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Review Essay

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Review Essays

Review Essay: Eugene Garver's *Aristotle's Politics: Living Well and Living Together*

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1. Introduction

Even amidst the renaissance of Aristotelian studies in the past fifty years or so, the *Politics* has attracted less philosophical attention than the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The reason for this disparity is not far to seek: the *Politics* seems significantly more culture-bound than the *Ethics*, and so less relevant to life in modern, pluralistic nation-states than in pre-modern, culturally homogeneous city-states. Hence even those who have invoked Aristotle to critique the dominant modes of modern political thought and practice have tended to focus on the *Ethics*, drawing from the *Politics* only a few ideas about human beings as naturally political animals and justice as the common good. The *Ethics*, it is widely held, continues to speak to us in detail, but the *Politics* has less to teach us. In the third and final installment in his study of Aristotle' practical philosophy, Eugene Garver seeks to reverse this conventional judgment.[1] The previous volume maintained that the central ideas of the *Ethics* are more foreign and less attractive than often supposed. The book under review, which can be read independently of the others, argues that the *Politics* remains valuable for us today precisely because the many glaring differences between Aristotle's world and our own help us "better to see ourselves by contrast" (p. 16). Garver explores frequently overlooked tensions in the work and refuses to accept easy solutions, but he keeps his sights set on how reading Aristotle "can help us think through our own problems" (p. 14). The result is a challenging and refreshingly distinctive treatment of the *Politics*. I will argue that several of Garver's main claims are mistaken as interpretations of Aristotle, and I will suggest that the *Politics* has at least as much perennial relevance on the more orthodox interpretation I prefer as on Garver's alternative. Nonetheless, though this book ought to arouse disagreement in any thoughtful reader of Aristotle, it consistently

[1] Eugene Garver, *Aristotle's Politics: Living Well and Living Together* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012). His earlier books are *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and *Confronting Aristotle's Ethics: Ancient and Modern Morality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

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provokes a reassessment and clarification of one's own views. Anyone with a serious interest in Aristotle's practical philosophy will therefore benefit from reading it.

2. Overview of *Aristotle's Politics*

One of the central questions that animates the book is how political philosophy can be *practical*. How, that is, can abstract theorizing about how people might best live together provide any guidance to concrete, particular political action? One possibility is suggested by a plausible interpretation of what the *Ethics* says about practical wisdom (*phronēsis*): the task of practical *philosophy* is to achieve an articulated understanding of the best way of life for human beings, and the task of practical *wisdom* is to bring that understanding to bear on the often bewilderingly complex circumstances of action. On this view, there is a considerable gap between practical philosophy and practical deliberation. Because of this gap, and because much of the task of living well is a matter of acquiring virtues of character through the habituation and training of our non-rational desires, practical philosophy has a limited role in living well. Even if a philosophical understanding of the good is necessary for living well, it will tell us very little about what we should do and it will not do much to enable us to do it; for that, we will need the virtues of character and practical wisdom. Since Aristotle tells us that political expertise (*politikē*) and practical wisdom are the same disposition (*NE* VI.8, 1141b23-24), we might expect a parallel account of the relationship between political philosophy and political action. Yet, as Garver emphasizes, this is not at all what we find in the *Politics*.

Instead, Aristotle lays out a program for what political expertise should be able to do: it should be able to give an account not only of the political arrangement or "constitution" (*politeia*) that is absolutely best without qualification, but also of the arrangement that is best suited to most communities in most circumstances, of the arrangements that are best for certain kinds of communities in certain kinds of circumstances, and even of the arrangement best suited to any given goal, whether or not it is the best achievable in the circumstances (*Pol.* IV.1, 1288b10-39). Each of these "four kinds of best" (p. 4) is the focus of a distinct mode of inquiry that approaches politics from the perspective of one of Aristotle's four causes: inquiry into the best without qualification is oriented toward the final cause of politics; inquiry into the best possible in specific circumstances begins with the material cause and "organizes political inquiry around the best that can be made out of given material"; identifying the best constitution suited to most communities requires understanding "a formal cause that can organize almost any material, any kind of people"; and the study of what Aristotle calls the best "relative to a hypothesis" is the search for the efficient causes that will promote any posited goal (p. 6). The *Ethics* seems to restrict its vision to the best life without qualification, offering no account of what is best for most people, what is best under specific circumstances, or what will promote any given aims. Practical wisdom may enable its possessor to deliberate well about all

