



ABSTRACT

Aristotle's Liberality

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My dissertation argues that Aristotle intends his account of unnatural economic arts in Book I of the *Politics* to emphasize the moral danger posed by the pursuit of wealth and reveal the importance of the household—and the family within it—as the natural association where human acquisition primarily takes place and should be moderated. My analysis shows how the problem of acquisition reflects tension between the limits and possibilities of human nature: human beings have the ingenuity to invent and use money to provide for their needs, but money has immense flexibility and readily tempts human beings to neglect their authentic good. However, nature also provides human beings with a strong grounding in the family to resist these temptations through education of desire and cultivation of virtue.

I show that Aristotle expands upon these considerations in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in his account of the virtue concerned with the use of money—liberality. Here he emphasizes the widespread danger that stinginess—the vice of excessive concern for money—poses to human life, arguing that common human preoccupation with money stems from the experience of need, but also identifying grounds for optimism about the

prospects of redirecting self-destructive spending into virtue. I show that liberality is a crucial virtue for Aristotle: on one hand it serves as a model for the education of “non-necessary” desires, and on the other, it pursues a peculiarly promising version of nobility insofar as it is tied to the salutary recognition of the human constraints that unite virtuous actors with those towards whom they act. Thus it avoids the frequent risk for noble actors to ignore their human limits in their pursuit of greatness and thereby allows for more coherent virtuous action. Finally, I turn back to the *Politics* where Aristotle reveals that civil faction and tyranny are frequently the high political costs of human preoccupation with money. This confirms the importance of both the household and liberality, insofar as they together provide human beings with critical means to resist the threat of greed and better navigate the relationship between their natural limits and orientation towards ennobling freedom.

Aristotle's Liberality

by

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DEDICATION

To my mother and my father, with gratitude.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

As Aristotle explores, at the start of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, what it is that human beings and political communities live for, he says that there are three chief ways of life (*bioi*) for humans, but he soon after names a fourth. He identifies the three as the life of enjoyment, the political life, and the life of the mind; further, he presents the goods that each pursues—pleasure, honor and virtue, and presumably the unidentified goods of the intellect,¹ respectively—as rivals for our recognition as the pre-eminent human good to be sought and chosen for its own sake.² However, he adds parenthetically that there is another way of life—that of the money-maker (*chrematistes*)—that is out of the running because it aims at wealth. He seems to introduce money-making in order to emphasize its contrast with the three pre-eminent ways of life and their rival goods: “The moneymaking life is characterized by a certain constraint, and it is clear that wealth is not the good being sought, for it is a useful thing and for the sake of something else.”³ Pleasure, honor and virtue appear to be “ends to a greater degree than is money” insofar as they are

¹ After introducing the speculative life as one of the three pre-eminent kinds, Aristotle leaves its discussion for later in the work. Thus, he speaks in Book One of how the life of enjoyment pursues pleasures and the political life seeks honor and, implicitly, virtue or wisdom, but he does not name the goods that speculative life points to or give any account of whether or not their aspirations hold up.

² Aristotle, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1095b16-19, 23-25, 27-32, 1096a4-5. Hereafter cited as *Ethics*. English quotations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* in this dissertation are taken from this translation, with my own modifications where appropriate.

³ *Ethics*, 1096a5-7.

“cherished for their own sakes,” while money is cherished as useful.⁴ Aristotle raises the money-making life as if it will lend support to the distinctions he has been drawing by its contrast to them, but, in effect, his doing so makes the whole categorization murkier. It is hard to see why the life that aims at pursuit of wealth is not to be weighed with the others. Perhaps it is logical to recognize that money isn’t for its own sake, but Aristotle has been taking his cues for this discussion from “the basis of the lives [people] lead,” not arguments.⁵ If money-making was a rarer profession in Aristotle’s time than our own, wealth was yet a good that defined the lives of merchants, artisans, sophists and others. If their way of life was greeted with some suspicion or contempt by the wise or the many, this doesn’t seem a good enough reason for Aristotle to neglect it; after all, he notes that the “slavish” pleasure-seeking of the many doesn’t prevent the life of enjoyment from “attain[ing] a hearing” on the grounds that people in authority also choose it.⁶ Aristotle’s political works recount numerous cases of wise or powerful people pursuing wealth, yet it attains no hearing here.⁷ Wealth, as instrumental, may point beyond itself to other goods, but Aristotle has just been casting doubt on whether even honor is intrinsically good through his argument that its pursuit points beyond itself to recognition that “virtue is superior” to it.⁸ All of the ambiguities that Aristotle has been revealing in his accounts of

⁴ *Ethics*, 1096a7-8.

⁵ *Ethics*, 1095b15.

⁶ *Ethics*, 1095b20-22.

⁷ For example, Aristotle speaks of pre-Socratic philosopher Thales’ scheme to gain and profit from a monopoly on oil presses (*Politics*, 1259a10), poet Simonides’ approval of wealth over wisdom (*Ethics*, 1121a7-8, *Rhetoric*, 1391a9-10), and the great wealth that belongs to kings and tyrants in general and leads others to plot against them (*Politics*, 1311a13).

⁸ *Ethics*, 1095b27-30.

pleasure, honor and virtue stand against dismissing wealth so easily as he seems to do. If this were all that Aristotle had to say about the relationship between the pursuit of money and human happiness, it would be profoundly unsatisfying.

