol* 1302a20-24).

Every faction and regime recognizes the supreme authority of the common good as the ultimate justification of their political rule and intentions, even as they misconstrue and undermine it. Therefore, the question of who is most essential to the good of all must be settled not according to the parties’ aims and merit, but in light of the overall impact of their rule on the

various facets of the common good. In terms of their own advantageous qualities and ends being consistent with and conducive to the good of the city as a whole, the wealthy can claim to provide territory, capital, and contractual solvency. The commonly claimed superiorities of good birth and freedom are manifested in the possibility of virtue that the city gives room to develop, and moral virtue has an obviously just claim to rule the whole, since justice itself is the encompassing virtue calling upon all other virtues in its realization. And finally, the majority can collectively claim to offer their own aggregated strength [*kreittous*], wealth, and leveled judgment. At the beginning of Chapter Thirteen, Aristotle asserts that “all or at least some” of the contending factions’ claims might be held to be correct in regard to the city’s existence, “but with a view to the good life,” superiority in education and virtue have the most just claim of all (1283a23-26). With a view to preserving the city’s existence, then, it seems that not “all,” but only “some” of the superior traits claimed by the factions in the city are equally advantageous. The question of who should rule, the best or the rest, hinges on which of these two parts of the common good (the city’s existence or the good life), which different regimes attain to varying degrees, is most just (cf. 1326a12-16).

Even More Oligarchic

In practice, regimes and rulers that come to power usually remain engaged in factional conflict rather than turning to the actual business of governance, and tend not to consider the ruled part of their city in the way that some royal families are apt to think of their domain and subjects, as their own estate (1284b17-23, 1287a32-b4, 1296a27-b1, cf. 1285b6-33, 1315a41-b1). As we have seen, no single distributive principle of rule by which any one regime might rule can encompass or satisfy the requirements of correct rule, so no contending faction makes

claims “in a way that is simply just” (1283a23-30, 1280a9-25, 1283b26-29). And although he also granted some partial credence to the distributive justice and claims of oligarchy, democracy, and aristocracy at the beginning of Chapter Nine, at the beginning of Chapter Ten Aristotle insists that the form of rule favored by any one of these factions, along with tyranny and even the rule of the one best man, “seem troublesome” (1281a8-15). We would expect deviant, self-centered regimes that rule like tyrants, who consider their effectual power as sufficient evidence of their legitimate authority to order the city however they please, to fall far short of the common good, but now, even the correct rule of aristocracy and kingship is likened to these tyrannical forms, in terms of the good (1281a13-24, cf. 1287b38-40, 1301a25-b1, 1318a27-29). However, we will not be surprised that Aristotle lumps all these forms of rule together when we recall that aristocracies and kingships, like deviant regimes, elevate one principle, character, and way of life at the expense of all others.

As Bias said, “ruling will show the man,” and absolute rule allows men to show themselves absolutely, as it gives full rein to rulers’ own ruling opinions and desires to distribute all goods and order all relations according to their partial perspective of justice alone (*NE* 1130a1-2, cf. *Pol* 1314b28-35). Unchecked oligarchies loot, plunder, and exploit the poor as much as absolute democracies oppress and take from the rich, and both with as much right as a tyrant and with no referential basis for seeing their own injustice – both these regimes are “base and unjust” (1281a25-29, 1318a18-26). “But should the decent [*epieikeis*] rule and have authority over all” in an absolute manner similar to democracy, oligarchy, and tyranny, Aristotle asks (1281a29-30)? The correctly oriented forms of aristocratic and royal rule do not suffer from a similar corruption, limited perspective, or ineptitude of their rulers, whose authority rests upon

the superior virtue and education required by rule. The trouble with these regimes, therefore, originates not with the rulers, but the ruled:

In this case, all the others are necessarily deprived of honors, since they are not honored with ruling offices. For we say that ruling offices [*politikais archais*] are honors [*timomenous*], and when the same rulers always rule the others are necessarily deprived of the honors. But is it better for the one who is most serious of all to rule? But this is still more oligarchic, as more are deprived of honors. (1281a30-34)

The correctly oriented rule of one or a few would be as disadvantageous and destructive as any deviant regime, because the ruled multitude cannot help but be aware of and offended by their complete subordination under such an arrangement and soon grow restless and resistant in response (1281a15-34, 1297b5-10, 1330b32-40). Unlike deviant regimes, whose unjust aims are the cause of their neglect of the common good, the problem with the rule of one or a few on the basis of intangible inequalities stems not from the rulers' aims, ineptitude, or excesses, but simply the bare fact that they have a monopoly on the highest honors and offices of the city (1264b5-9, 1332b16-31, cf. 1316a21-25). The highest, most encompassing honors are finite public commodities that derive their full significance from the social context and relational categories of rank existing in a particular community (cf. 1291a21-b13). Therefore, elevating any single person or group above everyone else in moral authority, in effect, diminishes the relative recognized worth of everyone else in the city of lesser accomplishment than the honorees.

Political conflict arises as much from those in the city who blame the rulers for their injustice and incompetence as it does from rulers' unjust and incompetent actions, not simply due to the corrosive effects of envy and selfish ambitions, but more from an anxiety over the dishonor, perceived loss, or punishment of being perpetually excluded members of the city (1301a36-39, *Rhet* 1387b2-13). Factional discord results wherever rulers are seen by a critical mass of the ruled multitude as appropriating excessive profits or honor from the common store, deserved or not (*Pol* 1279a11-15, 1302b5-14, 1308b31-9a9, cf. 1301b21-29, 1314b28-35). Rights of office and citizenship confer a public recognition of one's moral integrity and decency, as capable and worthy of ruling one's self and others. And since this good comes at the expense of everyone else in the city, who must forego the same honor and privilege, the claim of any group to deserve absolute authority as their due honor is a dishonor and insult to the ruled, as if they have no reason to believe they were not born to decide and command, and be ruled absolutely by others (1295a18-24).

Because office is seen by most people in most cities as more of an honorable prize of victory and sign of moral worth than a job, even a city ruled by only the most noble, respectable aristocrats would be "necessarily filled with enemies" (1281b27-30). Virtuous men would be unable to persuade or educate the many in how to live and be ruled from an accepted position of authority without offending them, because the greater multitude cannot easily discern the difference between the good rule of deserving men and tyranny (cf. 1310a28-34, 1316a7-10, 1317a40-b15). A ruler's selfless motives and genuine devotion to the entire city are insufficient for securing its common good which, to be good, must be real, effectual, and enjoyed in the lives of the vast majority (cf. *Const Ath* 9.2). Lovers of virtue who seek office for noble reasons look

just like greedy honor-mongers and profit-lovers to the many, who cannot distinguish self-love from selfishness or leadership from insolence (cf. *NE* 1168b23-9b2, *Rhet* 1367a1-17).

So, although only aristocracy can truly be said to aim at the best part of the common good, democratic principles and traits contribute more to the most common part. Actually instituting a regime devoted “above all” to the cultivation and exercise of virtue would endanger the integrity of both the city and virtue (*Pol* 1297a7-13, cf. 1273a41-b3). Because the virtuous are so few and outnumbered in every city, even if they could rule, their rule would either destroy the city out of an unwillingness to compromise their virtue, or would endure by relying on overwhelming, ruthless force, intimidation, and deception as the effectual basis of their power (1301a38-b1, 1301b40-2a2). Therefore, in order to give virtue its rightful place in the city by securing their exclusive right to office, aristocrats would have to rely much more on force, intimidation, and ruthlessness than noble deeds, thereby tarnishing their virtue and sacrificing the very basis of their desert (1304b3-9). The choice facing a ruling aristocrat would be either to resort to morally suspect and rough practices in order to retain his power, upsetting the public order and corrupting his own character in the process, or staying true to his own nobility by refraining from base and vicious deeds at the cost of both his deserved authority and the civil order (1313a5-10, 1325a30-b6, cf. 1287a30-31, 1328a8-12).

The many’s chafing at the rule of the few, in whatever form it takes, stems more from the small size and exclusivity of the ruling body of elites than the particular shared quality and principle – whether wealth, virtue, or birth – they happen to claim as justification of their authority (1290a15-22, cf. 1305b18-33). This is why Aristotle says aristocracy is oligarchic, and monarchy is even more so: due to the perceptions of the ruled and the unsavory means a small group must inevitably rely on to acquire or retain their power, the actual outcome of aristocrats’

rule would be no better or more just than if an equally small minority claimed rule over the entire city due to a morally irrelevant quality like musical ability, good looks, or luck (129437-41, 1301a38-b1, cf. 1307a5-27, 1316b40-7a6). According to both the everyday meaning as well as the sense in which Aristotle often uses the term, “oligarchy” is based upon the most readily apparent and politically pertinent inequality existing among individual human beings in all societies, and is commonly taken as a sign of their relative blessedness and as a measure indicative of a more fundamental inequality in regard to all things (*Rhet* 1365a7-10, cf. *Pol* 1273a20-b1). For something to be “*more oligarchic*,” then, implies an even stricter enforcement or standard of eligibility, resulting in the further concentration and accumulation of all property, power, and honor in the city, by an even smaller ruling clique (1293a19-34).

Any regime composed of only a few, whose authority is based on some shared superiority with no clear upward limit, is liable to become even more hierarchical and exclusive over time, if it rigorously adheres to its own principles (1306b21-26, cf. 1257b17-8a6). In contrast, because those ruling a democracy are so numerous, they do not feel as threatened by their opponents and, therefore, can more afford to be gentle and rely less on austere vigilance, severity, or shows of force in order to maintain their authority (1302a7-15). Because the demos is less pliant and movable through appeals to reason or knowledge, the rule of the few, whether on the basis of their wealth or virtue, will always be more volatile and precarious than the rule of the many, especially when the many rule over the more virtuous and decent few; these already best know how to be ruled according to the noble and necessary and are, therefore, least likely to break the law or incite discord (1277b7-22, 1295b35-6a15, 1297a10-14, 1320b32-1a2, cf. 1326a25-29).

Mixing Metaphors

A common good exists for every political community and its laws, Aristotle says, because “a certain common account will also fit all alike.” However, any one-size account for all would also most likely be the least fitting measure of the most surpassingly decent and noble member’s virtue. At the barest minimum, all members of a city can always be said, at the very least, to share a common geographical location, which ineluctably involves them in the most basic of shared interests with their fellow inhabitants; they are fated contemporaries of the same localized events, struggles and outcomes, like the passengers of the same ship, who are said to share a “common voyage” with the oarsmen, lookouts, and the pilot (*Pol* 1260b38-42, 1276b19-28, 1283a32). The common good of a shipmates’ continued voyage must take precedence over every other consideration, occupant, or destination, no matter how good, just, or noble (1284a22-24). Therefore, the more general and impersonal common experience, activities, and ways of life required for sustaining political community must be publicly projected above all other causes, as the one neutral conceptual interest and objective goal for which all others are useful or sacrificed – including the particular lives or aims of any single person or group of citizens (1276b19-35, cf. 1287b3-4).

In the most complete sense of the term, as the good of the entire city, the common good would conflict with no other ends of the city, since it is, by definition, the maximized, combined activation of its individual members’ potential, and everyone’s own greatest possible enjoyment of the resources, freedom, and leisurely peace provided by a self-sufficient city, “both in common and separately,” as interconnected, codependent parts of the same community (1278b23). However, in determining the question of political ends in light of how it actually arises in the political realm, on particular occasions when efforts to realize these distinct ends of

the city come into conflict and the most authoritative common good must take precedence over all others, the appeal to the common good only ends up confusing matters, becoming another common source of discord by further consolidating factions against each other and undermining the greater, shared union of the whole. So, not only is the correct target at which good statesmanship is supposed to aim a composite good, but also the goods composing it are far apart in terms of kind and quality, making correct aim mostly a matter of missing all principal competing targets equally, rather than hitting any one of them to the exclusion of the others (cf. 1283b36-42). Due to the variety of valid claims in the city, correct rule requires not just spotting and hitting the one best mark, but in distinguishing and choosing the most urgent parts at which it is even possible to aim. And hitting such a multi-faceted target, of which each faction can at best fully recognize but one aspect, can only ever be done in part -- not as the fruition of the good intentions of the most capable and discerning rulers, but as an ancillary consequence of factions' competing aims and principles being frustrated and mixed with each other, through a stable and working equilibrium of their rights and interests according to the dictates of law. Because the disparate parts of the common good and principles of each faction are unjust to the extent that they preclude the others, realizing a city's end is no mere matter of accurate aim, but an ongoing effort to balance and harmonize the various, opposing interests, capacities, and aims of all its members. Securing these ends cannot be done in the manner of a narrowly focused, keen-sighted archer, but by somehow by binding together all those who would aim so intently and exclusively at the good; men's overall aims are generally lowered as a result, but the combined vector of their bearing is kept straight and steady by the push and pull of all.