of these questions, but it is evidently not the task of practical philosophy to answer them. Hence, Garver concludes, political philosophy is *more practical* than ethics, because it does not need to leave so much to the discretion of practical wisdom. Political philosophy has more guidance to offer the statesman than ethics has to offer us as individuals.

This division of political philosophy into four kinds of inquiry that study four kinds of "best" is fundamental to Garver's reading of the *Politics*. He observes that each of these four approaches has been prominently treated as *the* self-sufficient method of political theorizing. His examples are "the utopian or Platonic best, . . . the strategic Machiavellian best on a hypothesis, . . . the *Federalist* project of a stable constitution without reliance on virtuous politicians, and the approach exemplified by Montesquieu of arguing that different peoples are suited to different kinds of government" (p. 7). One of Aristotle's strengths is that he not only finds a place for all of these inquiries, but allows each to complement the others, yielding "a more complete understanding" (p. 8). So for Aristotle the study of how to preserve any given sort of political regime is not the amoral enterprise that it is for Machiavelli, because the best means of preserving even the most corrupt regime is to moderate its excesses to bring it as close as possible to promoting the common good. So too, Aristotle's best constitution avoids the practical irrelevance of much utopian theorizing because it enables us to see the connection between the absolute best and the other kinds of best. Instead of leading us to regard non-ideal politics as a disappointing failure to achieve the ideal, the integration of utopian theorizing into a more comprehensive philosophy enables us to understand "what is truly political about our ordinary political activity" (p. 212).

In his conclusion, Garver lays out five "themes" that he sees recurring in the *Politics*, each of which is "a different way of exploring the complex interrelations between ethics and politics, between living well and living together" and which is also a way "of connecting Aristotle's political problems to our own" (p. 214). Though this summary is placed at the end of the book, it can be recommended as a second introduction, since it serves well to illustrate the unity of the preceding six chapters. Each of the themes is a set of questions. The first is: What is the alternative to living as a political animal? As Aristotle has it, every human being who is not radically disabled is such as to flourish fully only in political community. Yet many people who are not radically disabled do not live in political communities. What are the alternatives that they prefer instead? The second, related, theme is: What is so fulfilling about expressing one's nature as a political animal? What is valuable about ruling and being ruled in turn instead of opting for one of the alternatives? Those alternatives are despotism and slavishness, ruling others as though they were slaves or living like a slave by preferring pleasure and wealth to what is truly good. Garver's Aristotle does not believe that his audience will be tempted by slavishness, but he does think that despotism is a serious problem for them. For those of us living in advanced capitalist societies, however, the problem is, Garver thinks, precisely reversed. As he

puts it, "people engaged in trade and moneymaking try to please their customers, and so choose the pleasant over what is truly good. . . . [P]eople who organize their lives around acquiring wealth are slavish, even if not slaves, because to aim at wealth is to aim at satisfying the ends of people other than oneself" (p. 22).