It would also greatly limit the salience of Aristotle's political theory to life in modern liberal society. Modern democracies like the United States are structured to encourage busy lives of profit-seeking in their citizens. In his defense of the American Constitution's tendency to encourage and channel citizens' acquisitive desires into dynamic yet stable institutions of government and civil society, James Madison called it the "first object of government" to protect the human faculties "from which the rights of property originate."⁹ In this, he echoed the principles of modern political theorists like John Locke, who said that the "great and chief end" of government is the preservation of property,¹⁰ and Baron de Montesquieu, who argued that the transformation of human society from ancient preoccupations with virtue and honor to modern preoccupation of all citizens with commercial pursuits was inevitable and salutary for individual happiness and a healthy political community.¹¹ If Aristotle could so simply dismiss the idea that wealth might serve as the end for individual lives or political communities as a whole, could his political theory be of enduring importance to his readers today?

⁹ James Madison, "Federalist, No 10," in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Signet Classic, 2003), 73.

¹⁰ John Locke, *The Second Treatise on Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, Ed. J.W. Gough. (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002), 57. Locke's use of the term property applies both to the person and possessions of a human being, such that it is a "general name" for life, liberty and estate.

¹¹ See, for example, Charles, de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Trans. Anne M. Cohler et al. Reprint. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 38-48, 338-339.

Fortunately, this passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not the only place in his political writings where Aristotle takes up the question of whether the pursuit of money can serve well as an end to human action or political society, and whether the happiness that the political community aims at might not be found in the generation of wealth rather than goods such as pleasure, virtue, honor or philosophy. Rather, Aristotle explores such questions in the *Politics*, where economic matters are taken up at length in Book One, but also resurface throughout his discussions of citizenship, rule and regimes in subsequent books. Moreover, the relationship between money, virtue and the political community comes into sharper focus in Aristotle's discussion of the monetary virtues of liberality and magnificence in Book Four of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and in his subsequent discussions of reciprocity and political friendship in that work. Rather than taking up, addressing and resolving the question of wealth and the problems and opportunities that it poses for individuals and communities in one place, Aristotle weaves threads of such an account throughout the *Ethics* and the *Politics*. In this dissertation, I follow these threads in pursuit of a clearer understanding of Aristotle's political theory which recognizes the role of money in his understanding of human life.

The Significance of My Dissertation

In my dissertation, I cover new ground by bringing together the common threads in Aristotle's teachings in Book One of the *Politics* concerning acquisition and use of wealth with a view to the good of the household, with his account, in Book Four of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, of liberality, the virtue by which human beings give and take money well with a view to the needs of others. By doing so, I come to a unified view of Aristotle's teaching on economic matters that highlights the importance of both the

household and the virtue of liberality to a coherent life of moral excellence for individuals and to political unity.

Because of Aristotle's well-known critiques of usury and the branches of business which aim at generating wealth, he has often been characterized by modern economic theorists as a thinker whose views on money are unrealistic, elitist, or economically naïve.¹² However, my dissertation proceeds from the insight that in his discussions of economic matters in the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle is chiefly concerned to warn against the dangers which exist in the human desire for money and for the physical goods that serve life. I begin by showing that Aristotle considers greed—the human tendency to desire the means of physical life in an insatiable way—to be a central human problem, both with respect to individual virtue and private living, and to the good life of the political community.¹³ In Book One of *The Politics*, Aristotle warns that money readily becomes an object of insatiable and blind pursuit for human beings, sought as if it is good for its own sake and tending to thwart the possibility of authentic human happiness. Aristotle personifies the problem of greed by describing the “strange” case of

¹² I discuss such claims in Chapter Two.

¹³ Ryan Balot has given an insightful and complex treatment of Aristotle's discussion of *pleonexia*—“greediness”—in *Ethics* V and the *Politics* in *Greed and Injustice in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). This book traces the “history and discourse on greed” in classical Athens (3). In tracing this concept, Balot identifies *pleonexia* as the “most important single term” in classical Greek for the concept of greed, but he also identifies a list of other significant terms used for the concept: “*koros* (greed or satiety), *philochrēmata* (love of money), *aischrokerdeia* (base covetousness), and *epithumia chrēmātōn* (desire for money), along with a variety of periphrastic expressions suggesting the idea of grasping for more in excess of what is needed, useful, or just” (4). Like Balot, I am concerned with a concept that is sometimes described in terms other than *pleonexia*. However, Balot's treatment of *pleonexia* in Aristotle is intended as a “starting point” or “template” for Balot's historical analysis of the intellectual “tradition of reflecting on and experiencing greed” in political life out of which Aristotle came (22-23). For the purposes of this analysis, Balot finds the “most important” treatment of *pleonexia* by Aristotle to be his discussion in *Ethics* V, where he draws a “connection between acquisitiveness and the violation of distributive fairness within political communities (56).” However, Balot acknowledges that Aristotle's own interest in acquisitiveness, the “psychological drive that underlies greed” goes far beyond its influence on distributive justice (31).

King Midas, who was able to “abound in [wealth] and still starve to death... because of the insatiability of his prayer.”¹⁴ Aristotle warns that like Midas, money-makers who seek increase in wealth as such, are pursuing wealth “without limit”—and this amounts to a “desire for [what] is infinite.”¹⁵ According to Aristotle, the life devoted to pursuit of property leads human beings away from all but “bodily enjoyments;” it serves those who are “serious about living but not about living well.”¹⁶ Further, he argues that in a community where wealth is pushed beyond its natural limits, forms of business develop that turn human virtues and political capacities (e.g., courage, generalship, and medicine) away from their natural purposes and towards the task of making money.¹⁷ In this way, a society devoted to commerce diminishes the lives that all members pursue.¹⁸ Thus, love of money appears to represent for Aristotle a central problem for human beings because the pursuit of property readily serves as an end that restructures human life, by alienating human beings from their natural purposes—purposes that emerge in the family and eventually find greater fulfillment in political communities.¹⁹ Far from being naïve about

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Politics*, 2nd ed., trans. Carnes Lord. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1257b15. Hereafter cited as *Politics*. English quotations from the *Politics* in this dissertation are taken from this translation, with my own modifications where appropriate.

