

Letters on Aristotle's Politics

On May 1 2010, Apostolos L. Pierris wrote:
Dear Malcolm,

it was a double pleasure to meet you in Athens the other day. I met Richard McKirahan earlier that afternoon and he told me about your talk. Such a surprise! Greece is a failed state. Its establishment, what I call "the system", has been proven totally incompetent and is responsible for the colossal failure in all fields of official human activity in this unhappy country, quite beyond the obvious economic collapse. Of the inferior status of the academic establishment you must have yourself I expect have formed some idea from your experience of associating with them. It was evident even in the discussion of your talk. One reason why I didn't choose to participate directly in it.

The issue in the points that I raised with you afterwards is the finality, fullness and exactness of A.'s treatment in those chapters. Grossly put, the question is how big a part of the whole truth of the matter of the best constitution do they represent. And it would seem to me not much. The chs stand at the very beginning of the discussion, and "Politica" are particularly strong structured by many forward and backward pointers. So when he comes to analyze his best polity ex professo, I assume that that is his final word on it, his positive theory of it (I deliberately choose untrendy formulations!). Moreover, he explicitly delimits in the chapters themselves what he is saying in them. In ch. 1 he undercuts any special association of his analysis of citizenship with any kind of democracy, even the correct (non-deviant)one, by remodeling his definition in order to include citizenship in oligarchic polities.1275b13sq. and in ch.11, he introduces the discussion of the claim that sovereignty should rather reside with the multitude than with the few best, by assuming the prima facie absurdity, irrationality or at least paradoxicalness of the claim: it would seem, he says, that the paradoxon can be resolved, and some argument can be found in support of the claim and may just be that it has some truth in it.(1281a40-2). that part of truth that it possesses he then goes on to analyze, and that must be what is thereby determined (1282a41-2 : tauta men oun dioristhō touton ton tropon, in this specific way). We cannot even have final recourse to

the notion that the correct democracy is the one where the rule of law prevails by restricting the absolute will of the many exercised in their sole interest, and that lawfulness makes such a democracy the best polity, because he explicitly affirms exactly there that laws can be good or bad and even more that good laws apply necessarily to all correct polities. (1282b1-13). --- I think the treatment is aporematic (notice e.g. "to palai diaporêthen", 1282b7-8), introductory, provisional clearing up of difficulties regarding positions held or capable of being held etc. and thus resulting in part truths as he says.

If you come to Greece again (even for such gatherings!) let me know in advance and I'll arrange to meet and to show you what is best in greece physicalwise and humanwise!!! for the best in this country lies ex definitione (being a failed country) outside the range of official structures-- although again interesting individuals can even there to be found albeit silent ones and dwindling in numbers.

friendliest regards and wishes, and have a nice travel back.
Apostolos

On 01 May 2010 09:32:41 +0100
Malcolm Schofield wrote:

Dear Apostolos

Thank you for this kind message. Well, obviously we tend to different readings of the Politics - but briefly:

III.1: I deal with the issue you raise in Section II of my article 'Saving the Constitution' (Rev.Metaphysics 49: 1995-6). What A. corrects at 1275b13 in light of Sparta & Carthage is the dihorismos of 1275a31-2: aoristos archê. He doesn't revise the more basic haplôs definition of 1275a22-3: he reiterates it at 1275b17-21. I stick by my view that this is a basically democratic conception of citizenship: NB the requirement there that you have to have enough such citizens for autarkeia zôês if you're to have a city - which can't be true if only oligarchic-style office-holders are to count as citizens.

III.11: I agree that the method is aporematic, but A. in my view is working his way through the aporiai to a determinate conclusion at 1282a40. Since he has just said: dikaiôs kurion meizonôn to plêthos (1282a38) that must surely be one of the main things he thinks he has now settled when he states that the matter is now to be regarded as determined 'this way'. I don't think that

means he's now advocating democracy (he doesn't get to discussing the issue of the best constitution head on until III.14-18 and IV). As I put it in the talk, here he's concerned with parameters which the discussion of the best constitution will need to observe.

So for a non-ideal best constitution (best for most cities and most men) we would expect the conclusion: dikaiôs kurion meizonôn to plêthos to be observed in the system he recommends. His recommendation on that best non-ideal constitution is actually given at IV.11 (a form of the middle politeia mentioned in IV.9 as a kind of polity). And pretty clearly he's thinking there of a plêthos of moderately virtuous people who will indeed be kurioi meizonônôn. I.e. a plêthos satisfying the definition of polity given at III.7.1279a37-9.

QED?

Best wishes

Malcolm

Dear Malcolm,

not so simple, I reckon?

First of all I'm not so sure of how different, and in what, our readings of the Politics in fact are, despite appearances. Shortly before your article, two elaborate (and laborious!) papers of mine were published (K. Boudouris (ed.), Aristotelian Political Philosophy, vol. I and II, 1995, from the older Boudouris series, the conference at Ierissos in 1994). Titles are: 1/ "horos politeias and telos poleos: political constitution, social structure and end of life in Aristotle's Politics", and 2/ "Constitutional Diversity in Aristotle's politics". I still abide by my analyses back then. In particular I lay much emphasis on the Aristotelian basic doctrine that in each perfect science of a complete field of reality, it belongs to one and the same integral of knowledge to study (describing the general tenet in its application to politics) (i) the best constitution absolutely, (ii) the best constitution adapted to a given society, the best political form for a certain

human matter so to speak, (iii) the best arrangement for the preservation of a given constitutional type, and (iv) the best form suitable for most cases- your theme.