But if we are to reject slavishness, why should we prefer sharing in rule with others over ruling them despotically? As Garver sees it, Aristotle's answer to this question varies along with the perspective he takes on politics in different modes of inquiry. At times it seems that people's *de facto* equality makes permanent rule impractical; at others, it is that no single individual is sufficiently virtuous to rule well. Often, most citizens are not virtuous enough to want to rule and be ruled in turn for its own sake. In that case, Aristotle argues that the middle class, lacking the vices induced by poverty and excessive wealth, will be virtuous enough to be willing to rule without wanting to rule permanently; in non-ideal constitutions, citizens can be brought to regard a system of shared rule as a way of sharing the burdens of sustaining the conditions that enable them to pursue their own private good. Fully virtuous people see ruling and being ruled as choiceworthy for its own sake, because they see that "ruling over equals is a better, a more fulfilling, activity than ruling over unequals" (p. 189). Since virtue must sustain the conditions that enable its successful expression, the virtuous person who values ruling over equals will rule in a way that preserves rather than undermines his equality with others, and so will allow them to rule in turn without seeing this as a loss or sacrifice on his part. But only the fully virtuous can adopt this point of view consistently and make it authoritative over their action, and the widespread achievement of this degree of virtue by citizens requires the shared system of moral education that Aristotle recommends only when he operates in utopian mode. The ideal of political rule as a good in itself is therefore of less practical import than many have thought, since Aristotle's utopian designs are not presented as a model that we should seek to approximate in non-ideal conditions, and the Aristotelian statesman will not aim to inculcate this kind of virtue in his citizens (p. 204). Yet the ideal retains a crucial practical dimension, because shared rule over equals is a key component of success in even the least optimal political conditions, and the ideal serves to remind us that political rule is noble and good even in such circumstances.

Questions about the value of political rule raise further questions about the relationship between the virtues that make a good human being and those that make a good citizen. Those questions are the focus of Garver's fourth theme, and answering them is complicated by the issues raised in his third, namely, why is there a plurality of constitutions, even of good constitutions? Garver's Aristotle does not fit the standard view of the difference between modern liberal thought and ancient political philosophy. On the standard view, ancient political philosophers endorsed a single conception of the good and saw the task of politics as promoting the good so conceived. Liberal theories, by contrast, prioritize the right over the good and

search for a single political solution to problems posed by the plurality of reasonable conceptions of the good. On Garver's view, Aristotle's approach is straightforwardly perfectionist only in Books VII-VIII, which take up the inquiry into the absolute best. The other modes of inquiry do not attempt to approximate the absolute best, and in fact do not require any detailed knowledge of the good life. The theory of political justice in Book III does not appeal to any substantive conception of the good, and so makes the right prior to the good. One of the *Politics*'s greatest achievements is its discovery that constitutions can be better than their citizens, so that political excellence does not depend on moral excellence. Aristotle's sensitivity to the requirements of stability and his concern to identify the best political arrangement that is actually possible for most existing communities lead him to develop constitutional proposals that anticipate modern liberalism by producing "a full separation of ethics and politics" (p. 219).

But Garver's Aristotle is not a modern liberal in ancient disguise. In particular, his conception of political justice is considerably narrower than most moderns would accept, and he gives it a much smaller role. In politics, justice is strictly a matter of the distribution of offices, and not of honors or wealth: "justice is concerned with how rulers are selected, not what they do once they are ruling" (p. 124). The most important virtue for rulers is not justice, but moderation. Unlike the *sophrosynē* of the *Ethics*, which governs bodily appetites, political moderation consists in countering the tendency toward destabilizing extremism among people with partial conceptions of justice. One of the book's most insightful passages is Garver's discussion of how political leaders can practice moderation without presenting the appearance of weakness and compromise. He cites an unexpected analogy: Jackie Robinson's success in making it apparent that his refusal to retaliate against racially motivated insults and abuse was not an expression of cowardice, but of courage and self-restraint (p. 154). Similarly, the successful statesman must work to make his concern for stability appear to others as the noble commitment to political friendship and harmony that it is.

Garver's final theme is the pervasive concern with which I began: How can political philosophy be practical? On the one hand, the book's detailed exploration of Aristotle's four modes of political inquiry answers that question in a variety of ways. On the other, Garver ends on a more pessimistic note, suggesting that the practicality of political philosophy is inversely proportional to the value and importance of politics: "If politics is about winning, or about coordination, maybe things will be predictable enough for there to be a science. But if politics has something to do with living a good life, political philosophy making a practical contribution to our lives will be far more difficult. Only at a few critical places does Aristotle promise that political philosophy will tell the statesman something that he doesn't already know" (p. 229). It might be tempting to respond to this depressing prognosis with an appeal to the intrinsic value of philosophical understanding. But Aristotle insists that practical philosophy is supposed to

make a difference to how we live our lives. Can it do that even if Garver is right about its limited prospects for effecting political change?