¹⁵ *Politics*, 1257b34, 42.

¹⁶ *Politics*, 1257b40-43.

¹⁷ *Politics*, 1257b49.

¹⁸ *Politics*, 1257b33, 48.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas provides interesting and unusual commentary on the centrality of the dangers of the desire for wealth for Aristotle, in his discussion of liberality, stinginess and prodigality in *Summa Theologiae*, *Secunda Secundae* Questions 117, 118 and 119, where he draws extensively upon *Nicomachean Ethics* Book Four, Chapter 1. Although he claims that liberality is not a “principal” moral virtue, he also finds that “covetousness” (understood as love of money or *philagyria*) is a “capital” or principal vice insofar as it “gives rise to other vices” under “the aspect of end.” He refers to the passage in this where the manifold species of stinginess are compared to the crimes of tyranny. He explains that covetousness is a

what might be accomplished by sophisticated economic systems, Aristotle sees the possibility of a commercial society and rejects it as inadequate for human nature and politics.

At the same time, Aristotle assigns the management of economic matters (*oikonomikē*) primarily to the private household (*oikos*), linking the acquisition of property to its contribution to the family, and ultimately offering thereby a grounding for human life that makes possible the pursuit of common goods in political communities. Aristotle identifies the household as the association in which human beings naturally participate in the work for which property primarily exists (reproduction and nourishment), and he insists on the importance of the family to political unity in his refutation of the proposals made in Plato's *Republic*. According to Aristotle's account, shared good life in the political community is possible only where the special biological and deliberative functions of the family are preserved. Families ground individuals, constantly reinforcing the bodily connections that exist between husband and wife or parents and children. At the same time, Aristotle finds in these connections the basis for sharing in the advantageous and the just; he says that community in such things is what makes "a household (*oikian*) and a city."²⁰ Aristotle argues that if families are assimilated to the larger political communities that they constitute, the natural and physical connections that families represent will be lost, and the development of virtues made possible through these connections will be thwarted. In particular, Aristotle assigns the

capital vice because desire for money – a "token of taking possession" of things – misleads human beings through a "promise of self-sufficiency" that has a deceptive "likeness to happiness."

²⁰ *Politics*, 1253a18 (emphasis mine).

primary responsibility for well-moderated pursuit of property to the domain of the private household, in service of its proper ends, and thus limits commercial pursuit to serving the human good.

In *Nicomachean Ethics* IV.I, on the virtue (liberality) and vices (prodigality and stinginess) concerned with the use of property, Aristotle confirms that “greediness for gain” is both dangerously compelling to humanity and comprehensively corrupting of human life, but also argues that human beings can become disposed to the proper use of wealth through habituation in liberality. If human nature inclines to a corrupting seriousness about money, the cultivation of the virtues depends on elevating human beings above this inclination, and I argue that Aristotle’s presentation of liberality provides a model for understanding how virtue can bring human beings some freedom from their preoccupations with the necessities of life. I argue further that liberality serves as a model for the virtues involved in our common lives with others that seems to widen the possibilities for virtue and address some difficulties inherent in Aristotle’s “grander” virtues (i.e., magnificence and magnanimity) where self-regard seems to nearly undermine the compatibility of these virtues with justice. I show that Aristotle provides, through his exploration of liberality, a more complex and hopeful depiction of virtue than is often recognized.

My dissertation also brings together subsequent discussions in the *Ethics* and the *Politics* to show that liberal deeds provide a basis for overcoming the conflict between economic factions that divides political communities and for achieving the good life of friendship and noble deeds that constitute the end of the *polis* for Aristotle. Aristotle recognizes that a powerful understanding of politics finds the origin of the bonds of the

political community in money and exchange, recounting in his discussion of reciprocity in Book Five of the *Nicomachean Ethics* how money serves as a “sort of interchangeable substitute” for the need that holds human beings together, and thus is foundational to every community.²¹ However, in his presentation of this fact, he notes how the word for “legal currency” (*nomisma*) relates to *nomos*, the word for law or convention, in order to at once confirm just how foundational money is and also that economic exchange is not all that is needed for a political community: money is like law but is not, and it points beyond itself to law, which is concerned with virtue.²² Further, Aristotle refers his reader in this chapter to another form of reciprocal exchange—the reciprocation of gracious deeds between individuals in a city—that holds promise to bring human beings together in a much fuller common life than commercial exchange. This is consistent with his move in the *Politics* to correct oligarchic and democratic accounts that people unite for mere exchange or security with an argument that political association results from the human desire for “living well,” by which, as he makes clear, he means doing noble deeds.²³ He writes to challenge the view that politics is reducible to the exchange of goods, and to show that it is built on exchange of a higher nature: the city is a deliberate “work of friendship,” arising when individuals and families choose to “form a community in living well for the sake of a complete and self-sufficient existence” in the form of “noble deeds.”²⁴

²¹ *Ethics*, 1133a25.

²² *Ethics*, 1129b27-1130a14.

²³ *Politics*, 1280b30.

²⁴ *Politics*, 1280b30.

There is a tendency in scholarship on Aristotle to emphasize the divergence and tension between public and private spheres in his view, but my dissertation throws light on his recognition of a fruitful connection between human beings' private and public lives. I disagree, for example, with Hannah Arendt, who turns to Aristotle to support a model of political life that very intentionally turns its back on the questions of human beings' physical and biological needs that are met within the household. Critical of modern politics' preoccupation with humanity's private economic pursuits, Arendt praises the conception she attributes to ancient Greece of politics as the sphere of life where human beings "experience meaningfulness" insofar as their shared worldly actions—those performed outside the private home—allow them to "talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves."²⁵ She argues that Aristotle's actual experience of Greek political life did not allow him to doubt the distinction between the spheres of household and of *polis*, or understand the "good life" of citizens in the *polis* except as "'good' to the extent that by having mastered the necessities of sheer life, by being freed from labor and work, and by overcoming the innate urge of all living creatures for their own survival, it was no longer bound to the biological life process."²⁶ She dismisses places in Aristotle where the "borderline between household and *polis*" is "occasionally blurred" as if they

²⁵ Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. 2nd Ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3-4.