The common good includes each cohabitant's own maximized personal good (insofar as each might partake), but only inasmuch as they are a contributing part of the larger purpose of

propelling and keeping themselves together over the long haul. Of course, a common voyage presupposes a common unifying destination of voyagers, but for it to last for more than few days requires that these shared ends remain vague and beyond all horizons, to turn all members in the same general direction. Citizens are most of all rendered interconnected fellow companions sharing a common interest and fate by their regime in the same way voyagers are tied together by their common voyage. Above all else, the prevailing regime's voyage must continue. The common good can never be so attainable as to seem final or somehow completed, so that men might slacken their endeavors toward maintaining the only possible portion of it and an unswerving course by which the regime might avoid both the strong egalitarian currents and deceptive shallows of popular rule (toward which all oar-powered ships tend to drift over time), and the elusive maelstrom of surpassing nobility and aggrandizement.

The arguments for the modest merit and competence of the multitude, along with the inevitable necessity of relenting to their claims, ruling principles, and aims, may satisfy the opposing arguments concerning the justice of democracy, but certainly not most of those who would give them voice. Accordingly, in the second part of Chapter Thirteen, Aristotle takes a new rhetorical tack, confronting the superior few with a radicalization of their own claims of unequal desert, in order to compel their own appeal to the egalitarian spirit and principle of the demos, which inheres at the structural and conceptual core of all regimes (cf. 1273b11-16, 1318a18-33). The advantageous attributes and distributive principles of inequality claimed by both oligarchs and aristocrats are relative superiorities with no clear natural limits, always admitting of further augmentation and accumulation by parties of varying size (cf. 1256b26-37, 1257b18-8a18). These factions' principled claims of unequal wealth and virtue can just as easily be made on behalf of their own most outstandingly rich or virtuous individual members, and

ultimately point beyond these groups' own associative authority to the unparalleled right of the one most surpassing individual, who can claim the same degree of surpassing worth and contribution in comparison to the rest of the regime that they do for themselves, as justification for ruling the rest of the city (*Pol* 1283b8-26). If the few were to maintain that only virtue or wealth has any legitimate claim to political rule and honor, then by the same standard of inequality and the arguments by which their regimes are defined and defended, there is no clear reason not to rescind their own claims in favor of granting sole authority to the one man with more money or greater virtue than everyone else (1283b13-23, cf. 1308a19-24).

Unlike wealth and virtue, physical strength is never explicitly cited to justify an individual's right to office, and the collective strength of the many contributes nothing directly to living well or the city's nobility and splendor, but is nonetheless most essential for its continued maintenance and effectual power. However, physical strength would be a very base and undermining precedent of legitimacy for any regime or individual to claim as the basis of their rule. A claim of superior physical strength as the rightful grounds of moral authority would seem to carry the implied threat of its own self-enforcement and that, if not duly recognized, the mighty multitude can always seize their own due by simply exercising their distinctive trait as its own fiat. Because nature fails to buttress the highest qualities of the soul consistently with corresponding superiorities of the body, such an implied claim – to possess the capacity for realizing justice of any and all claims in an improvident world – sounds profoundly brutish, arbitrary, and unjust to any decent, self-respecting citizen. This is why the majority's superior contribution of aggregate strength is not cited as the *moral* justification for their rule (1280a2-5, 1280a22-24). The democrats themselves do not wish to base their rights to rule strictly on their surpassing capacity to seize them, but as owed to them as dignified, self-possessed, and self-

directed equals. No city, no matter how martial or democratic its regime, explicitly bestows political honor or rights to groups or individuals on the basis of physical might alone. Certainly, all cities seek to honor exemplary men who exhibit the greatest freedom from fears, desires, material concerns, and base self-regard. But to grant the highest accolades and political authority upon men for no other reason than their collective muscle mass and its relative contribution to the cities' overall might would be as absurd as awarding flutes to those with beautiful bodies for contributing to the city's nobility. Such traits would only be politically relevant if nature could, as she wishes, fit every godlike body with the uncorrupted, pure minds of the naturally ruling element, so our hierarchy might be as apparent as that between lions and hares (1284a8-18, cf. 1318b1-5).

The democrats' claim of equal freedom from authority is itself only truly realized as the full freedom and self-sufficient happiness of a life dedicated to virtue, but the practical merit of their surpassing numbers and collective strength cannot be so neatly extended to outstanding exemplars of their defining trait by the same logic that collective wealth and virtue can, because the bulk of a multitude cannot be surpassed by any single person in the same way (cf. 1291b2-6). Perhaps, Aristotle suggests, there are "one or more" in the city who are stronger than the rest of the city put together, and should therefore rule according to the same principle of justice (1283b23-26). The unique ambiguity of Aristotle's phrasing here in reference to the many's contribution – that their superior strength might be outmatched by some unknown quantity of "one or more" men, rather than simply "by one alone," as he puts it in the cases of both the wealthiest and most virtuous – is an acknowledgment of this natural limit of human relations, embodied by the sheer, incomparable immensity of the many's gathered size. No "one" human being is so surpassingly godlike as to command a god's self-sufficient power to order others

without the help of many “more” (cf. 1254b25-33). Even Heracles or his retinue would require sizable numbers of reliably devoted friends and allies to secure absolute authority over a political multitude – an arrangement that essentially “already is law,” coordinating the relations and activities of a ruling body of “equal and similar” associates (1287a16-20, 1287b25-34, cf. 1292a32-33). And although there may have been aristocratic rulers in the past who could overwhelm an entire city with the help of only a handful of allied knights, Aristotle does not think that anything close to such an arrangement is possible or desirable in the more civilized and sprawling cities of his own time – unless the “one or more” rulers have another, separate, armed multitude at their disposal whose own pooled potential rivals that of the many (1284b33-34, 1286b7-13, 1286b27-40, 1297b15-28, cf. 1287b29-8a5).

Balancing Unequal Proportions

Although the absurd case of an outstandingly strong man whose physical strength or size surpasses the combined might of everyone else in the city never arises in politics, individuals of similarly surpassing wealth and moral virtue do sometimes arise and, by their very presence, threaten the legal fiction of equal obligation, desert, and capacity by which every ruling group coheres. Such exceptional individuals *do* tend to attract an inordinate number of backers to their cause from among the citizenry more easily, according to the very principle of their own regime. Therefore, in all deviant regimes, those who surpass the rest of their cities to such a degree in desert and worthiness threaten the spirit of equality that forms the basis for all community and are, therefore, justly expelled from their midst. All regimes exclude those in the city who fall short of their ruling principles. But in the case of an individual member of the regime who surpasses the rest, rather than handing over the regime to such a man, or legislating with a view

only to the best, most worthy citizens, lasting regimes must insist on another principle: the standard of “correct” rule, with correctness being taken to mean “in an equal spirit,” on terms of some basic equality, which is “correct with a view both to the advantage of the city as a whole and to the common of the citizens” (1283b39-4a3). To prevent regimes from disintegrating through the consistent application of their own distributive principles of rule, a supplemental, correcting principle of equality is necessary for allowing and honoring some individual members who contribute more, without depriving and dishonoring the rest of the regime.

The most absolutely sovereign human ruler is still as completely bound by and subject to the conditions and necessity of man’s world and nature as any slave to his master. Legislators, rulers, and statesmen must look to standards of balance and harmony between the city’s ends, rather than realizing any one of them at the expense of the whole by relying on the same criteria of proportional design that guide other, subservient arts, which must look to and take into account externally imposed ends and limitations (1288b10-20, 1302b34-3a2).

For a painter would not allow himself to paint an animal with a foot that exceeded proportion, not even if it were outstandingly beautiful, nor would a shipbuilder permit himself to build a stern or any of the other parts of a ship that exceeded proportions, nor indeed would a chorus master allow someone with a voice louder and more beautiful than the entire chorus to be a member of it.

(1284b7-13)

It would be best, Aristotle says, if a legislator could arrange a city so that no individual or group might gain disproportional power (1294b33-34, 1302b15-20, 1318a1-10). But it is not clear how even the best laws could prevent someone of unequal stock, with more friends, virtue,

and wealth, or a greater capacity for wielding strength and gaining power, from arising. In such cases, it would seem that even a well-legislated regime would require recourse to this “second voyage,” if some future passenger who comes aboard during the voyage is so relatively excessive in weight he would capsize the ship of state as much as a poorly designed off-kilter poop deck (1284b17-20). In all existing, possible regimes, which necessarily fall short of the best conceivable political order, outstanding moral virtue is as threatening as any other excess in attributes that are prized by citizens and subject to the same corrective. From the perspective of the statesman and legislator, virtue – especially the most magnificent moral virtue that cannot be fully harnessed or sublimated by a regime for its purposes – is one more potential source of rival power in the city and, therefore, may not always be politically salutary. The mere presence of a man of outstanding virtue that surpasses that of everyone else in the city can disrupt the regular, accepted order of things and threaten the rule of law, since he acts according to a higher standard of excellence, as a sort of law unto himself; he constitutes a sort of separate, rival authority of nobility and the good capable of supplanting the laws and regime (1302b10-20). Recognizing the just desert of such an incommensurably superior citizen would obstruct the city’s enjoyment of the most basic of common goods by reorienting the regime around the due honors of this specimen of human excellence. The natural authority that the outstanding man commands cannot be allowed to undermine prevailing conventions and opinions that preserve the community (cf. 1254b26-36, 1277b3-29, 1295b13-29). Therefore, his banishment is necessary to preserve the regime as the shared, deliberative rule of equals.

Removing the outstanding men of the city is “not simply just,” because it unjustly denies valid claims of desert in the name of the regime and city, but it still accords with “a certain political justice” (1284b13-17, cf. 1279a17-22, 1280a18-21, 1283a29-30). This is a peculiar sort

of justice to be sure, since the most outstandingly virtuous man is most obviously entitled to rule, and it is resoundingly unfitting and unfair for the city not to defer to his guidance and expertise. By right, everyone in the city ought to obey the most deserving man of outstanding virtue, and gladly (1288a17-29). Exiling a person merely for being too impressive or good surely cannot be called just by any regime whose authority rests on its claims to be good and just (1283a3-11). So although it is obscene to publicly declare the removal of superior men just, as a preservative of the peace and integrity of political community, ostracizing the most outstanding individuals contributes to the long-term concord and harmony of the city by maintaining the possibility of fairly sharing the honors and goods of rule among equally entitled peers.

“Political justice” is discussed and contrasted to “justice simply” in Book Five of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as a sort of applied justice that takes into account the contingencies of a particular occasion. It concerns the extent and parts of complete justice actually possible and called for by justice in the particular situations, contingencies, and circumstances a real city faces (*NE* 1134b18-24, *Rhet* 1364b16-5b21). Political justice includes both conventional justice (which concerns the governing principles and ends of a particular community’s laws and customs) and natural justice (which serves as a constant, guiding standard for the judicious application of prevailing principles and laws to different situations as they arise). Besides authoritative laws, then, political justice always requires the experienced judgment, equity, and practical wisdom of particular individuals in the best positions available for surmising the correct standard by which those laws should be written, judged, and enforced (cf. *NE* 1135a5-8, 1144b5-5a11, cf. *Rhet* 1376b17-32). Because citizens are not gods but roughly equal mortal beings living in an ever-changing world, in order for them to live as well as possible, the necessarily

imperfect terms of justice by which they live together must be adaptable to the ongoing, unforeseeable changes in personnel and circumstances (*NE* 1134b27-33, *Rhet* 1375a27-b25).

In Book III of the *Politics*, regimes are first classified as either correct or deviant according to the standard of the complete common good of the entire city, but it turns out that, in practice, actual regimes can only be more or less politically just, aiming at only the most discernible and attainable parts of the common good (*Pol* 1279a16-21). That which is purely and unqualifiedly just is not a good prescription for every community, conundrum, or scenario, and is, therefore, rarely just in practice (1280a20-21, 1284b23-25). It is as unjust to single-mindedly pursue justice simply at the expense of the common good as it is to pursue the best simply without regard to desert. In both cases the course demanded by justice is that which most benefits the entire city. The common good of one city may be best served by the dominance of the rich, while another might even be capable of sustaining some sort of aristocracy for a time, but the common good of most actual cities almost always calls for some sort of democracy (1296b1-12). Some cities are not even capable of this sort of arrangement or even worthy of being called cities at all, and some sort of despotic dictatorship or dynasty may be the best possible case scenario for the slavish inhabitants, as they lack any semblance of the virtue, dignity, or decency necessary for political community and self-rule. Of course, as it is, for most human beings and cities in most times, places, and situations, mere security and material self-sufficiency *is* living as well as possible.