3. Assessment of *Aristotle's Politics*

There is much to disagree with in Garver's interpretation of Aristotle and his relationship to modern politics. Since a catalogue of disagreements would be nearly as long as the book itself and of interest mainly to specialists, I will concentrate instead on four broad, related claims: (1) that only the inquiry into the best constitution makes the good prior to the right; (2) that justice is given virtually no place in Books II, VII, and VIII, while the central books concentrate only on a narrow conception of justice; (3) that an understanding of the good life is only politically relevant in the best constitution; and (4) that the best constitution is in no way a model for approximation. I take all four of these claims to be false; seeing why they are false will shed some light on how political philosophy can be practical.

Aristotle's discussions of justice in the *Politics* explicitly depend on the broader theory laid out in *Nicomachean Ethics* V. That text is sometimes obscure, but the main lines of the theory are clear enough. Aristotle distinguishes between what he calls justice as lawfulness and justice as equality or fairness. Justice as equality admits of further divisions into justice in the distribution of goods, the rectification of wrongs, and reciprocity in exchange. Justice as equality is a part of justice as lawfulness, but not the whole. "Lawfulness" misleadingly suggests adherence to positive law, but the central idea of justice as lawfulness is instead the promotion and preservation of the common good.[2] There is a common good in every community, from the simplest exchange of commodities to the polis itself, but because the political community embraces and controls all other forms of community, the political common good is paradigmatic. The polis has this special status not because it is the largest form of community or because it is not a part of any other community (neither is true), but because a political community is essentially one that aims at the well-being or flourishing of its members, and this goal is necessarily superordinate to all others. Good political communities promote the flourishing of their members well, and in particular promote the good of all of their members without compelling some to serve the interests of others without receiving proportionate benefit in return. As Aristotle pithily puts it, "the political good is justice, and this is the common good" (III.12 1282b16-17).

Strictly speaking, then, Aristotle cannot coherently make the right prior to the good. Discussion of justice is always discussion of the common

[2] There are many interpretive disputes about the relationships among these varieties of justice, but my argument here does not depend on any particular view of those relationships. I here follow, in broad outline, Fred D. Miller, Jr., *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), chap. 3, and Richard Kraut, *Aristotle: Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), chap. 5.

good, and discussion of justice in politics is discussion of what promotes and protects the shared pursuit of the good life. Of course, it is arguably incoherent to suppose that the right *could* be prior to the good in the sense of not depending on the good for its content and justification. Presumably, Garver does not intend to deny the formal priority of the good to the right, but instead to maintain that Aristotle reaches substantive conclusions about justice without relying on substantive premises about the good. In his favor, such substantive premises are not prominent outside of Books VII and VIII, and yet the conclusions about justice that Aristotle reaches are not merely formal. But those conclusions do in fact inherit the abstract and schematic character of the conception of the good on which they depend, and Aristotle's arguments help themselves to substantive premises about the good more often than may initially be apparent.

The central argument of the second half of Book III is that justice requires that political offices be distributed according to merit rightly conceived. The meritocratic conception of justice is opposed to what Aristotle calls the democratic and oligarchic conceptions. The democratic conception assigns authority equally to all citizens on the grounds that they are all equally free, while the oligarchic conception awards offices unequally on the basis of wealth (III.9, 1280a7-25). Aristotle agrees that freedom and even wealth are relevant grounds for sharing in authority, but only insofar as they contribute to the common good. Since the virtues of practical wisdom and justice make a more decisive contribution, they are the most important determinants of merit in the context of politics (III.9, 1281a2-10, 12-13 1283a14-42). Individuals and groups merit permanently preeminent positions of authority only if they are better able to promote the common good of the city than any other group would be. Hence a narrow aristocracy or even a monarchy can be just, but only if the monarch or the aristocrats meet this rather stringent criterion (III.13, 1284a3-8, 17 1287b41-1288a6).