²⁶ Arendt, 36-37. The concept of the Greek household is tied for Arendt to patriarchy and constraint. Her strong equation of traditional household life with patriarchy is echoed by Thomas Pangle in *Aristotle's Teaching in the Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 34. Although Pangle calls Aristotle's treatment of the household in Book One of the *Politics* a sort of beautiful lie or "new rationalist poetry" about the city's naturalistic origin in the family intended to move "gentlemanly readers" away from traditional piety about the city's origins and toward friendliness to philosophy, he also views the gentlemanly reading of Book One as "a demotion of the family" because it is a demotion of patriarchy.

are accidental to his political understanding.²⁷ As I have related, although Aristotle confirms the threat of corruption to the good life of the city that may arise out of the private and “biological” needs of human beings, he finds meaningful life even within the biological cooperation of the household, and he indicates that good political life can arise only where the private nature of the household is respected and room is made for virtues like liberality, which contribute to meaningful and rich political life through noble deeds that begin and end in the private sphere. On one hand, political life for Aristotle isn’t possible without the contributions of private life, and on the other, where political life transforms humanity’s biological possibilities, it does so not through the overcoming of natural urges so much as the perfecting of them.

My analysis is in greater agreement with scholars who recognize the potential for meaningful life that Aristotle finds in the household, especially between husband and wife.²⁸ Stephen Salkever, for example, describes the “final cause” of the partnership of husband and wife not as biological but as the “development of human rationality or ‘living well’”—that is, development of the “capacity for living according to a rational perception of one’s overall interest... [instead of] whim or temporary passion”—that is the “most decisive” trait of human life; in his view, this end is shared with the city, but is not essentially political.²⁹ However, I disagree with interpretations by Salkever and others who infer from such considerations that Aristotle’s purpose is to undermine Greek

²⁷ Arendt, 37.

²⁸ See for example, Stephen Salkever, “Women, Soldiers, Citizens: Plato and Aristotle on the Politics of Virility,” in *Essays on the Foundations of Aristotelian Political Science*. Ed. Carnes Lord and David K. O’Connor (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991). 165-190.

²⁹ Salkever, WSC, 176-177.

attachment to political life by elevating the claims of the household above those of the *polis*.³⁰ Aristotle does not indicate that human beings might be “sometimes a citizen and sometimes not,” as Salkever puts it, but rather that they might be at once citizens and open to the parts of their nature that are not exhausted in citizenship.³¹

My dissertation also contributes to an important debate about whether Aristotle’s political writings are written to reveal the inadequacies of political and moral life. Looking to Aristotle’s argument, in the final book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that contemplative activity is more serious than political activity and constitutes “the complete happiness of a human being,” while the life of moral virtue “is happy in a secondary way,” many of his readers have concluded that even if the surface of his arguments appears to uphold the life of practical and political virtue, those reading the subtext carefully see him undermining or at least problematizing moral virtue.³² Thus, many scholars have argued that the *Nicomachean Ethics* reveals a rupture between moral virtue and politics, and an irresolvable tension between the pursuit of excellence by the individual and devotion to the common good, which is governed by justice.³³ Along these lines, Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins have argued that tensions Aristotle reveals between the moral virtues and justice serve as a preparation for his ultimate conclusion

³⁰ For example, Stephen Salkever, “Teaching the Questions: Aristotle’s Philosophical Pedagogy in the ‘Nicomachean Ethics’ and the ‘Politics,’” *The Review of Politics*, 69 (2007): 192-214. Salkever argues that the *Politics* and the *Ethics*, taken together, are “craftily organized” to subvert his audience’s deep attachment to political life and activity because the “greatest danger to a decent political life” is identified by Aristotle as the “unbridled love of the city.” Where Arendt lauds the Greek “virile warrior” as the “hallmark of truly human, truly political activity,” Salkever substitutes Aristotle’s “gentle” magnanimous man, who does “strangely little” because “nothing much in the realm of action is very great.”

³¹ Salkever, WSC, 190.

³² *Ethics*, 1177b20-21, 24-25, 1178a9.

³³ See, for example, Bartlett and Collins, 280.

that establishes “the decisive superiority of theoretical to moral virtue.”³⁴ Such interpretations often dovetail with the view I have described previously that for Aristotle, private interests prove incompatible with justice, or the political good: not only the private household, but also the private pursuit of nobility has the potential to crowd out concern for the political community. In a similar vein, Aristide Tessitore has argued that even if the *Nicomachean Ethics* appears to emphasize how lives devoted to philosophic and moral excellence are alike elevated above other kinds of life, reflection on his arguments reveals their difference and incompatibility, and serves to point readers beyond politics to the pursuit of philosophic life.³⁵ Others, such as Thomas Pangle, have similarly interpreted Aristotle’s *Politics* as a work that subtly reveals how even the best *polis* and the virtues found therein essentially fall short of openness to philosophic life and virtue.³⁶

One of Aristotle’s arguments in favor of the philosophic life is that while for great moral and political actions “much is needed,” contemplative acts have a freedom from necessities. It therefore makes sense that Aristotle’s arguments about greed and the harmful consequences the pursuit of these necessities cause for human beings are often interpreted as confirmation that Aristotle would turn his readers away from politics toward philosophy.³⁷ Thus, Pangle finds in the economic discussions of the *Politics* a “glimpse” of the truth “that complete immunity to becoming intoxicated with love of

³⁴ Bartlett and Collins, 278, 298, 302.