So, while the rule of the best men is always the unqualified, simply best arrangement in all times and places, the *best possible* to which any particular regime or city is obligated to aspire can vary widely. This is not to say that the best regime and best way of life are not always and everywhere superior to every alternative, but that they are rarely, if ever, even possible for

anyone; it is rarely good or just, therefore, to establish this sort of regime or its policies in other cities (*NE* 1135a2-7, *Rhet* 1360a30-34). The best political arrangement would presumably come closest to reconciling men's merit with their capacity and moral worth, consisting of the best man or equally best men ruling everyone else according to whatever is best for and deserved by each (*Pol* 1286a7-15, 1288b17-38, 1325b7-13). Political justice, on the other hand, is determined by what extent the good and just can be approximated in any given situation. And when what is good and what is just seem to diverge and that which would be most fair or just simply would be bad for a particular community on certain occasions, political justice calls for putting considerations of potential common harm ahead of the desire to see good men being properly rewarded and bad men punished (1284b15-23, cf. 1289b6-10). During volatile times of civil discord, revolution, or war, claims of partial justice and the comprehensive justice of the city's general welfare often conflict, and in such critical moments it might be just to enable the undeserving to suffer, or to allow bad men to flourish even while exploiting and dishonoring deserving heroes, all for the sake of sustaining the greatest degree of the barest, minimal common goods of political peace and collective independence.

As it cannot be fully delineated by any definitive formulation or conventional strictures, political justice is essentially amorphous and open-ended. A strict adherence to pure and simple, absolute justice in every circumstance would often endanger the integrity and preservation of a city and on such occasions would be politically unjust – unjust at that particular time and place, under those particular circumstances (1282b1-6). The specific duties that justice demands at any given time cannot be impossible or else it would make no sense to say anyone was justly obligated to fulfill them. Accordingly, justice does not call on us to enact the best, most unqualifiedly just civil order when it is impossible in a particular city or situation, because we

can only be justly obliged to do what is within our power to do. Rulers and statesmen must learn to lower their aims from the best conceivable to the best possible if their particular city or regime cannot live up to its own standards or would be destroyed by its best laws (cf. 1265b29-31, 1276b6-12, 1288b20-39, 1289a10-14, 1293b42-4a8). It is unjust to let the best become the enemy of the better in politics, and to establish the best regime and way of life the governing standard and aim of every city in every conceivable situation would render justice the enemy of the good.

The peaceful perpetuation of a civil order is not the complete architectonic good that common life seems to promise, but in practice, for all intents and purposes, it must become the primary effectual end of the city (cf. 1328a21-b2, cf. 1259a5-35). When faced with choosing between conflicting aspects of justice, the most common good – understood in its broadest, barest sense, as the mere preservation and security of the regime – ought to take precedence over considerations of desert. But even during times of normalcy, when the urgency and starkness of this choice between political priorities is not felt as strongly, justice continually calls upon prudent rulers to compromise, dilute, or ignore their most noble principles and aspirations for the sake of the low. For, whatever we think complete justice consists of and would look like, if it is indeed the proper end and good of the political community, then doing what is just must surely at least preserve that community. The good of the city is necessarily a common good, and the most common goods that perpetually dominate cities' concerns are the least spectacular sorts of goods, like the general stability and maintenance of common life (cf. 1325b36-38). Other, finer goods are only common to those who share in the regime, and only to varying degrees, if at all (cf. *NE* 1129b13-17, *Pol* 1283b35-4a3, 1296b17-24). And while the complete common good would

include both these ends, in practice this standard regularly calls upon us to put providing for our most basic needs of sustenance ahead of what we need to live well.

As the correct end of political community, justice is always involved in and applies to all human associations and, therefore, determines our particular duties in every situation. Like the education and advice of a physical trainer, justice must always be customized to suit each unique situation and subject but, in every case, always calls for the best possible outcome for all (1288b10-18). There is always a more correct course and right choice in every situation – it is always just to do what is necessary to secure the general welfare of the city – but what the end of the city’s common good specifically requires changes with circumstance. That which constitutes the sole, guiding end of statesmanship and that which is necessary to achieve it vary with the city and circumstance under consideration, but the particular content and specific imperatives of political justice at any given time are not arbitrary: the more common and necessary goods are always of a higher priority than any particular claims of merit (1281a18-34, 1281b22-31). Unlike the best life or the best possible regime that might provide the conditions for it, the just priority of the common good can be said to possess a real power of self-enforcement in political affairs. The exact course of action that political justice calls for is not always clear, but the reward for pursuing and punishment for ignoring the common good are consistently enforced by the very consequences of rulers’ actions. And if a regime does not recognize and defer to the necessary, but instead wrongly insists on adhering to principles of fairness in the face of the dire consequences of doing so, its injustice is punished by discord, insecurity, or the destruction of its rule and order. Because of this, political justice is operative whether or not it is enacted or recognized by a city (cf. *NE* 1134b18-19). Regimes that act against the common good and abide only by the narrowest interests, goods, or principles of fairness will eventually pay for their

unjust neglect of political necessity (cf. *Rhet* 1373b1-25). Every political community can be said to reap what it sows and, in a certain consequential sense, deserves the ruling order it puts up with or perpetuates, and statesmanship in all actual cities mostly revolves around managing the repercussions of the transgressions of natural justice that advance human affairs (cf. 1393b10-23).

The Slippery Slope of Desert

Exactly what the common good consists of and obligates men to do varies with a community's circumstances and possibilities and can include a wide range of good things and activities in which different residents share. Because possibilities change, political justice must be completely flexible, and not bound to any single, universal principle, best way of life, or regime. To be so resiliently flexible and adaptive in practice, political justice cannot be captured by any universal axioms or precise rules like geometrical constants that hold across time and place. Therefore, justice obligates rulers to know as much as they can about the particular lives, circumstances, and potential of their own city's inhabitants, so that they might better secure the incompletely just, but still best possible, common conditions for all (*Pol* 1325b34-6a4).

It is almost always the case that less than the best means are available for securing only the least bad possible outcome for all (cf. 1294b13-40). And this sometimes means setting aside the prevailing principles and rules of distributive or corrective justice in special circumstances. Political justice calls for the banishment of inordinately great men in most circumstances, for example, but at other times and places it might be more just to appoint the best man available as an absolute dictator for a set term or indefinitely to ensure civil peace or quell an enemy (cf. 1285a29-36). Similarly, most of the time it is to the common advantage for rulers to enforce

laws strictly and consistently, but at other times political justice may call for equitable discretion or leniency, as when it would be impractical or detrimental for the regime to punish large groups of inadvertent lawbreakers. And it is usually conducive to the good of the entire city for the virtuous to be honored and the wicked punished, and it is proper for citizens to desire and contribute to the realization of this just outcome. But if these normal procedures of reciprocal justice were to outrage a large bulk of the population on a particular occasion for some reason, or if the manpower of the wicked and indecent became necessary to purchase at the price of pardoning or even rewarding their vice, these same customary codes of desert and obligation would then be justly neglected.

The fundamental obstacle faced by anyone seeking to rule a contemporary political multitude for the sake of virtue is twofold: not only is the majority of any actual city not easily led by and often even hostile toward virtue, reason, and prudence, at the same time they are also too easily led by demagogues on the basis of flattery of their moral claims, hopes, and basest desires (1304b19-5a15, cf. 1305b21-39). Because they would not willingly obey anyone on the basis of his surpassing virtue alone, for outstanding men of virtue to gain the absolute power they deserve would require subduing all those cohesive elements of a community that might resist or compromise their authority. But the same aspects that sow discord, conspiracy, and revolution in a city are among the very things that make political community distinctly noble and good for men, and that which destroys the conditions for anyone enjoying any portion of the common good cannot be considered just, or even truly a regime in the most precise sense (1295a14-24). This is why a king who rules by law can only have a retinue of bodyguards so large that they remain collectively inferior in strength to the assembled multitude, so that he is always fundamentally dependent on the freely given, general assent of the city to follow and obey him –

as “king” rather than “tyrant” (1285a24-35, 1286b27-40, 1310b8-19, 1312b38-3a15, cf. *NE* 1170b20-29). But even tyrants who wish to prolong their reign must either learn discretion, restraint, and humility, and make a show of public works of devotion to and aggrandizement of the entire city, or else work to erase every associative network and social connection by which anyone in the city could be admired or reviled as just, unjust, good, bad, worthy or foolish, including himself (*Pol* 1315b11-29, 1315a14-24).

Undiluted, absolute authority is seen by the politically active as being proper to a patriarch, master, and despot and suited only to the rule of slaves, children, and beasts, while political authority is esteemed as being shared by fellow citizens who respectfully rule each other as freeborn equals with the same right to rule in turn (1255b16-20, 1277a32-b7, 1278a34-38). Subjects are commonly viewed by the proud citizen as naturally incomplete, lacking enough inner spirit of independence and command to stand up for themselves and are, therefore, rightfully ruled absolutely (cf. 1252a31-13, 1254a6-13). Absolute, arbitrary authority, based upon and enforced by coercion alone rather than words, seems to signify a fundamental inequality to which no self-respecting freeman could honorably consent (1255a21-b9, cf. *Rhet* 1393b8-23). If they think that their rulers are gaining anything good through the use or influence of their position, the bulk of the city will grow indignant and dissatisfied, which is bad for them and for the city as a whole (*Pol* 1315a14-31, cf. *NE* 1167b4-15). The question of whether a specific arrangement of rule is advantageous for a particular city is more fundamentally just than whether the rulers truly deserve their offices or not. And a regime’s advantageousness to its members hinges more on the question of whether its rule will be accepted or not, than how capable or correct its rulers are (cf. *Pol* 1313a10-16). Regardless of rulers’ true merit, competence, or justice, if they are *perceived* as being illegitimate or insolent by the strongest,

least discerning group in the city, then their rule is, in effect, as incorrect and harmful to “the common” as that group asserts. The unrelenting threats of external enemies, civil unrest, and revolution lead all lasting regimes to focus their energies on satisfying the demands and interests of the ruled – or else (1316b21-24, 1320a14-16).

No regime ever escapes the necessary persistence of contrary ways of life and divisions in the community at large (cf. 1283a16-18, 1290a35-b10). Through the generations, as the population and demographics of a city develop, the equidistant “golden mean” of which prudent rulers are mindful – between the principles and aims of the rich and the poor, citizens and residents, and the few and the many – shifts with the disproportional growth of the multitude’s size and strength (1296b15-34, 1319b11-19). Maintaining political stability and communal cohesion, therefore, requires regularly staving off the democratization of the regime to whatever extent possible, while at the same time peacefully relenting to these same political forces when made necessary by circumstances (1295b21-28, 1297a6-13, 1308b10-19). This lurching trajectory toward democratic dominance infects every city and regime to some degree, and in the long run the rule of all cities tends to pass gradually from few to the many (cf. 1307b1-19, *Rhet* 1404a1-8). As the demos grows in number and finds reasons to grow prouder and bolder over time, ruling oligarchies and mixed regimes must continually find the least disruptive ways to appease them and satisfy their claims, while democracies generally tend to slide in the same direction – ultimately, toward complete, lawless tyranny – but even quicker (1319a37-b32).

Aristotle’s brief discussion of the function and virtue of the citizen at the beginning of Chapter Five in Book III, in which he looks for that portion of inhabitants who actually are citizens, admits of five general class categories. These are: the citizens who partake in the offices and power of the regime; those who are *called* citizens, but are denied office and

influence; native-born freedmen who are not called citizens; resident aliens who are free but not native born; and slaves (1277b33-8a13). Actual regimes must maintain a proper proportion of all four of these classes among their cities' populations, while also managing the process of social mobility and class promotion. But all regimes also eventually find it necessary or advantageous to reform and reassign these hierarchical categories (1278a14-34). To provide a regime with the requisite manpower, efficacy, and popularly conceived freedom to do as it wants without restraint, some portion of the excluded multitude of non-citizens must come to see themselves as recognized vital parts of the city, and then of the regime, as their collective strength grows; at the same time, moreover, their numbers must also be replenished and supported by another, even larger underclass (1291a6-10, 1313b35-39, *NE* 1134a23-28). For, just as no soul can exist apart from some structured, unified body, there can be no virtue, justice, or any higher goods of the soul for very long at all unless the bulk of the more necessary elements of the city can somehow be peaceably incorporated into the regime, over time, in order to embody and sustain it and the city as a whole (*Pol* 1291a23-32).