This argument, so far as it goes, does not depend on any view of the content of the common good. Garver therefore has grounds for claiming that the argument operates in abstraction from the good. But abstraction is not isolation or separation. What we get is not a complete theory of justice, but a framework for assessing claims about justice in specific circumstances. Actual assessment will depend on a more robust understanding of the content of the common good. Moreover, Aristotle explains mistaken conceptions of justice as products of mistaken views about that content. Democracy treats freedom, and oligarchy wealth, as the primary goal of politics. These views of the goal depend for their plausibility on widely shared conceptions of the good that give pride of place to pleasure, luxury, and "doing what one wants." (III.9, 1280a6-28; cf. V.10, 1311a8-15, VI.2, 1317a40-b16). Aristotle rejects the democratic and oligarchic views of justice because he rejects the conceptions of the good on which they depend. His own alternative is vague, but determinate enough to rule out his rivals. His theory of justice therefore depends on a substantive and controversial conception of the good.

If Garver unduly minimizes the role of the good in Book III, he likewise understates the role of justice in Books VII-VIII. It is true that *distributive* justice is not prominent there, because the best constitution will successfully educate its citizens for virtue, and so they will all alternate in ruling equally. But distributive justice is only one part of justice as lawfulness, and appeals to virtues other than distributive justice do not imply that justice in that broader sense has fallen out of consideration. Justice as lawfulness covers all of the virtues in their other-regarding aspects, so that when Aristotle discusses moderation and generosity as the virtues concerned with property, he should not be understood as maintaining that property falls outside the scope of justice. The distribution of property in the best constitution is one of the main concerns of Book VII, which argues that land ownership should be equal and that each citizen should own one plot of land near the center of the city and another near the borders, because by this arrangement the dangers of military invasion will be more equitably spread among the citizens (VII.10, 1330a9-24). Similarly, Book II argues in favor of private property on the grounds that private ownership will better support the citizens' virtue and produce more beneficial results (II.5, 1262b37-1264a5).

Garver is right to emphasize that these are not considerations of distributive justice. Aristotle evidently does not regard the assessment of existing property distributions in terms of distributive justice as a fruitful task for political philosophy. His reason for this is not obvious, but here is a plausible suggestion. If someone's existing property has been acquired through injustice, then it falls under what Aristotle calls corrective justice to restore that property or an appropriately equivalent value to the victim of the injustice. If the property has not been acquired unjustly, there is no question to be asked about the distributive justice of its *possession.* Aristotle applies the notion of distributive justice primarily to acts of distributing some unallocated goods. Yet the argument of Book II in favor of private property is, in effect, an argument against regarding property as a common asset to be distributed and redistributed directly by the city. Questions of justice arise instead about the *use* of the property. Its use falls under the general conception of justice as lawfulness, and in particular under that part of it which is constituted by the other-regarding dimensions of generosity. People should use their wealth for the common good of the city as well as for the good of their closer friends and relatives.

The use of property might even fall under the scope of specifically distributive justice to the extent that it is guided by considerations of merit. As Garver helpfully observes, Aristotle's conception of merit in the distribution of political authority is *forward-looking* rather than *backward-looking*; a person merits a share of authority proportionate to the good he can do with it, not in proportion to what he has already done (p. 90). There is reason to think that Aristotle regards forward-looking considerations as relevant to the distribution of property as well. According to Book II, the Carthaginians make wealth and virtue jointly necessary for holding office on the grounds that ruling well requires leisure from work and freedom from

financial need, and hence is possible only for the wealthy. Aristotle responds that they ought to adopt measures to ensure that those with the requisite virtue will have the requisite property (II.11, 1273a22-35). Whether or not these considerations strictly amount to considerations of distributive justice, it is plain that both the distribution and the use of property fall under the broader concept of justice as lawfulness. While this makes for intriguing differences with modern ideas of distributive justice, it is misleading at best to claim that the *Politics* treats the use of property "not as a question of justice at all" (p. 54).