³⁵ See, for example, Aristide Tessitore. “Aristotle’s Ambiguous Account of the Best Life,” *Polity*, 25 (1992): 197-215. 209, 214-215, and Ronna Burger. *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3-9, 228n8.

³⁶ See, for example, Thomas Pangle, 267.

³⁷ *Ethics*, 1178b1.

lucre belongs only to the philosopher, because he alone lives a life whose most serious preoccupation entails gaining mastery over the profound anxieties and hopes that fuel the addiction to monetary gain.”³⁸

However, my arguments about Aristotle’s treatment of the household and liberality provide an alternative view in which there is more compatibility between moral and philosophical virtues. Leo Strauss likened Aristotelian moral virtue to what Plato would have considered “a kind of halfway house between political or vulgar virtue which is in the service of bodily well-being (preservation or peace)” and the “genuine virtue” that “animates only philosophers as philosophers.”³⁹ My dissertation argues that Aristotle’s analysis of liberality shows how the moral virtues give us some access to freedom from necessities, and to this extent reflect the theoretical life. Moral virtue can be “a halfway house” only because of this reflection. And, as halfway house, it serves to ground philosophy itself in the human things, just as Aristotle’s assigning property to household management serves to militate against the infinite pursuit of wealth. If my analysis of liberality is correct, Aristotle’s moral virtue is a rather full house, and it may be Aristotle’s refusal to turn away from the political things that protects his openness to philosophy. Perhaps this is the reason why Aristotle says that the liberal person is unsatisfied with the conclusion of Greek wise man Simonides that wealth is more choice-worthy than wisdom because the wise flock to the doors of the rich.⁴⁰

³⁸ Pangle, 61.

³⁹ Leo Strauss. *The City and Man*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 27.

⁴⁰ *Ethics*, 1121a8.

Outline of Chapters

In my second chapter, I begin my analysis of Aristotle's teaching on economics and politics by considering his treatment of economic matters (*oikonomia*) in *Politics I*. This is my starting point because it frames the larger problem of greed—insatiable desire for money or the physical goods that serve life—in its starkest terms. In the *Politics*, Aristotle presents the private household (*oikos*) and its care of economic matters (*oikonomikē*) as essential elements of the political whole. The *oikos* serves a double function in this book: its primitive form, where human beings came together to naturally cooperate in reproducing offspring and providing for daily physical needs, is treated as a preliminary association that was a first step toward the fulfillment of their nature in the *polis*; a more complex form of household that is found within the *polis* provides Aristotle with models that serve his analysis of the city into different parts defined by political, monarchic, despotic and household rule. Much of Book One is devoted to an investigation of the form of rule peculiar to the household—household management—and it is here that Aristotle argues against forms of economic acquisition that he deems harmful to human beings insofar as they fail to observe limits in what is required by human nature to support private and political life.⁴¹ Aristotle argues that the household ought to engage in forms of acquisition that are consistent with the ends of its natural work and eschew corrupting forms of money-making that encourage insatiable acquisition while blinding human beings to these ends. As Aristotle warns that great seriousness about the task of making money has a nearly irresistible tendency to reorient human capacities, tasks, and politics, he binds the economic expertises to the ends of the

⁴¹ *Politics*, 1256b7-26.

family as the human association in which human beings naturally participate in the work for which property primarily exists. My argument in this chapter rejects claims by many contemporary economic theorists that Aristotle's arguments here arise out of naïve analysis of economic exchange or commitment to a traditional aristocratic way of life. In this, it agrees with work by political theorists who have found that Aristotle's economic teachings are much less sanguine about what it takes for human beings to provide for their physical needs than such interpretations recognize. However, it diverges from the second group in taking Aristotle's arguments about limits imposed by human nature unironically—I argue that Aristotle's presentation of these aspects of human nature is consistent with arguments he makes in the *Parts of Animals* and *History of Animals*, and should be given due weight. More broadly, I argue in this chapter that Aristotle's arguments about human nature as it shapes the household and the political community are more speculative than didactic or ironic, in keeping with a tension at the heart of human life between the limits and constraints of our nature and the highest freedom it is capable of achieving. I argue that an understanding of this tension informs Aristotle's warnings about greed and the puzzling way in which he presents them.

My third chapter explores Aristotle's presentation of the household further, showing that in Book One and in subsequent Books of the *Politics*, he emphasizes the importance of the contribution that the family within the household makes to the political whole of which it forms a part. In keeping with his concern about the insatiable desires that money invites into human life, Aristotle's treatment of the household reveals the importance to political life of the family, where human beings naturally participate in the work for which property primarily exists and receive their earliest experiences of

deliberation. Aristotle's account reveals that not only the *polis*, but the family itself unites human beings for nobler purposes than the mere sustenance of life. Aristotle denies (in Book Three) that communities concerned only with economic exchange or security against harm are political in the fullest sense, because they exist to support life, but not "living well."⁴² Aristotle argues that a fully political community can exist only where people achieve a fuller kind of unity, one that is founded as a "deliberate choice" and a "work of friendship."⁴³ I discuss in this chapter the role that Aristotle sees for strong "marriage connections" and the shared activities that healthy family connections support in providing the necessary conditions for community in this complete sense. Rather than presenting a political community as a union of solitary individuals whose rational self-interest binds them together, Aristotle argues that political communities are composed of households, and exist only when "households (*oikia*s) and kinships (*genes*i) form a community in living well for the sake of a complete and self-sufficient existence."⁴⁴ Families are critical for Aristotle not only because they are a natural source of affection and care between human beings, but also because they are a first site of deliberative speech—the kind of speech where human beings fulfill their political nature by revealing together "the advantageous and the harmful, and hence also the just and the unjust."⁴⁵ Thus, while Aristotle teaches that human beings are political animals who need the *polis* to achieve their natural good, he also emphasizes that the full life of the *polis* is

⁴² *Politics*, 1280a31-32, 34-35.