New honors give men new reasons to feel proud, dignified, and deserving of good things (cf. 1308b10-29). And once greater autonomy is granted on one occasion, there no longer exists any readily apparent reason to deny any future claims, since by elevating one part of the population, the regime has already tacitly acknowledged its need for that group and the capriciousness of its conventional grounds and categories of rank and authority. "For either it must be denied that those who share are citizens, or they must participate in its advantages," leaving no real, sustainable middle ground (1279a30-32). It is not difficult to suppose how a slave or alien who had fought or served important functions alongside freemen in battle might bear his servitude more heavily after a war as unfitting and ignoble, or how a freeman soldier

would become more keenly aware of the earned dignity of citizenship and self-command, and of his own worthiness for claiming them; those who are merely called citizens would themselves, over time, readily see fewer and fewer reasons why they should not have a more substantial share in political power (1267a41-b8, 1278a34-39). But satisfactorily honoring the services or worth of any one of these groups only necessitates eventually expanding even greater honors and rights to even more people in order to sustain the new arrangement.

And even if the demographic size and proportions of a city's various populations could remain static and stable, unless that city is isolated from the rest of humanity, the mere presence of foreign communities nearby will greatly accelerate this process of integration. Regimes are often compelled, especially during or after foreign wars, to expand the political recognition and rights of the lower classes, as compensation for their contribution of public service (1306b36-7a1). And rulers must anticipate these inevitable exigencies, when considerations of mere life supersede those of living well, and always be ready to place virtue in service of slavish, material concerns and to expand political standing and rights to ever-larger numbers, despite their inferior moral worth, for the sake of their past and future contributions (1273b35-4a18, 1279b10-29). Even the smallest, most restrictive regime, composed of only the most virtuous and competent men or man, will intermittently require a greater force in numbers to back up and implement its command, which can only be reliably drafted through the reassignment of many of those who attend to daily needs to help meet non-daily ones (cf. 1252a34-b4, 1273b9-11, 1265a18-27, 1291a23-31). But even during unexceptional times of prolonged peace, greater manpower is often required to aid statesmen's ambitions or simply to support the growing number of citizens' accustomed degree of comfort and leisure. On these occasions it is both necessary and just to compensate these groups for what they perceive as the dishonor, indignity, or oppression of the

regime's arrogance – to grant freedom to slaves, permanent residency to aliens, the title of citizenship to non-citizens, or real rights of citizenship and office to citizens in name only – in grateful recognition of their political virtue and loyal devotion to the city (1297b9-12, 1307a23-33, 1308a10-17). Even Aristotle's own best regime holds out the hope of an eventual manumission retirement package for the publicly enslaved masses, as the eagerly anticipated reward for their faithful service (1330a30-33).

An Ignoble Justice

Justice will often demand that rulers and citizens reconcile themselves to the erratic, foolish, and unjust, but strong, multitude and their incomplete principles of fairness, for the sake of the greater, more essentially just purpose of preserving the regime and city. The common good refers to the abstract, general advantage or benefit that some deed, law, or policy provides for the artificial, conceptual entity of "the city," which is somehow shared in by all its members and larger than any of its constituent parts, causes, or goods. Devotion and duty seek a noble cause to advance, a greater, enduring ordered whole, as opposed to simply any other single person's or party's good or even the aggregated material welfare of all. As something much larger and longer lasting than any one person, and belonging to no one exclusively, the common good sounds like a grand and noble cause, worthy of the most virtuous deeds – especially in support of something so grandly noble and comprehensively authoritative as the political community that commemorates and immortalizes such deeds. And because no chain of events or set of circumstances can be absolutely anticipated or disregarded beforehand in men's prior determinations of justice, no deed that the common good might require can be absolutely ruled out by political justice. And this means that in any given situation, anything – ranging from

exercising virtue to betraying the virtuous – may be necessary to secure a city’s long-term peace and autonomy. The most vile, vicious acts or policies cannot justly be considered absolutely off-limits, so long as they may conceivably be required to realize the most common and best good possible under some set of extenuating circumstances. The prudent statesman must remain aware of the overriding priority of the city’s most base, material interests, justifying all sorts of deception, coercion, and exploitation of a regime’s enemies, allies, subjects, and citizens, when such becomes necessary in fulfillment of his primary duty of attaining whatever outcome is least bad for all.

However, that which best serves the common good at any given time is completely variable and difficult to predict, so a regime’s anticipation and correct interpretation of political justice and its dictates greatly depend on the perspicacity, discernment, and knowledge of particular political practitioners. And that which actually gets called the common good and is designated as the just means to it are determined in one way or another by a city’s strongest, predominant faction in light of their distorted perception of their own desert; that which they call the common good is always incomplete, moreover, and never common to all nor all that good (1296a27-b1). The common good that a city’s members secure certainly excludes those killed or injured in the process of securing it, for example. The common good is also not shared by everyone in the city equally, but is much more fully enjoyed by citizens and rulers, whose own good depends upon, but is not always aligned with, the good of the entire city. Even the most basic goods that we attain and experience collectively cannot always be had by all at once or in the same way (cf. *NE* 1170b1-6). Because everyone has a different life and capacity for living, peace and mere life are uniquely and separately good for each member individually. And yet, despite its just practical priority and effectual power of common good, most of the time, an

actual regime cannot focus nor its members even agree on the identity or importance of its various aspects of the common good, until some impinging crisis helps crystallize its urgency in such a way that some of them may more easily discern and articulate its specific duties and directives to all. But whatever actual rulers can actually identify as the common good in these situations, it is only ever a conjectured aggregate of individual interests.

The just priority of the greater common good of the entire city over the best men's own best interests means that, rather than being the central end of correct rule -- even under the best possible conditions, regime, and laws -- the highest possible human ends and happiness made possible by political community are only ever realized "accidentally," as its unintended side-effect, more than its natural or chosen final end (*Pol* 1278b31-9a7, 1284a33-b17). Although moral virtue can only ever be developed and exercised by a slim segment of a population, political rule, by a regime as opposed to a despot, elevates and ennobles the lives of all the inhabitants of a city to some extent. Rulers' and citizens' proud insistence on their own moral worth helps turn all men's attention upward toward higher standards of excellence than can exist in households and villages. In practice, of course, this still amounts to very little, since most actual citizens might exhibit martial and political virtue at best, while most non-citizens can hardly participate in the barest strictures of justice and law (1283a17-22).

While maintaining the best possible conditions for all whatever the cost to some is the most politically just arrangement, Aristotle does not state this conclusion explicitly, and for good reason. Aside from the sheer baseness and vulgarity of this core, pivotal imperative of justice, its full and explicit public expression would amount to violating it by undermining the common good. The moral fabric and preservation of any political community would be endangered by a regime that dared to act openly only on behalf of the lowest, most attainable, and common good

for the greatest number. It is necessary and just for regimes to proclaim the common good as a transcendent noble cause and to honor whatever serves it as supremely just in the highest, ultimate cosmic sense (cf. *Meta* 1075a11-23). The city, regime, and its laws should try to aim at realizing every aspect of the complete common good of the political community and, failing that, at least claim to do so, even though the vast majority of a city's inhabitants will always be incapable of realizing much of their full potential (largely due to the conditions and policies necessary for perpetuating the city).

The moral priority of the greatest possible sum of perceived interests over every other conception of justice would seem to make collective might the basis of right, since it basically designates the survival and material comfort of the greatest number as the most constant, fundamental end of all noble actions and sacrifices. If the highest priority of just rule is ultimately defined by this crude qualitative utilitarianism, then justice would appear to lose all of its splendor and nobility as a shining ideal and seem merely a convenient calculative tool for managing necessity. From the standpoint of fairness and desert, considerations of brute force, accident, and necessity are completely aside from the issue of determining precisely who or what should rule and be honored by the whole community. It may sometimes be prudent and just to sacrifice or betray the most virtuous men, or to deny them their just due, but simply deferring to necessity cannot usually be considered very noble or admirable like other virtuous deeds, especially in light of the relatively unimpressive, common ends it serves. Giving in to the baser wants and needs of a million others at the cost of one's superlative virtue and its just due is not as clearly nobler, more glorious, or fulfilling than if it were done for the sake of some random tyrant's aims alone.

If political justice were explicitly made the official grounds of any regime's authority and laws and the ruling principle of the community, then the city would offer no reason to any of its members not to serve only their own selfish ends rather than others or the selfish city (*Pol* 1334a13-b5, cf. 1324a38-b32, 1325a5-13, 1325b25-31, *NE* 1177b31-8a1). Regimes must at least appear to be serious about and pay some homage to the higher, more admirable aspects of the complete common good. For if security concerns always automatically took precedence over cultivating virtue and other concerns, not only in extraordinary circumstances, but also in the words of the city's laws, leaders, and deliberations, then, in the eyes of its members, their community would seem to be reduced to a self-perpetuating common estate or trade union, unswervingly devoted to nothing above or beyond its own maintenance. The widespread prevalence of such a narrow and incomplete understanding of the common good would, in effect, render the community a convenient but ultimately unimpressive conceit of scheming, anxious allies, unworthy of anyone's noble devotion. Without the commonly conceived nobility of the common good as a transcendent cause to which we belong somehow, in some larger, promising scheme of things, then there is no solid basis on which to claim that anyone in the city should prefer another's good to his own, however much freer, richer, wiser, or nobler the other might be. If individuals lose this sense of obligation to others' good, then not only the common good, but also whatever anyone is owed according to distributive justice, becomes meaningless, since there would no longer be any possibility of a real community, capable of sustaining itself on the basis of a mutual concern about individual moral worth, proportion, or reciprocity. And this is why Aristotle says that putting the most common, shallowest good ahead of the merited perfection of the most virtuous men could surely not be *called* justice, since it would be ignoble

and thuggish to suggest that, instead of moral worth, considerations of size, might, and survival should guide our public policies and actions (*Pol* 1284b28-34).

It would be unjustly detrimental to all involved for a regime to publicly define justice so starkly – as a matter of putting others' mere survival ahead of one's own good, and for the sake of merely securing their lowest, most unimpressive ends, as opposed to the noble, or the performance of the just deed itself. It is true that the unifying, comprehensive, and selfless cause of the common good does justly trump all other public and private concerns in the city – but, in contrast to its citizens, whose dedication to the common good requires putting justice and their fellows ahead of their private portion of the good, the city's own good is equivalent to the common good, acting for which, with no regard to any higher purpose, law, or principle, constitutes its virtue (1324b22-5a10). The public promulgation of what political justice actually demands of us in certain situations would be as politically unjust as ignoring its commands, since doing so would be destructive of the integrity of the city as a collectively conceived entity worthy of sacrifice. After all, if it is just for the city to harm or dishonor one or a few virtuous, loyal citizens for the sake of its preservation, then it seems only a matter of perspective when, under other special circumstances, it would be convenient, pleasant, or profitable for everyone else in the city to consider harming an even greater number of blameless citizens just, when done in the name of fortifying the whole. And if a city has the right and duty to look out for itself, at whatever cost, then it is not clear why any individual in the city should not similarly feel a stronger attachment and obligation to his own actually experienced well-being than that of anyone else, in person or the abstract (cf. *Pol* 1273a38-b4, 1323b30-35). The many's own deviant understanding of rule as equivalent to the freedom of the effectual master is reflected and reinforced by the city's recurring need to be unjust or ignoble in its internal distributive and

procedural policies for the sake of remaining independent and materially self-sufficient in its dealings with foreign powers (1324b2-22). But, if it is just to place the mere conditions and possibility of justice above all other obligations, then it might seem that any injustice, toward any person or group in the city, would be justified if seen as necessary to save the whole; justice then would not be such a clearly impressive or duly exalted sum of every other virtue – certainly not more wondrous than the morning and evening star (cf. *NE* 1129b25-30a1).

To conclude, the common good is the most determinant and core signification of justice. And the most common, essential, but least good aspect of the common good is ensured only when the greater multitude is willingly aligned with the regime. Popular rule is the most resilient and stable kind of rule, due to both the multitude's advantageous size and their democratic ruling principle of equal freedom, by which all forms of regime are preserved and properly mixed. The multitude itself is as primary and essential to their political community as the geographic location and, therefore, they and their low and ordinary concerns can never be very far removed from any just and enduring regime's principal aims and deliberations any more than the city's crops, territory, or walls (cf. *Pol* 1261a16-20). I will discuss some of the reasons for the discouraging pessimism with which Aristotle leads his readers to recognize the justice of democratic principles and claims in Book III in my final chapter.

Chapter Five: Aristotle's Aims

“What has defined us as a nation since our founding is the capacity to shape our destiny—our determination to fight for the America we want for our children. Even if we’re unsure exactly what that looks like. Even if we don’t yet know precisely how we’re going to get there. We know we’ll get there.”