Justice as lawfulness also plays a crucial role in Books VII-VIII because the argument gives a fundamental role to the value of justice *for the just agent.* Ruling others despotically, subjecting their interests to one's own and denying them a role in the deliberation and decision-making that govern their lives, is ignoble and hence bad for the person who does it (VII.3, 1325a16-b23). Justice comes into play here not only insofar as concern for the common good guides the design of political institutions, but insofar as seeking to live with others on terms of equality and mutual benefit is itself a component of a good life. Aristotle is thus able to show that distinctively political rule can be of value to both the ruler and the ruled, because it aims at the common good of a community of equals, creating and sustaining the conditions in which each of those members is best able to flourish.

Garver writes eloquently about this dimension of Aristotle's argument (pp. 188-90), and he is right that we can appreciate this point and bring it to bear on practical deliberation in non-ideal contexts without accepting any of the institutional arrangements that Books VII-VIII go on to endorse. But he overstates the gap between the defense of political rule and the elaboration of the institutional structure of the best constitution. The value of ruling politically is only one part of the good life that those institutions are designed to promote. The best constitution will enable and encourage all of its citizens to live in a way that expresses their intellectual, emotional, and practical capacities in a robust and integrated fashion. Political rule is crucial for realizing this goal, but it is neither the whole nor even the primary part of it. That distinction goes instead to the leisured pursuits of literary and artistic culture. Garver observes that Aristotle does not endorse a public program of education designed to foster this culture outside of Books VII-VIII. But the thick conception of the good life that is the aim of the best constitution may allow utopian theorizing to be more practical than he takes it to be.

In the real world, efforts at political improvement are constrained by the demands of stability. Stability is by no means sufficient for a good constitution, but it is necessary; a city beset by destabilizing conflict is unable to achieve the common good. Among the conditions imposing limitations on improvement is the existence of a plurality of conceptions of the good. Many people prefer the pursuit of pleasure, freedom, wealth, or domination to the life of intellectual and practical excellence. Unlike many liberal thinkers, Aristotle does not regard these alternative views as reasonable or inherently worthy of respect, and he supposes that political authority may rightly seek to

shape citizens' character and even compel them to act in accordance with the demands of virtue. But he does not naively advocate coercive moral education as a viable solution to the problem. One of the statesman's tasks is "to introduce an arrangement of such a sort that people will easily be persuaded and be able to share in" (IV.1, 1289a2-4). Stability and justice both require that the citizens be persuaded to support the constitution willingly, and not merely compelled.

Typically, the statesman cannot simply implement the institutions of the best constitution, even gradually, because neither persuasion nor coercion will successfully bring the citizens to support them adequately. It does not follow, however, that there is no sense in which the best constitution provides a model for approximation. To promote the common good is not to promote what the citizens take to be good, but what is actually good for them. The account of the best constitution is supposed to show us what the full achievement of that task would look like. As such, it can guide judgment and decision in non-ideal contexts without supplying a recipe for its achievement or a set of institutional means that can produce the desired end equally well in any context. To borrow Aristotle's medical analogy, a theoretical model of perfect bodily health can guide medical practice even when the best achievable falls far below the best without qualification. Ultimately, it is only by relation to the best without qualification that we can identify which sub-optimal alternatives to prefer.

Garver seems to acknowledge this much when he writes that "much of the interest in the *Politics*, especially in Books IV-VI, comes in seeing Aristotle develop political forms of moderation that insure stability and at the same time move the constitution as close as possible to promoting the good life, so that aiming at stability does not become an amoral variant on *raison d'etat*" (p. 224). But surely understanding what the good life is and the principles of justice embodied in the best constitution can help guide our reforms of existing constitutions not by giving us policy proposals for gradual implementation, but by showing us what a fortunate city aimed at promoting a correct conception of the common good would look like. Like a good physician, the statesman can aim to approximate the model's achievement of the goal without imitating its means of achieving it.[3] Ideal theory thereby has more practical relevance than simply reminding us that politics is worthwhile even in dismal circumstances.[4]

[3] For a similar understanding of what he calls Aristotle's "gradual approximism," see Fred D. Miller, Jr., "Aristotelian Statecraft and Modern Politics," in *Aristotle's Politics Today*, ed. Lenn E. Goodman and Robert B. Talisse (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), pp. 13-32.

[4] I am grateful to Eugene Garver for comments on a draft of this review.