⁴³ *Politics*, 1280b35.

⁴⁴ *Politics*, 1253b1, 1280b30.

⁴⁵ *Politics* (Lord), 1253a15-17. Emphasis my own.

impossible without the contributions of the household.⁴⁶ I show further in this chapter how Aristotle's accounts of the problems with the over-regulation of familial and economic communism in Plato's *Republic*, as well as neglect of the family in the Spartan regime founded by Lycurgus, highlight the dependence of political unity and friendship on maintaining the private integrity of the family and its primary concern for economic pursuits. According to Aristotle's presentation, it is through family life that human beings' natural self-interest can first be elevated and channeled into affection for others. Not only does Aristotle argue that political unity depends for its existence on the private care and choices of friends and families, but he also warns that the exercise of the virtues of moderation and liberality require the preservation of the private household.⁴⁷

In my fourth chapter, I turn to the *Nicomachean Ethics* and Aristotle's treatment there of excellent and deficient use of money in his account of the virtue of liberality and the vices of prodigality and stinginess that are opposed to it. Here again, Aristotle focuses on the dangerous temptations that greed presents to human beings, this time through his

⁴⁶ Other helpful interpretations of Aristotle's understanding of the family in Book One of the *Politics* and of its relation to the political community include those of Waller Newell, Kevin Cherry and Wayne Ambler. Newell argues that the central question of Aristotle's discussion of the household is whether "the household's forms of rule" can be applied to a whole city rather the relationship of the household to the city as a whole. Waller Newell. "Superlative Virtue: The Problem of Monarchy in Aristotle's *Politics*," in *Essays on the Foundations of Aristotelian Political Science*. Ed. Carnes Lord and David K. O'Connor (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991). 191-211. 196. Cherry's discussion of Aristotle's teleology in Book One and his conception of true wealth paints a picture of an Aristotle more sanguine about satisfying the needs of human life than seems justified. Kevin Cherry. *Plato, Aristotle, and the Purpose of Politics*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). There is convincing evidence for this point provided by Wayne Ambler, in "Aristotle on Acquisition," in *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 17 (1984): 487-502. Ambler argues that Aristotle "teaches nature's beneficence ... as a problem," such that his doctrines, which imply a "simple relationship between the city and nature," are called into question (493, 487). Ambler's conclusions are quite ambiguous; he wishes "by no means to suggest that Aristotle's political judgments are ultimately not rooted in nature," but calls for "renewed efforts ... to see more clearly how nature does indeed support these judgments (502)." Although my dissertation would likely not be seen as such by Ambler, it could perhaps be considered a "renewed effort" of this sort.

⁴⁷ *Politics*, 1263b6-13.

striking presentation of the moral and political dangers of the vice of stinginess: he links the excessive seriousness about money to a whole schema of unjust and criminal acts shamelessly undertaken for small gains.⁴⁸ At the same time, he saves the reputation of prodigality—recklessness in the spending of wealth—on the grounds that it is curable and shares the detachment from money which marks virtuous liberality.⁴⁹ Aristotle rejects a common judgment that the prodigal is generally licentious and base, and he argues that it is the opposite, seemingly more provident, vice of stinginess which leads to wide-ranging corruption.⁵⁰ He also makes two striking references to tyrants in this chapter, contrasting aspects of both vices to tyrannical qualities—prodigals spend like tyrants but destroy themselves because they don't have tyrants' resources, while stingy people perform many vile actions like tyrants but they do so for small gains, unlike tyrants.⁵¹ In this chapter, I take up the affinities that Aristotle recognizes between the tyrant and the stingy person, showing that a profitable comparison may be made between this presentation and Socrates' account in Books Eight and Nine of Plato's *Republic* of the genealogy of a tyrannic soul in which both the stingy and the spendthrift take part. Both Aristotle and Socrates identify stinginess as a potentially insatiable longing for wealth which follows from a single-minded concern for the necessities of human life, and prodigality as something not inherently ignoble, but self-destructive, and consequently as a potential

⁴⁸ *Ethics*, 1121b15-1122a14

⁴⁹ *Ethics*, 1121a24.

⁵⁰ *Ethics*, 1121b8-11.

⁵¹ *Ethics*, 1120b25 and 1122a5.

inducement to wrongdoing.⁵² Aristotle's implication that the tyrant possesses a certain greatness that the stingy lack echoes Socrates' description of the tyrant as a man in whose soul the great winged drone of love itself has been planted.⁵³ However, in the Socratic account of the tyrant's origin, the most corrupting desires are the opposite of those given in the Aristotelian account. There, stinginess protects the laws—albeit weakly, and with false arguments—while those who freely spend without care of their own well-being are deemed the stinging drones that seduce youths to ever greater desire.⁵⁴ Aristotle turns the Socratic account of corruption on its head by saving prodigality and condemning stinginess; by doing so, he redeems prodigality's detachment from “necessary desires” as a plausible antidote to the disease of stinginess which infects most human beings. Socrates' account favors the “necessary desires” of the stingy, which serve the needs of human nature, and condemns the “unnecessary desires” of the prodigal drones, which “exist for the sake of play and showing off” and aim at nothing beneficial for human being.⁵⁵ However, as Aristotle progresses through the virtues of Book Four, he edifies these latter desires by holding them to a new standard—that of the “liberal person.”⁵⁶ Significantly, just as the virtue of liberality was a private virtue in comparison with magnificence, the “liberal” person is recognized in interactions that occur in private rather than civic moments. Thus a sort of liberal detachment from necessities is described

⁵² *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 555a-c, 554d, 555d, 552c-d.

⁵³ *Republic*, 573a.