- Barack Obama

“The whole dream of democracy is to raise the proletarian to the level of stupidity attained by the bourgeois.”

- Gustave Flaubert

In this, my final chapter, I will begin by briefly reviewing the motives and grounds for Aristotle’s qualified defense of and deference to the political authority of democratic justice. I will then turn to reconsidering the mixed regime ruled by law that Aristotle posits as a model of justice in light of the likely hopes and expectations of his target audience. Finally, I will consider the rhetorical intent of Aristotle’s presentation of political peace, stability, and popular rule as constituting the essential core of justice. Besides being somewhat useful for the practicing statesman in clarifying their own political experience, aims, and opinions, the same discussion serves as a personally practical education for those younger readers who have not yet chosen such a life and can only speculate only the merits and potential of living a political life according to the ethical peak of justice. That is, although it is probably somewhat helpful for determining and pursuing a community’s public purposes, the *Politics* is far more useful and meant for the individual leisured reader, in regard to his own life.

The justice of democratic claims and principles has been shown according to three separate standards to which Aristotle appeals in the course of his investigation concerning the overriding and central political question of who should rule the city. As we have seen, Aristotle shows no special preference for democracy's capacities for rule. He clearly states his own preference for aristocratic principles and ends, and proclaims the best sort of kingship as conducive to better rule than even the most correctly oriented rule of a multitude. But aims and prudence alone are limited without the assured support of many others' strength and arms. Even more than good, clear-sighted aims, the most essentially distinctive and "true" ends of political community depend on the consensual and coerced contributions of a diversified multitude. While it constitutes an inferior *moral* standard of distribution among individuals, the many's surpassing bulk and physical capacity are essential political assets that can only be matched by some other multitude of similar size, whose combined strength can be just as well coordinated, focused, and directed toward a common goal. No king or assembly can simply rule an entire multitude, single-handedly issuing universal edicts, without any discernible basis on which they accept their rightful authority. There are always implicit, democratic constraints built into the rule of even the most divinized, conquering emperor. No political aim is realized by virtue of its being correct, but by its being accepted by the overwhelming majority of a city, the gaining of which necessarily lowers rulers' immediate aims and efforts to addressing a multitude of misplaced and misperceived cross-purposes in the process (cf. *Pol* 1287b3-34).

However, despite the disadvantages of even mixing the demos into a regime, the democrats' moral claims do have some merit, in contrast to their dubious abilities to govern the city coherently or consistently. By making the realization of any political aims even possible, no faction of the city can justly deny the many's complete case for deserving citizenship and

authority, no matter how poorly they may understand or express it on their own. Justice always has some effectual authority in human affairs, and when backed up by the collective weight of the many, democratic claims and democracy itself become an irresistible force that, like some highly combustible fuel for political community, can sometimes be harnessed to secure and elevate a city's common good and prominence better; they can even more easily destroy everything, when not well-directed and restricted in its influence by good legislators and statesmen (*Pol* 1325b9-29). Therefore, Aristotle's accessions to and arguments for democratic claims for some share of rule – at least in a mixed “polity” – rest mainly on his insight that, in the long-run, a leveling expansion of political authority on the basis of equal freedom is inevitable wherever some men share preeminent authority to deliberate about, define, and act according to virtue and justice for the whole as co-owning partners in it.

Although polity is put forward in favorable terms, as a feasible hybrid regime that might secure the greatest possible good for all the parts of a city, it ultimately falls far short of the similarly corrected rule of one or a few in terms of nobility, goodness, and fairness because, beyond its instilled moderation and institutional safeguards, the superior practicality and resiliency of mixed rule depend most of all on it being first and foremost a sort of popular rule (*Pol* 1279a36-b4). Aristotle's conclusion and the arguments that lead to it invite us to question how he means for a treatise about practical activities to be practically applicable to our becoming or making others as good as possible through the most edifying activities and way of life. However, Aristotle's various statements on the matter would seem to indicate that – to the extent that politics and state-craft admit of some key piece of practical wisdom, knowledge, or understanding that can be transmitted and learned through writings – the usefulness of political study would seem to pertain mainly to the personal lives of Aristotle's readers, as private men

rather than ruling citizens. Some of Aristotle's practical intent and the expectations of his intended readers can be surmised from the original introduction to the subject and inquiry of political science presented, not in the *Politics*, but in the separate, preparatory investigation of the *Ethics*.

Practical Purposes of the *Politics*

At the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, after discussing all the facets and ends that make up a complete human life, Aristotle states the need to learn about laws, lawmaking, and politics in order to complete the philosophic investigation of "human things"; then he lays out a curriculum of study, beginning with examining "whatever has been nobly said by our predecessors" on the subject; and finally he goes over all those things that are good and harmful for different actual regimes, in order to gain a better view of what the best form of each and all would be (*NE* 1181b12-23, cf. 1094a4-b12, 1098a13-17). The philosophic investigation initiated by the *Ethics* was not undertaken simply for the sake of establishing and delineating a science, but in order to better and benefit ourselves, our families, and friends through the contemplative study of human purposes and practical action (1103b26-31, 1179a33-b4). The art of lawmaking is introduced at the end of that work as necessary for learning how to foster virtue and happiness: since good character is mostly the work of habituation, and determinant habits are most primarily allowed, encouraged, and developed by the most authoritative good examples and regulations of a community (1103b20-25, 1180a29-33). Virtue is not something that can be learned or transmitted like knowledge, but is only developed and honed by the continual practice of virtuous deeds (1179b4-80a18). But perhaps science can at least provide some insight on the right conditions, stimuli, and procedure by which virtue is transmitted to others. Since law is

what most of all shapes and conditions men's character, learning how to make and use its power to compel men to hold fast to disembodied, unchanging deliberate *logos* in their actions (1180a10-24).

If it were as simple as learning how to write, select, or combine the best laws for a city through a familiarity with various legal codes, then any sophist or rhetorician could presumably become emperor of Greece just by knowing all of the most popular and efficacious laws to propose and apply when they will be pleasing to most (1181a12-b1). As with music, painting, and many other arts, practical wisdom and proficiency in political and legislative matters is only gained by someone with a fully developed, good character through some amount of active experience in political activity and lawmaking (1094b28-5a13, 1142a11-31, 1142a20-b1, 1181b6-b12, cf. *Rhet* 1359b1-17, 1360a30-38, 1375b20-25). Although the study of law, like reading medical textbooks in preparation for practicing medicine, is hardly useless for an aspiring or practicing statesman or doctor, the usefulness and proper application of this knowledge depends entirely on the more profound knowledge of when, where, and how to apply which laws for whom, possessed through prudence. Virtue is the fruit of good habits, as cultivated by good laws, which in turn are the product of politics but best judged, written, and used by experienced political actors who have become virtuous through good upbringing and habituation under good laws (cf. *NE* 1152a6-14, *Pol* 1268b31-9a24). There seems to be no clear method by which rational inquiry might find some foothold, or overriding causal factor by which we might gain much practical leverage on the political process of collective character development. This is because there is no one with any real influence on this cyclical production of virtue and justice without having first been a part and product of it. No one, unless he were of a very rare nature, can come to know exactly what is the particularly correct course of action for

attaining the best possible ends in any given political situation except through extensive prior experience in political affairs (*NE* 1141b8-20).

So, for those aiming at knowing about politics, it would seem that there is an additional need for experience. And those sophists who profess that art seem to be very far from teaching it. For they mostly do not even know what sort of thing it is or what sorts of things it is concerned with, otherwise they would not have classified it as the same as or even inferior to rhetoric, nor would they suppose it is an easy thing for someone to make laws by collecting the laws that are well-regarded. For, they suppose, it is easy to pick out the best laws – as if the selection were not part of the comprehension involved and as if the correct judging of them were not the greatest thing, just as it is in music. For it is those who have experience with each sort of thing who judge its works rightly, and understand by what means and in what manner they are achieved, and what sorts of things harmonize with what others. For those who lack experience, it is good enough if they do not fail to notice whether the work is well or badly made, as in the case of painting. But laws are like works of the political art. How, then, would someone become a skilled legislator as a result of those collections of well-regarded laws or judge the best laws? For physicians too do not appear to come into being as a result of reading treatises, although such treatises attempt, at least, to state

not only the treatments but also, by distinguishing the various characteristics of each patient, how physicians might cure each of them, and how they ought to treat them. These treatises do seem profitable to those with experience, but they are useless to those without the requisite knowledge. Perhaps then, collections of both laws and regimes would be of good use to those who are capable of contemplating and judging what is noble (or is contrary) and what sorts of things accord with which circumstances. (1181a12-b10)

The sophist teachers of politics, Aristotle says, recognize laws as the product of politics, but inadequately define politics as the description of whatever happens to be popular among a particular, arbitrary group with power, as though we already know exactly what we would want to achieve with such empowering knowledge, and that it can attain it best for us (cf. *Rhet* 1356a21-33). Although Aristotle argues against the prevailing teaching methods of certain sophists, he admits that such a course of study would be useful for someone already experienced in political affairs, and seems to share with them a similarly dim view of the political affairs and legislation of actual cities (*NE* 1181a28-b8). Most cities' laws are just a tangled heap with no end or ruling principle, except in those few that direct their laws and lives toward fighting war well (1180a24-31, *Pol* 1324b2-22, 1333b4-4a10, 1338b9-38, cf. 1308a24-30, 1334a5-10). And yet, Aristotle suggests that actual experience and participation in the deliberation, rule, and legislation of actual, badly ordered cities is essential to gaining the ineffable insight and understanding displayed by impressive statesmen. That is, as opposed to mere study or contemplation of the topic, actually engaging in actual political activity and rule seems to be the

only way we might learn how to improve our friends and family (*NE* 1179a35-b4). But it is not immediately clear how gaining legislative understanding through political experience in the collective production and enforcement of haphazard laws and decrees for no evident purpose would improve or benefit us personally – the first justification Aristotle gave for completing his inquiry by turning to political science at the end of the *Ethics*.

Right after laying out the reasons for the limited and uncertain practical advantage that the theoretical study of laws and opinion might offer in actually ruling and instructing others well, Aristotle now proposes that we turn to the study of political science, so that we might complete our inquiry into human things (1181b4-12, 1181b21-24). Since the assessment of specific things as good or bad in the course of deliberation and action cannot be taught through words alone, but only developed by an already virtuous man steeped in an active political life, Aristotle must not intend this course of study to contribute very much to the actual practice of statesmanship. If we can only gain an inkling of insight about the best laws in general and in particular from the theoretical study of politics, compared to the more rigorous and nuanced understanding of the experienced statesman, Aristotle must have some other primary purpose in mind when suggesting it. The most immediate, direct benefit of studying politics as the completion of the larger inquiry into human things would seem not to lie in whatever greater political competence and success students might enjoy, but in their gaining an even more comprehensively practical insight into human affairs generally through an examination of the commonly prevalent concerns, contentions, and ruling opinions by which politics is defined in its own words. In order to make his curriculum more useful for us than the sophists' approach to politics as a forum for pleasing rhetoric, Aristotle adds what he says theirs is missing -- some knowledge of what politics is, involves, and aims at in the first place -- and to glean some greater

practical insight, understanding, or judgment concerning what is good and bad in regard to its multi-faceted practice (1152b1-4, 1181a12-24, 1181b6-9).

A theoretical understanding of political community and moral categories is not the same as the experienced know-how of a politically engaged person judging matters in a specific political context, and so will not help us develop any more of a capacity for correctly applying equity to particular political circumstances than the sophists' education (*Rhet* 1364b7-24, cf. 1368b6-9a8). However, though limited in its practical advantages, a political science could still help us in judging the goodness or badness of political opinion and affairs in general. And this sort of good judgment is practical for teaching us what both the sophist and seasoned statesman themselves seem unable to transfer reliably to any student or offspring, such as which goods a political life of action serves and can serve, and how good or bad are its ends. Gaining experience through an active political life dedicated to the common good of an incoherently legislated city might help us know better how to improve our friends and family, even though Aristotle notes that the enlightening experience of political citizenship and rule seems not to have bestowed any existing statesmen with this most noble capacity (*NE* 1181a1-13, cf. *Pol* 1286b25-28). But it seems even more unlikely that turning to political study for the sake of improving anyone else would also be the best thing for us personally – especially in deciding to live a politically active way of life in the first place.