Now this best-for-most form (IV 11) is (1) sociologically defined indeed by the preponderance of the middle (and the middling class). The specifically defining virtue (2) for this form is a certain citizen honour and the patriotic valour of an individual hoplite (and a hoplite class) always prepared to defend HIS OWN state. But (3) as a form this best-for-most constitution represents the mixture of the principles of democracy and oligarchy and a corresponding mixture of structures and practices. And in fact the middle is a balanced mixture of the extremes (1294b13-8). This harmoniously mixed constitution is a type of polity or of the so-called aristocracies (he reserves the name aristocracy simpliciter for the absolutely best constitution). The difference between a well ordered polity and a harmoniously blended so-called aristocracy is fine, and there is overlapping between them (e.g. 1293b18-21), esp. as there are several types of each one of them conceived as generic. in fact the so-called aristocracies seem to lie closer to the absolute best in constitutional form in that they represent a mixture of the three principles, democratic, oligarchic AND aretē, as against the double mix of polity from democracy and oligarchy (1307a7sq.).

Now what I consider specially relevant to your thesis (and here we may have a different reading, for in the rest I do not see much in dispute between us) is the fact that not only so-called aristocracies and polities, but even the first and best kind of democracy as such, do involve or imply a limitation in citizenship (cf. e.g. 1296b25sq.). It is remarkable that in his description of the constitutional changes effected through the oligarchic revolution of the 400 Aristotle repeatedly speaks of the new constitution as politeia. (e.g. Ath. Pol. XXIX, 1: ēagkathēsān kinēsantes tēn dēokratian katastēsai tēn epi tōn tetrakosiōn politeian). As is also noteworthy in this connection Thucydides' praise of this constitution, presumably a case of Aristotelian polity or so-called aristocracy. A restriction of citizenship by census or any other principle to a part of the native inhabitants of the state is what makes the best-for-most constitution undemocratic (although of course it does include democratic elements in its well-balanced mixture, but this is precisely in order to control the excesses of democracy and the intemperance of the pure democratic principle).

As to your points, in III,11 the phrase you mention (1282a38) is an example I think of how circumspectly we should construe such resumes in an aporetic context. The argument in 1282a24sq. goes like this:

the aporia is that it seems atopon that the worse may rule in bigger things than the best, something that happens when the ecclesia is sovereign. And yet in democracies participation in the assembly and in the boulē and in dikastēria starts with the minimal timhma and any chance age, whereas financial supervision and generalship and the greatest arxai are reserved for those belonging to the highest timhmata and older age. Now A. says this aporia might be solved in a similar way; for perhaps these arrangements too are correct (1282a33-4: isōs gar exeī kai tauta orthōs).and then he proceeds with a half sophistic turn, to the effect that the cumulative timhma of the many is higher than the sum of the timhmata of the few best! In this (in)famous way is the statement made that justly then is the multitude sovereign over the bigger things. Such is the nature of aporematic treatment: unequal, elucidating, preliminary, provisional. The very previous aporia concludes with the expression "and so this aporia one may seem to have solved in this way satisfactorily". Well, that's it for all that it's worth.

And by the way there was a reason that I mentioned the strong structure and form of the Politics. I argue in an excursus of the papers above mentioned that this is the overall sequence: (1) books I (and II), prōtoi logoi- (2) book III, prōtē methodos peri tōn politeiōn- (3) books VII and VIII, peri aristēs poleos- (4) books IV, V and VI deutera methodos peri tōn politeiōn. It is clear if things stand thus why I insist on the essential provisionality of III.

On III,1 I am at a loss to see where the interpretative disagreement lies between us. Precisely because he holds to the aplōs definition (and discards the one involving the aoristos arxē) he cannot be construed democratically! He explicitly says so- that he sticks to the broader definition in order to include citizenship in oligarchic constitutions. So citizen is one who participates in archē deliberative, decisive and dicastic. This is applicable to oligarchies, polities and so-called aristocracies as well, beside democracies. Take the 5000 constitution: its OK, according to this definition. But it involves a drastic reduction of the number of citizens as against the number of native inhabitants (irrespective of the question of slaves, metoikoi or women). Would you say that it is democratic? And notice that even democracies do occasionally enact such restricting acts- cf. Pericles' law on citizenship of around 451. That he adds plēthos ikanon pros autarkeian zōēs is a new element in the definition, and it is a general point, aplōs. It points forward to the disquisitions relating to the end of societal congregation and political organization of society that will follow and it is an indication of the fuller and exacter treatment to be pursued later in the Politica. But anyway, as I said, polities and so-called aristocracies and even most types of oligarchies would easily satisfy this extra condition.

So what? A. in short is, even in his best-for-most polity, an aristocratic realist and a realistic upholder of aristocracy!

friendliest best wishes

Apostolos

Dear Apostolos

I'm glad that there doesn't after all seem to be much of a dispute between us. You are - fairly enough - using 'democratic' in a strictly Aristotelian fashion, I am using it to indicate the closeness between Aristotle's favoured form of polity and democracy as it actually seems to have worked in Athens for much of the time.

I would only add that what you describe as the (in)famous half sophistic turn recurs in III.13 and III.15. I fancy that Aristotle was rather pleased with himself for thinking of it.

All best wishes

Malcolm

Balancing Note

We seem to follow the law of diminishing returns towards a state of general equilibrium in our intellectual exchange.

The polity we are talking about is rather the constitutional form best-for- most human conditions than Aristotle's strictly favoured politeia, which latter is pure aristocracy appropriate for the realization of human nature in its perfection. And I suggested that this "median" polity is closer in historical terms to the Constitution of the 5000.

And by all means, let's not spoil the simple pleasures of a great mind – and its "serious play"! All occurrences happen in the preliminary, and mostly aporematic, treatment of the second-best constitutions, book 3, or the first methodos peri politeiōn.