⁵⁴ *Republic*, 572c-d.

⁵⁵ *Republic*, 572c.

⁵⁶ Explicitly named at *Ethics*, 1127b35.

in Aristotle's definitions both of the virtues that exist in informal public settings—friendliness and truthfulness—and of those that exist in moments of rest and play—wit and tact. In fact, the “refined and liberal person” avoids wrong uses of humor as if he were “a law unto himself.”⁵⁷ At the same time, Aristotle echoes his indictment against the shameful calculations of the stingy in critiquing the pettiness of the vices that correspond to these virtues. In Aristotle's treatment of the household, he showed how necessary desires are to be moderated and elevated by the family. His discussion of liberality goes further, presenting a vision of virtuous habituation in which the unnecessary desires play a positive and important role. For similar reasons, life in families and moral virtue both support the elevation of political life in accordance with a notion of the human good.

In my fifth chapter, I expand on the importance of liberality to Aristotle's full account of the virtues by contrasting it with the virtues of magnificence and magnanimity. I argue against scholars who have treated it as a subordinate virtue and stepping stone to magnanimity as the “peak” of the moral virtues discussed in Books Three and Four of the *Ethics*. I show that it serves not merely to point in the direction of magnificence and magnanimity, but also acts as a foil to them: where the “self-regarding greatness” that animates magnificent and magnanimous actors may tend toward the forgetting of their own human limits, the noble giving that defines a liberal deed engages the giver in judgment about the needs and constraints that all human beings share. Although the surface of Aristotle's account of magnificence seems to exalt this virtue over liberality—as private giving on a larger scale turned to grander, nobler and more public purposes—it is also suggestive of the ways that the magnificent person's defining pursuit of grand

⁵⁷ *Ethics*, 1128a29-33.

display and the evocation of wonder in others might tend towards vicious excess. It is difficult for one who wishes to elicit the wonder of others not to fall into the vice of vulgarity, which tries to make an object of wonder of the big spender instead of the noble work that he or she has brought about. I argue that Aristotle's account suggests that a magnificent person must be restrained by a liberal awareness of his or her own limits to maintain coherent virtue. Aristotle suggests this in part by evoking the *Odyssey* as he contrasts liberal and magnificent spending; I examine how the *Odyssey* complements my account by suggesting that generosity toward others is rooted in human beings' openness to the worthiness and nobility (even potential divinity!) of others that is not on ready display, and that human beings must recognize this to escape arrogance and baseness. I argue that Aristotle's discussion of the virtue of magnanimity also highlights the difficulty that devotion to one's own worth may pose to the ability to act worthily, and thus points to the need for the concern of one's own worth to be tempered by a liberal awareness of the worth of others. Through his treatment of liberality, Aristotle shows that regard for others and recognition of the natural constraints that human beings share can be consistent with noble deeds and help to make virtuous life more coherent than it would be if it precluded this possibility.

In my sixth chapter, I return to the question of why Aristotle has related liberality to tyranny. Some scholars have argued that this is because Aristotle sees kinship between liberal virtue and tyranny: he means to reveal a problematic abstraction from justice that lies at the core of liberality and the virtues in general or to warn against the liberal human being's action of private giving to those in need as an antagonistic gesture of dominance that threatens equality and political partnership in rule. I make the opposite case—that

liberality is revealed to be the antagonist of tyranny, not its friend. Aristotle suggests in the *Ethics*, through his discussion of reciprocity in the temple of the Graces, how liberality can be a source of both private affection *and* political friendship when it takes place in a political community that promotes reciprocation of gracious deeds. This underlies his insistence in the *Politics* that the political community is a community of noble deeds and affectionate choice, not mere economic exchange or defensive alliance. Although Aristotle concedes that the exchange of money in trade can bring people in mutual need together as “equals and partners in a community,” he shows that the exchange of noble deeds, such as acts of liberality, is required to build political friendship and like-mindedness (*homonoia*) between them. Aristotle presents the inevitable division of citizens into the many poor and few rich as an enduring source of faction and alienation in society and one that culminates in tyranny. Although Aristotle finds some justice to the egalitarian claims of the many and the elitist claims of the few, their very competition over the external goods of the city reveals that they lack the political virtue that is the true grounds of merit in the city, that engages “in factional conflict... least of all,” and that proffers what hope there is of mediating this conflict. Aristotle presents tyranny as the culmination of the injustice in this factional competition, and his discussion of tyranny highlights the ways that tyrants use their authority to undermine their citizens’ private lives and property, their shared lives and trust in each other, and their capacity for liberal and noble actions. Where liberality beckons as a way that rich and poor might come closer to acting in common, the tyrant compounds the love of money of the rich with the hatred of restraint of the poor. Aristotle emphasizes the illiberal qualities of the tyrant: his unlimited greed debases him, his desires “ebb and flow

like a violent strait,” and he is incapable of friendship with himself as well as others.

Where a liberal person knows how to use his private goods nobly for others, a tyrant seeks domination because he does “not know how to be a private individual.” I argue that whereas the tyrant represents the figure whose way of life has been shaped by the greedy insatiability of desire for the means of life that Aristotle warned about in his account of money in Book One of the *Politics*, the liberal person’s preference for noble giving over money prepares him for political life in its fullest sense and even makes space for the pursuit of wisdom as well.

Thus, Aristotle’s presentation of liberal reciprocity as a civic institution complements his presentation of the family and completes the picture of how private care and activity must be channeled into public good in the political community. Just as Aristotle sees private households as a necessary condition for the existence of truly political life, he sees the city as a necessary condition for the flowering and promotion of virtues such as liberality, whereby private life achieves richer fulfillment. Where nature allows for human beings to remain alienated by their private concerns, the city at once requires these private concerns for its life, and provides the path that is required for alienation to be overcome and human beings to live in community, united by affection and noble deeds.