Political science, like every other subordinate science and art the city finds room for, does not seem able to tell us *how* learning or mastering it would improve us or best serve our own true good, along with that of our family, friends, and city, by being good and serious citizens, as an architectonic science presumably would and the end of the *Ethics* seems to promise. However, nailing down exactly what politics is – how it relates to our perfection and whether it revolves

around the most important, fulfilling matters in life or is always inseparable from the most incoherent and absurd illusions of irrational opinion – *would* make a great deal of difference in choosing to pursue a politically active life, as well as how to go about living it and to what end (1324a24-35, *NE* 1141b24-2a11, 1177b4-8a7, cf. 1141b1-17, 1178a24-9a33). So, Aristotle’s practical purposes do not seem to be primarily public, but private. That is, the proposed study of political rule at the end of the *Ethics* is meant to be practically applicable on a personal level – as most immediately useful for living one’s own life well and improving oneself, as opposed to ordering others’ lives in an official political capacity (1180b11-28, *Pol* 1325b11-29). Yet, despite these indications of Aristotle’s underlying intent, from the perspective of his most serious readers, the political life of ruling alongside and over other freemen might still appear to offer the highest outlet for all of the greatest capacities of the best sort of man. And it would not be unreasonable for them to suppose that political activity and citizenship might benefit both the political actor and others at the same time, and even to think that “it would be odd” if it did not, since political rule seems to call upon man’s highest capacities for exercising the full range of moral virtue, as well as to be oriented by a sort of experiential wisdom of how and for what men should live, that citizens absorb through their active engagement with reputable opinion and right reason (*NE* 1141b20-23, 1179b21-80a24, cf. *Pol* 1324b21-5a5). In the investigation into political affairs contained in the *Politics*, however, it turns out that political life is rife with intrigue, deluded opinion, and the misdirected administration of others’ needs, while great opportunities, positions, and outlets for moral virtue are scarce (cf. 1324b4-40).

Diminishing the City by Elevating the Many

In the *Politics*, Aristotle is quick to confirm his aristocratic readers' low opinion of the demos as especially unjust, incapable, and ignoble, but at the same time he insists that every city has pressing needs and low concerns it must address and that usually only "the base are useful for base things – as the proverb says 'nail by nail'" (*Pol* 1314a4-5). From the start of Book I of the *Politics*, the city already seems to serve *two* distinct ends: providing the daily and non-daily needs for sustaining the safe and comfortable lives of its citizens, while at the same time, "existing for the sake of living well" (1252b28-3a1). But Book III makes more certain what Book I as a whole only raises as a question: living nobly and well cannot and should not be the overriding practical aim of political life (cf. 1259a15-35).

Every regime must have recourse to the might of a multitude, whose inhibiting poverty, vulgar labors, and vast numbers eventually contaminate all forms of regime with some element of their shortsighted democratic aims and ignorance, leading even the most qualified rulers to pursue only the most commonly acceptable and possible course of action by which the whole will best cohere and endure (1296b15-34). The disadvantages and injustices that mark democratic rule are not only often necessary to accept, but also regularly demanded by the political justice that binds and sustains a city. This is the politically practical teaching of Books III – VI: of the ongoing need to grant some share in the regime to the greater majority, but *only* as much as is necessary for it to seem to all that everyone's principles of rule have been equally compromised and partially recognized by the regime, for the sake of the common cause of harmonizing the greatest extent of claims and ends possible for all (1281b21-38, 1319a38-b26, *NE* 1109a30-b26). Eventually at some point, however, once a critical mass of the greater multitude begins to demand rights and honor, only some mode of democratic or tyrannical rule

or worse is ever possible for a city (1282a37-41, cf. 1286b1-7). The give and take of how this precipitous, dynamic balance works is the main topic of the next three Books of the *Politics*, in which all standards and questions of contribution and worth are superseded by the politically just priority of preserving the prevailing regime which, in most cities at Aristotle's time, would necessarily be some variety of democracy (*Pol* 1288b21-9a8, 1294b34-40, 1296b34-40, 1309b14-18, 1319b33-20a5).

The popular republican conception of shared fraternal freedom is both the constant source and a potential destroyer of political community (cf. 1253a29-30, 1255b16-20, 1261a17-b15). Among all regimes, democracy most of all emphasizes and claims to realize the common good, but the material goods and false freedoms pursued by democrats tend not to be any better or more noble than those of any self-serving junta or tyrant (1279b4-10, 1310a26-35). The democrats' ruling principle of freedom would seem to promise and call for the arrangement that best allows the maximum number of men to live and act to an equal degree in whichever way they happen to think they want, whether good or bad (1281a15-21). This is because, to be as common as possible, equally had freedom can only ever be realized on democratic terms, as the mere lack of constraint on inclination. But even this slavish shadow of the true freedom and mastery of the self-sufficient man can never be exercised by any more than a portion of a city's total population. And while it does tend to be less susceptible to strife, intrigue, or revolution, democracies also tend to tolerate, and even foster, a general permissiveness, irreverence, and lawlessness among the entire population over time (cf. 1291b33-36).

The common goods of preservation and civil peace that are usually facilitated by incorporating the demos into a regime are merely a byproduct of their general satisfaction and size, rather than the many's deliberate aim (1320b38-1a3). Indeed, the same inherent causes of

the many's ignorance and ineptitude can also lend a certain inertial stability, capacity, and perpetuation to a regime. If the many were allowed to busy themselves with their own affairs without being worried or offended by any possibly perceived disproportionate aggrandizement of others, then they will incline toward preserving the peace, law, and order of the status quo (1319a19-38). And although democracy is classified as a deviant regime, because the corporeal power of their collective bulk is always already aligned with their conventional authority, democratic rulers tend not to feel as threatened by their political adversaries, and are therefore not as likely to go to extremes or require as much force to keep themselves in power (1295b35-6a15, 1307a12-27). And because the many can afford to be more moderate and gentle, they tend to feel less compelled to imperil the common good out of perceived weakness and anxiety, or to fortify their preeminence by oppressing the ruled. Accordingly, Aristotle ranks democracy as the least bad of all deviant regimes (1289a38-b4, 1307a7-20, *NE* 1160b16-1a9).

In Chapter Thirteen, Aristotle suggests a middle way between the incongruent but fundamentally linked common goods of the regime and city, where rule is distributed according to a more general proportional equality between the city's different demographic blocks and their claims, rather than any particular principle of basic equality or inequality between individual member (*Pol* 1283b36-43, 1290a19-29, 1318a11-b1). A city can rightly be considered well mixed when its largest major elements are made to work together in such a way that only the best features of each are incorporated into the regime; the overarching common good of the regime and city becomes superior to any one of its conflicting components; and each contending distributive principle is legally diluted by the others. Since no single end should be understood by everyone at all times as the city's only purpose, the regime's overriding consideration should always be to strike a balance between conflicting reputable opinions or the valid principles of

justice upon which they rest, in a way that considers and harmonizes every claim and aim to which they give rise, so that no group, person, or cause seems to receive disproportionate honor or power (1307a20-28). Aristotle's newly proposed ruling end of communal harmony seeks to deny the complete authority, desert, and good of all factions in the city equally.

The Mixed Hopes of the Political Mean

No existing regime, Aristotle says in Chapter Thirteen of Book III (and also throughout Books IV, V, and VI), can ever afford to legislate and order itself exclusively on behalf of only its best elements, elevating only the most deserving and quintessential exemplars of virtue to their rightful position, because most of their fellow citizens lack a corresponding ability to be ruled well and are unfit for living with or under such morally outstanding men. In legislation and deliberation, regimes and statesmen ought to seek the mean, relative to the proportions and character of the population, between the excesses of oligarchy and democracy. But the democratic tendencies of common life are stronger, requiring more effort to resist and manage (1309b17-10a23). Political justice often calls upon rulers to surrender to the unjust threat of the many's bulk and reconcile themselves to incompetence and vice for the sake of stability (1281a22-38, 1297a10-13). Aristotle's judgment in favor of democracy is not due to any clear advantages or surpassing justice of popular rule, but based on the fact that, in the developed cities of his time, the injustice of the many is always accompanied and sanctioned by their overwhelming might, making it impossible to achieve anything better than a mixed and moderate polity. Even a genuine aristocracy, because it would appear as an oligarchy to the many, would have to dilute its surpassing prudence and nobility with the consent and recognition of the greater majority of the multitude they ruled. If a city *were* fortunate enough to have enough virtuous

men to form and sustain a regime, Aristotle says, then, in that case, the virtuous alone ought to rule and avoid democratic tendencies in their laws and actions, or restricting offices to themselves, in order to steer the city as a whole toward inculcating ever greater virtue and happiness among all its members, inasmuch as they are able (1308b31-9a10). But if the number of virtuous men in the city is too small to form a viable regime, as he says it always is, then the many must be granted rights, and the regime will eventually devolve further in a democratic direction, as it is compelled to relent and adapt to the growing weight, ineptitude, and impudence of the entitled masses, the pressure of which no formal institutions of legal framework can long withstand (1301b38-b3, 1310a1-5, 1330b32-40).

The gradual inclusion of the greater multitude of the city into the regime, and its acquiescence to their greater demands, bred by their sense of equal dignity and entitlement, dilutes the functional competence of a regime, while at the same time coarsening the tone and lowering the aims of common life. But recognizing and even relenting to the many's claims of desert are often preferable to perpetuating the dishonor of such a large and vital segment of the population (1308a3-10). Regimes that fail to find ways to assuage or indulge the masses, while at the same time not sliding too fast toward the inefficient, erratic rule of extreme democracy, soon suffer the consequences of strife and chaos (*NE* 1109a30-b3, cf. *Pol* 1321a18-40). Yet, at the same time, cities are always in the process of becoming, some more rapidly than others, "looser" and more completely democratic as new, intractable needs for greater manpower, security, and stability inevitably arise (1293a12-34, 1297b1-28, 1301b4-39, 1320b28-35). This is why all actual, long-lasting regimes are not completely oligarchic or democratic, but always contain elements of both. Therefore, besides their ruling principles of distribution, all regimes must also abide by an additional political principle, or more precisely, a non-principle of

effectual harmony, as defined by the standard of “correct” rule applying to all regimes and rulers, with correctness taken to mean mixing opposing claims and rights in an equal spirit -- which is “*correct*, with a view *both* to the advantage of the city as a whole and to the common of the citizens” (1283b39-42, cf. 1279a32-38). To prevent regimes from falling apart through their own dogged dedication to their distributive principles of rule, this supplemental corrective of conventionally imposed reciprocal equality, which balances all claims against the needs of the whole, is necessary for allowing and honoring some individual members who contribute more, without depriving and dishonoring the rest of the regime. The resulting mixed sort of regime, or “polity,” is a sort of corrected and contained democracy, strictly moderated by legal regulations and countervailing principles of desert. Being the combination of certain advantageous elements offered by oligarchy, democracy, and aristocracy, and sharing its name with the entire genus of “regime” [*politeia*] as the archetypal city-form, polity is in many ways the polar opposite of tyranny, which combines the worst aspects of democracy and oligarchy, is technically not a regime, as it is bound by no laws or principles, and stamps out all roots and remnants of political community (1287b37-40, 1292a31-33, 1293b33-42, 1294a35-b39, 1295b39-6a5, 1310b2-6, 1311a8-21, 1313a35-4a12).

Polity is the least good of the correct forms of rule, but seems the only one to which any possible city could ever aspire. Some transitional but stable state of affairs between the extremes of any single distributive principle’s absolute dominance is the best we can hope for in civilized times, and it becomes more possible as a city becomes more developed and diversified, allowing for a sizable and distinct middle class to emerge from the larger demos (1295a25-34, 1308b20-31). The middling element, though not much larger than the virtuous few in number, is a much more politically feasible party to serve as possible arbiters and conduits of moderation, stability,

and reason than they (1295b3-13). As it is composed of members of the working demos with greater military virtue and property than the others, a distinct middle class, with its own collective good and shared aims, can better stabilize a city on the more solidly dependable and mundane level of material interest, when political conflict and disputes arise between the rich and the poor, than any person or group who would deign to resolve these grievances solely on account of their virtue, which they presume to monopolize and speak for.

A sizable, well-armed, middling element is essential to maintaining a well mixed regime that can harmoniously maintain the political mean. But even though the mean is “a sort of virtue” and in a certain way just, the middle element’s contribution to political stability, concord, and moderation is not made on the basis of any principle, deliberate choice, or noble intent (1295a34-b5, 1296a5-21). This middle class is composed of those less impoverished, fully occupied artisans and war veterans of the city who own their own arms, and like the demos from which they emerge, its members are not especially virtuous; they are also not, however, especially insolent, ambitious, or intrusive busybodies, and are, therefore, the group least likely to seek rule out of honor or to shirk its duty (1302a13-15). As such, this middling minority represents the best sort of multitude that a large developed city can engender (1308b25-9a14). Those of the middle class generally tend to behave more gently and sensibly, out of a penchant for orderly constancy, tranquility, and the rule of law, than the rich and the poor who actively contend for power and prestige (1295b5-34).

Because they lack their own ruling principle of distribution, the middle class contributes more to the common good of a city than any contending faction, by nudging both rulers and ruled toward compromise and moderation. Their predominant concern for their own basic material interests and preserving most conditions of the community takes the place of a ruling

distributive principle or standard of fairness for the middle class, restraining any urge to join in looting the rich or oppressing the poor out of a keen awareness that they could as easily be lumped in with the out-group and become the next in line to suffer in either case (1296b34-a6). Rather than just another contending faction with distinctive distributive claims, then, a middle class serves as a crucial vacillating mechanism in maintaining a stable equilibrium of powers and offsetting the regime's most extreme deviations by centering its attentions, steadying its aims, and peacefully resolving disputes between the rich and the poor, lending its decisive weight to the more oppressed side (1295b34-6a3). The material self-concern of the middling element – and by extension the mixed regime to which they belong – corresponds and contributes to every city's effectual end of lasting civil peace, which is both just and advantageous by nature and allows some opportunity for a well-equipped few to pursue the more complete goods and happiness in their private lives (1276b25-33, 1278a14-29, 1283b36-4a3, cf. 1287b37-40). Although polity seems more imitable and possible in more times and places, it also does not hit upon the common good by intent; this happens as the outcome of its proportional mix and balance of its necessary but opposing elements. Although the mixed regime, unlike a true aristocracy, is actually possible, there are no existing examples of any cities with a large, influential middle class, because most actual cities' political affairs and deliberations are too full of tumult, paranoia, and partisan grudges ever to allow a large and distinct peace-loving class of citizens to coalesce – let alone to act in concert for the sake of their shared interest in law and order (1296a17-b1). However, as the best form of rule that any existing city could realistically strive to approximate, the necessarily modest, low, and shortsighted aims of this generic political hybrid also cast doubt on the nobility of all cities and politics.

The mixed solution of incorporating the demos into regimes so that their sense of dignity is preserved and their actual influence can be largely buffered, stifled, and stemmed by institutional and legal means that Aristotle ends up promoting does not live up to the expectations we are led to hold after the noble beginning of the *Politics*, especially after reading of the apparent grandeur and promise that the subject seems to hold at the beginning and end of the *Ethics*. In light of the introduction to political study in the *Ethics* – as the comprehensive science of all human activities and ends, and its practice as equivalent to both teaching and learning it – the opening and central topic of the *Politics* – “the city” – would seem to hold the key to all life’s questions of purpose and meaning (*NE* 1094a1-b11, *Pol* 1252a1-6). And yet, as Aristotle begins Book One of the *Politics* by defining this all-encompassing object of our study, the very conception of the city as some single comprehensible, organic entity and authoritative cause begins to give way and dissipate into its various components and qualities, which can never be fit back together into the comprehensive whole on which Aristotle’s inquiry into the human things was premised. The city is soon shown to be relative to its parts, and its parts relative to the regime by which they are partitioned and ordered, while the regime itself must always be most responsive and relative to the largest, most intransigent and determinative part of the city, with which it is entangled in the same collective fate and endeavor (1261a16-24). And this is a disappointing chain of reasoning for any lover of nobility or justice to consider. Rather than a complete or just end of coordinated action, the city is rendered the best collective conditions that we must settle for, because the ever-lurking and growing threat of the multitude and their principled claims necessarily subverts and deforms the free deliberation of ruling citizens and statesmen everywhere (1288a9-17). Aristotle makes it clear, even while demonstrating the ongoing necessity to relent and gradually absorb and align multitudes to a

regime's purposes, that when economic and political rights are expanded to the vulgar classes in the cities or freedom to slaves, and the rolls of citizenship are expanded, deliberation becomes increasingly muddled and debased, and the regime's own principles and ends are distorted in the process. And over time, life itself becomes unstructured, immoderate, and tyrannical because the many exhibit little self-control, follow-through, or consistency in their collective capacities and actions (1319b26-32).

Political Pessimism as Enlightened Statesmanship

Book III's presentation of the inextricable dilemmas and imperfections of political justice serves two practical pedagogical purposes, which we might distinguish by positing two types of students of the work. Firstly, the *Politics* makes theory and reason useful for the experienced statesman and citizen who will find many of their right opinions backed up and confirmed by reason and nature, which might perhaps lead them to be more open to philosophical speculation and amenable to true education as assets, allied with him in his task of better determining and moving men toward the noble and good. Reason and knowledge are not only worthy of honor but also useful to the statesman and regime, as informing a source of tranquil, moderate, and sensible citizens, who may contribute and be led well by rational argument, and useful to rulers, whose own discernment and judgment will be well-honed by a grounding in the knowledge of what is truly possible, necessary, and best for men and cities in general. Even inexperienced, but astute readers' own political ambitions and hopes for justice might be rightly lowered, tempered, and directed toward the more practical and necessary matters of merely maintaining the civil order and peaceful protection of a real city, with its own particular, ingrained limitations, impinging needs, conditions, and shortsighted concerns. Second, for those with the most

uncompromising conceptions of justice and good, Aristotle's endorsement of compromise and equality for the sake of stability and preservation and at the cost of higher political aims and aristocratic motives, would not only moderate some of the highest hopes and grandest ambitions of many of his practically minded and morally active readers, but would probably discourage, deflate, and maybe even refine a few readers' own aims and understanding of their good.

For this first audience, of citizens, statesmen, and prospective statesmen seeking political expertise, the curriculum of Book III demonstrates the essential utility of scientific study, wisdom, and reason in aiding just and equitable men to claim and retain political authority but, at the same time, shows just how limited an influence intellectual virtue can have directly on common affairs and opinions. Although politics cannot be taught to the inexperienced through treatises, the theoretical demonstration of the practical truth of the matter in Book III might help edify and sober up some readers by revealing any grand hopes that their cities have cultivated as mostly hollow and destructive. Two points that follow from Aristotle's discussion would be especially unsettling to his most hopeful aristocratically inclined readers: that political community cannot be sustained without somehow involving the demos in its rule, and that the demos always drags virtue down and frustrates competent rule when it takes an active part in the regime. Shared public affairs will always tend toward the lowest common denominator because there is no dependably apparent or constant natural distinction on which legal limits and exclusions can reliably be made. And the growing need to command and appeal to so many means that regimes and statesmen can only ever aim at the most accessible, common part of common good, since aiming at what is beyond their grasp would be destructive and unjust for all. Political association and rule largely consist of grappling with the plain fact of the many's inevitable ascendancy and effectual rule of the city on the basis of their numbers, and the slow,

ineluctable need for regimes to expand citizenship to more inhabitants – both to appease the multitude and to garner the strength necessary to defend the city. Because the democratic claims of equal contribution and worth are self-enforcing, legislators and statesmen should seek to stave off this inevitability, finding ways to limit or frustrate the direct rule of the many, and maintain a strong mixture of aristocratic or oligarchic elements within the regime (1278a38, 1284b17 - 20).

The principal claim put forward concerning his topic at the beginning of the *Politics* and presumed in some form by the laws and legends of all cities – that is, to be “the city,” founded and arranged according to some larger design of nature – is necessary for establishing the ultimate, rightful authority of the regime in the ruling opinions of its members. The necessarily widespread and largely self-perpetuating belief in the authority and divine status of one’s own city is a contributing factor to the derangement infecting a city’s most politically active parts, who blindly obey, revere, and contend over the elevated role and unrivaled stature of political office and rule. The ruler’s task of keeping the peace requires an ease of command over the collectively formidable demos. And that means, rather than seeking to cure or inoculate men from deluded passions by educating or delivering them to their own good, legislators and regimes must on the contrary, infect citizens with a political fervency to uphold the law and serve the common good and law that incites a hunger in some for what appears to be the greatest prize available to those in this ravenous state: the honor to serve and contribute the most to the good of others and the whole (cf. *NE* 1180a29-15, *Pol* 1287a29-b24). This feverish political contamination of its members distinguishes the city – as the free association of freemen, ruling for the sake of best using and retaining their equally deserved freedom – from every other sort of human association. Successful statesmanship in any actual city involves leading men to do the good they could not otherwise recognize outside political associations. And since citizens cannot

be led to the good on the basis of sound arguments or syllogistic appeals to the good, leadership would always require some recourse to and knack for demagoguery that can help advance rational purposes, which otherwise would have very little weight or voice in public affairs.

Throughout the *Politics*, Aristotle's depiction of political life and rule emphasizes how far out of our hands the ends of the city and practical virtue are. Politics is a mire of moral confusion because every member will always mean different, unmatchable things by his own appeals to terms like the good, the just, freedom, virtue, and happiness. Intentions are mostly lost in the political process, to the point that the political body, composed overwhelmingly of imperfect human beings and led above all by longstanding ingrained habits and customary opinion, never deliberately acts as a single mind with one purpose, coherently directing the citizen body as a single head, because mere consensus does not follow from a steady and coherent account, always in accordance with truth and reason. Instead, most cities and regimes are necessarily characterized by sporadic lurches of error, and overreach pursuant to only the lowest, most accessible and common attributes of aspiration among free men. Unlike every other virtue, justice is essentially oriented toward the good of others, but in its grandest manifestation, it only orients us toward others impersonally, as an aggregate of fundamentally interchangeable demographic interests and fellows with whom we happen to share some basic ends and related ways of life (cf. *NE* 1130a3-13).

In the midst of this perpetual public and political twisting of every intention, law, and decree, competent statesmen must understand how to best identify and straighten out common aims. And yet, in order to retain the adaptive power they have to unify the opposing parties through a more common vocabulary, the political purposes that make up the common good and are ascertained by the prudent statesman necessarily remain conceptually elusive in their use in

actual political discourse and deliberations, always according to the evolving, incomplete principles, experiences, and understanding of the day. Entire communities and assemblies of separate equals are unable to develop or maintain a steady, well-honed aim at their proper end, as reckoned by reason like a single archer, and can only admit of being generally oriented toward safer waters, or at least away from more obviously threatening courses of common action and policy by the more prudent and clear-sighted among them. Sheer deadeye accuracy and correct aim matter little if the best archer of all must share the same sightline with so many other eyes of lesser quality. Good rulers' correct and steady aims cannot be taken as equivalent to the city's final end in political affairs, because political outcomes depend much more primarily on the opinions and perceptions of distributive justice and the regime held by the ruled multitude, whose imprimatur is necessary to back up and realize any city's collective, self-sufficient power to preserve itself and to act freely as an independent, self-sovereign, whole entity, perfectly reflecting the cosmic whole.

Disillusionment as Education

No regime can be ruled by and dedicated to moral and intellectual virtue. The best and true end of political community is possible for only a slim sliver of the few, inadvertently, and under the imperfect compromise and corrupted conditions of a mixed regime, which depend upon the institutionalized, subservient misery of the vast majority of a city's inhabitants. At best one might hope for the independent development of moral and intellectual virtue among some of those left free enough to reflect upon and react to the needs and shortcomings of common life, through the chance combination of the laws, relations, and experiences of those most able to cultivate a moral character that commands its own authority as its own purposeful activity and

end. But if the mediocrity of mere civic peace and preservation is the best we can ever accomplish through the ultimate authority of the city, then rulers, legislators and cities can never deliver the real education or expert soul-craft necessary to make them good or happy. The built-in inefficiencies and imperfections that help sustain the well-mixed regime would run counter to Aristotle's most serious readers' probable hopes for political activity as the noblest outlet and end, worthy of the greatest virtue. And if, in spite of all the practical and theoretical difficulties of squaring the opposing aspects and claims of justice with each other, readers still wish to serve others by directing and ordering the city, they face the problem of imposing the best possible way of life for each on the unjust ingrates of a city

At some point in the course of reflecting upon the various disappointments and unfortunate truths of mankind's situation raised in the *Politics*, it would probably occur to most readers that this intractable mess is not conducive to the complete life of virtue and happiness that that they truly desire. The city is good and worth preserving inasmuch as it provides an arena for the cultivation of freedom, virtue, and reason in the first place, allowing for the ennobling and happiness of a few, even if incidentally (1293b11-14, cf. 1263b4-14). The better, but always secondary and fleeting, political end of complete self-sufficiency is only possible in the lives of some individual members of the city, but the city itself, at best, can only establish the proper conditions for this possibility. Living well is made possible for some by the collective sustenance and security of (almost) all, but can never displace these goods as the most urgent, actual end of the city itself. In practice, political aims and actions can rarely transcend the mundane business of encouraging only the most accessible and ordinary political virtue toward securing the lowest common goods. Unlike other arts, politics is never determined or oriented by good design or progressive advancement as much as it is by particular, contingencies, events,

and concerns in the ongoing management and preservation of a particular pre-existing, imperfect political order (1319b33-20a5, *Rhet* 1375b4-25, cf. *Pol* 1289a10-19, 1324b22-35, *NE* 1180b3-25).

However useful and profound a lesson this pessimistic assessment of man's constricted situation and capacity for ruling himself or others well would be for statesmen to learn and reflect upon, political education and practical reason generally only approximate the unblemished nobility of wisdom. A potential ruler requires the capacity, virtue, and practical judgment, guided by the knowledge necessary for serving himself and his regime well (1291b1-3, 1309a32-b14). And this sort of practical wisdom appears to be the same comprehensive knowledge concerning ends and limitations that makes one a good man generally, who can choose, act, and live well for himself. The good ruler and good man share in prudence because their concerns, breeding, and experience overlap to a large extent but are hardly identical. As Aristotle says in the concluding Chapter of Book III, "the education and the habits that make a man serious are almost the same as those that make him political or kingly" (1288a40-b2). That is, the education of the good ruler is "almost," but not exactly, the same as that which makes one a good man, whose own goodness is not relative to his community (1277a11-23). A genuine education must first bring to light the problematic assumptions underlying men's enthrallment to the city and others' opinions through free, leisurely inquiry and thought. The feverish condition that political association and activity engenders in its associates can only be overcome and counteracted in the individual lives and souls of a few who can turn away from political life as the common burden it is, like the first sensible and healthy occupants of the cities mentioned in Chapter Six (1279a8-15). Book III is a large step toward the *Politics*' pedagogical purpose of

gently but firmly disillusioning readers, as a way to immunize them from the unrealistic expectations that infect most citizens, rendering them that much more just, savvy, and temperate.

Political aptitude requires gaining practical political knowledge of particulars through political experience. But the cost of pursuing the greatest opportunities for virtuous action in politics is that the virtuous man either tarnish his virtue in the process of gaining power, or subvert his virtue and harness himself to the lowest, confused hopes and destructive aims of the many (1279a30-33, 1308a11-16, 1313a5-10, 1325a31-b13). The first option is most embraced by tyrants and is unjust toward the city at large, while the second approach to politics is more just in terms of the common good but is also mostly difficult, ungratifying, and ignoble for even the most resourceful and prudent political actors (cf. *NE* 1170b20-29, *Const Ath* 6.2-4, 9.1-12.5). Popularity alone can be no guide to the competent statesman since what is liked by the multitude is often detrimental to it, contrary to other popular things, and destructive of the city. Cautiously giving in to and indulging the masses might, at first, seem how a political ruler's good could be harmonized with that of the city, but only appears so to the extent that the ruler does not truly or completely know what is truly good for himself or others, and merely pursues what most people think is good simply (*Pol* 1309b34-10a35). Aristotle's depiction of political development as the eventual decline toward democracy, peppered by the perennial need to maintain and reinforce the order of collective self-sufficiency as populations grow, prosper, and defend themselves over time, is not the best sort of life for which many serious readers might hope from dedication to the noble and just ends of the city. And while his most explicit statements in favor of democracy, which ascribe prudence and moderation to the many, might persuade some, the consequential necessity to lower political aims would certainly disappoint those noble souls with the highest standards and hopes for virtue and justice; for even though enjoying the more common, basic

goods necessary for mere life with no attending hardships can be portrayed as a sweet consolation, much of life's sweetness lies in its potential and possibilities for human flourishing and perfection (1278b25-30, 1326b27-29, 1328a25-40, 1334b12-28, *NE* 1170a25-b14).

To the extent that the distinctive tasks of rule and education of actual rulers do call upon and cultivate virtue, they mostly involve activities associated with martial virtue, directed toward securing the most obvious, material needs, as opposed to gaining any aptitude for applying practical knowledge of any fine "subtleties" useful in living a noble and good life (*Pol* 1277a13-21, cf. 1288a40-b2). The vulgarity and crudeness of the virtues actually called upon in political life do not discourage many would-be rulers from claiming their rights, due to the same sickness that plagued the tyrant Jason, who could not live in peace or find a way to satisfy his incessant hunger for power when he lived without it as a private man (1277a23-37). Even though actual rule is tedious, servile, and vicious, those contending for it see ruling as the better of the only two real roles for them in the city. The ability and right to rule others is generally admired and claimed, while knowledge of how to be ruled is much more rare and useful for both, but shunned by most proud free men (1277b8-25). Because they have not ever learned how to be ruled well, most people, like Jason, simply suffer through life confined to the undignified obscurity of the private realm, or else pursue the only palliative of which they are aware – in the political realm, which seems to be full of promise and endless potential from an ethical perspective.

Book III helps further this personally practical education and way of life by clarifying the political foundations and limits of justice. In particular, Aristotle shows us that by "justice" we mean two very different things: what each person fairly deserves, and what is most advantageous to all (cf. 1282b14-27, 1287b36-8a1). People usually think and speak of these two forms of justice as ultimately the same and expect them to cohere somehow, since this would be just. But

even in the hypothetically arranged association of only the most decent, serious citizens, the highest claims of distributive justice and the lowest threshold of the common good are in tension and cannot ever be fully realized or secured under any actual circumstances of human association. Political justice always lies between and contains these two incompatible elements, never fully closing the gulf between them.

In the course of defining the city, citizen, and regime more precisely throughout Book III, the two main connotations of justice – in the terms of merit and the common good, which were defined in the *Ethics* as “partial” and “complete” forms of the same idea – are both evoked in an arbitration of the central political question of who ought to rule the city. Along the way Aristotle fleshes out the aptness of these terms – “partial” for the obligatory aspects of justice that makes it a unique part of complete moral virtue, and “complete” justice as the comprehensive encapsulation and peak end of all virtues – by demonstrating the political priority of the common good over all of reciprocal justice in the adjudication of the different claims, principles, and ends of the contending factions. But the complete common good is also shown to be an elusive construct of convention, and is itself composed of incompatible, conflicting parts. Discerning and attaining the common good, therefore, are not simply a matter of establishing a preeminent principle, law, or single end to guide our self-rule, but require the prudent man’s continual reassessment of and vigilant attunement to the difference between what people want and need, as well as a familiarity with the unchanging good simply and knowledge of the fluctuating possibilities for its realization (cf. *NE* 1103b3-6, 1130b22-26, *Pol* 1310a12-36, *Rhet* 1375a28-b25). The same political standard that places the community’s good before the fair distribution of rights and honors to its members also favors the worst, most necessary common goods to the exclusion of the finer and better goods.

Book III lower its readers' expectations and hopes for political life through a consideration of its shortcomings and contradictions in light of the possible, better preparing them to gain insight and orientation from a study of applied statesmanship, as well as a familiarity with the best regime conceivable under the same prevailing constraints of chance and necessity. The disillusioning disappointment of the political right's moral priorities helps reconcile serious readers to the fact that actual politics always consists of mostly unworthy rulers leading uncultivated multitudes on the basis of foolish popular opinions, passions, and aims which, if left unchecked, undermine the common good. For some readers this means merely accepting mediocrity as good enough and elevating it as a practical golden mean, in place of their more unrealistically singular and rigid aims. Others will have more difficulty accepting that the injustices that regimes and rulers commit against equals or superiors out of political expediency could somehow be just. Ultimately, this sobering presentation might steer some of those with the highest, purest, and uncompromising hopes for living nobly and justly away from the irredeemable political realm, while sharpening the aims and tempering the expectations of others who might still wish to enter political life (1324a19-b4). But it would probably also steer a few back to that other peak of virtue, cultivated in leisure and contemplation and praised at the end of the *Ethics*, as offering a difficult, but more possible and inherently fulfilling personal excellence, through the development and exercise of the most essential aspect of their nature in the pursuits of the mind that leisure affords (1334a14-b16, cf. 1255b27-37, 1325b15-29, *NE* 1177a11-8a7, 1178a24-9a33, *Rhet* 1371a30-b10, 1371b25-2a1).

Aristotle's discussion is partly meant to diminish the opposition of aristocratic gentlemen to the rule of the vulgar multitude. In addition, among the most morally serious men of all, his account would probably arouse indignation at political justice, especially in its necessarily

ignoble and unjust treatment of the best and most deserving men of all (cf. *Pol* 1325b6-13). And a deeply felt sense of indignation might help liberate some of these best readers from the charms of political life and the attraction of the city's all-encompassing authority by loosening their unquestioning attachment to the goods and honors of any possible regime, principle, or law, real or imagined (cf. 1342a5-16).

Serious readers who care deeply about justice, nobility, competence, or the authority of scientific authority should be left disturbed and disgusted by the need to make a regime ever worse through accessions to the many for the sake of its strength and stability. Once political life is seen for what it truly is – as the mostly thankless, inhibited, and obsequious management of others' affairs according to their own inferior and misguided aims – political rule and preeminence lose some of their divine sheen and noble allure. By presenting the aporetic dilemmas of cities' attempts to combine the different parts and ends of justice, Aristotle makes us more aware of our own ambivalence on such matters, as a product of the prejudices by which our own regimes enslave us through the education and habituation of laws and custom; perhaps, in the process, he might even encourage a few readers toward the noblest purpose of political philosophy – to pursue a more exhilarating and complete intellectual liberation, as serious men, from the received opinions and guiding standards of the political realm (cf. 1333a10-b3). This disillusionment with political ends helps prepare Aristotle's best readers for his later arguments in Book Seven, concerning the superiority of a life of private virtues and pastimes that he characterizes as true freedom and self-sufficiency, suiting the best man of the highest ambitions as the final end and promise of political life, but only ever enjoyed by some lucky, leisured few (1331b25-2b10).

Aristotle wants his readers to see that the best life is not necessarily an action-oriented, political one, dedicated to the fitting recognition of the noble, among a multitude of less educated, less worthy, legal peers – especially in comparison to the more leisurely activities of wisdom and learning, which flourish in and foster more peaceful ways of life, aiming at ends that can easily be split and shared under stable arrangements, without a destructive concern for exacting fairness among most members. Disillusionment with the city's purported nobility and authoritative ends would help free some readers from their own highest hopes for justice and socially inculcated ideas of desert, by turning their attention to the question of exactly what the city as a whole seems to promise, but never seems able to deliver. To attain any self-sufficiency and completion, a man must jump the proverbial ship of state and seek his personal destination on his own, in pursuit of his own end, away from the endlessly urgent and necessarily unswerving common voyage.

Despite the innate incoherence, irrationality, and shortcomings at the very root of all political life and community, Aristotle still finds the city's integrity worth defending as men's proper end because it remains the optimal home where man's nature may develop and flourish most fully and freely. For Aristotle, political activity is not equivalent to such self-realization and happiness, but it offers the highest and most direct experiences and examples that compel men to figure out what they truly want and can hope to get out of life. As the most compelling expression of man's urge for the true freedom of self-sufficiency, politics presents a most impressive, but flawed and unsatisfactory attempt to transcend our very nature and, as such, its ultimate worth lies in its heightened display of that nature for us see and judge, in all its conflicting needs and ends for ourselves. Aristotle favors the city for most of the same reason he

accedes so much to democracy and democratic claims – as a necessarily coercive deformation of nature for sake of the greater justice, allowing for the greatest natural good of the greatest few who happen to be fortunate enough to live in free communities ruled by law. Political community makes virtue, leisure, philosophy, and happiness possible and accessible to the greatest number, but not ever to very many. However, this greatest potential of city life comes about not by the direct education of laws or rulers' deliberate choice, but unintentionally, in spite of its just ends or shortsighted limitations, and only among those who are most freed from the tasks of ruling or being ruled by others.

The city carves out a place in the world for man's moral development, individual excellence, and leisurely pursuits, like philosophy: not by nature or intent, but incidentally, and only for those who are most free from the duties of ruling or being ruled (cf. 1328a33-b2). The best end of man differs in kind from the city's necessary concerns for its strength and capacity for effectual actions, but that does not mean they are completely or always incompatible. Although private pursuits of private goods do not serve the city's practical ends like the development of moral virtue, they do contribute to civilizing and calming men's passions, domestic tranquility, and the strength, stability, prosperity, and contentment secured by a city's martial policies, and a formidable military is necessary to provide some space and freedom in which individual flourishing can emerge. Political justice harbors, calls upon, and protects virtue and leisure, which in turn ennoble and elevate man – as represented by a few leisured Greek males – above the misery of mere survival that nature has left him in; it provides an artificial realm of convention in which the full spectrum of his nature is free to find and reflect upon the noblest and best ends for which he might improve himself and his world. In the end, for Aristotle, the political virtue, participation, or republican freedom required, enjoyed, and

exercised by some close compatriots and friends does not come close to justifying the many disadvantages and injustices of the city, without considering the leisurely ways of life and learning that it all makes possible.

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