CHAPTER TWO

The Dangers, Limits and Purposes of Economic Arts in Aristotle's Introduction to his *Politics*

In Book One of *The Politics*, a key purpose for Aristotle's discussion of acquisition, moneymaking, and household management is to warn against the dangers that exist, and yet are easily overlooked, in human beings' deep-seated desires to acquire money and the physical goods that serve life. In his chapters on acquisition, he presents the insatiable human tendency to desire the means of physical life in its starkest terms, and he treats greed as a central problem both for moral and political life. He argues that great seriousness about the task of making money has a nearly irresistible tendency to reorient human capacities, tasks, and politics—a problem that he elaborates in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹ However, in highlighting this problem near the beginning of the *Politics*, he lays the groundwork for identifying and eventually showing the crucial contribution of the family to the political community. As I will explore further in Chapter Three, the familial household, as the natural association whose ends can lead human beings to participate virtuously in acquiring and using possessions, is essential to the possibility of a political life that will transcend the corruption threatened by humanity's distorting tendencies towards greed.

In the first two sections of this chapter, I examine two influential perspectives that scholars have taken on Aristotle's treatment of acquisition in the *Politics* that are, in my

¹ I discuss this elaboration in Chapter Four.

view, insufficient. The first perspective concludes from the arguments made in Book One, Chapters Eight through Ten, that Aristotle's chief intention is to rule out the use of "unnatural," sophisticated modes of acquisition—especially those involving interest—from the economy of the *polis*. While some exponents of this view are more favorable than others to such an intention, they generally agree that Aristotle would bar the use of these modes from his well-ordered, best *polis*, and that the reason for this is his attachment to the aristocratic status quo in Athens, which stands in sharp contrast to the capitalistic or commerce-based political communities of the modern world. They therefore view Aristotle as a conventional thinker who is unable to transcend the simpler economic structures of his time.

The exponents of the second perspective emphasize perplexities within these chapters and argue that Aristotle changes his course in the immediately subsequent chapter, Chapter Eleven, when he endorses practices he previously condemned as unnatural. They hold that while Aristotle explicitly defends what they regard as an idealized or noble view of the *polis* in Book One, his chief purpose in treating the subject of acquisition is to subtly undermine this noble view by showing that it does not adequately address the challenging necessities of human life. While these scholars differ on how to view the political and philosophic significance of the contradictions they discover in Aristotle's arguments, they agree that Aristotle's intention for his economic arguments in Book One is the revelation of problems with the noble view of politics rather than an endorsement of that view and that he intends to indicate the problems rather than to offer prescriptions to be followed in the political community. In effect, they understand Aristotle as an economic and political realist in his awareness of the limits not

simply of his time but of political life more generally. They offer a persuasive case that Aristotle is neither bound by the conventions of his time in his economic theory nor in his understanding of politics.

I respond to both groups of scholars in the third and fourth sections of this chapter. First, I argue that Aristotle's appeal to nature as a standard in the *Politics* is both more nuanced and more fruitful than either group of scholars recognizes, and explain how for Aristotle, humanity's natural good, as fostered in the household, points to a greater realization in political life. Then I turn to Aristotle's treatment of the art of acquisition in Book One of the *Politics*, which focuses especially on the question of whether there is a natural standard by which to evaluate that art. These passages of the *Politics* include observations on which both the economic conventionalists and their revisionist critics rely for evidence of their own interpretations of Aristotle's economic theory. My reading, in contrast to theirs, emphasizes Aristotle's teaching on the problem of greed and ultimately the role of the household in addressing this problem. As I will elaborate on further in Chapter Three, Aristotle's understanding of the pivotal role of the household provides grounds for more optimism about political life than these scholars recognize.

Is Aristotle Economically Conventional?

Modern economic theorists have tended to attribute the divergence between Aristotle's economic views and modern economic reasoning to the philosopher's inability to imagine market structures that didn't exist in his own place and time. His most famous economic critic may be Joseph Schumpeter, who discussed Aristotle's economic theory in

History of Economic Analysis.² Schumpeter argues that Aristotle (unlike Plato) had a clear “analytic intention,” evident from the “logical structure of his arguments,” as well as his laborious “method of work.”³ On one hand, Aristotle was a “good analyst,” who developed a “conceptual apparatus” that proved “a priceless boon to later ages.”⁴ On the other, unfortunately, his “social science” adopted (and led followers into) “the teleological error” of “exaggerating the extent to which men act, and shape [their] institutions ... according to clearly perceived ends that they consciously wish to realize in the most rational way.”⁵ Although Schumpeter finds merits in Aristotle’s account, he also judges him to be a primitive analyst who mistakenly passed “value judgments upon a reality large stretches of which he failed to explore at all,” in “the spirit of prescientific common sense.”⁶ Schumpeter states that Aristotle’s analysis achieved little more than “decorous, pedestrian, slightly mediocre, and more than slightly pompous common sense.”⁷ Schumpeter’s Aristotle was conservative and banal, the sort of thinker who typically missed his opportunity to look beyond the limited “economic” structures of the Greek polis by ignoring his pupil Alexander the Great’s “stupendous experiment in political construction.”⁸ This to Schumpeter is “highly characteristic” evidence that “the Greek city-state ... was and remained for (Aristotle) the only form of life worthy of

² Joseph Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954).

³ Schumpeter, 57.

⁴ Schumpeter, 58.

⁵ Schumpeter, 58, 58n4.

⁶ Schumpeter, 64.

⁷ Schumpeter, 57.

⁸ Schumpeter, 57n1.

serious attention” and that his imagination was closed to the “vast vistas opened up by [Alexander’s] experiment.” Schumpeter also holds that Aristotle was unable to see economic facts clearly because of the moral idealism and aristocratic class prejudices that clouded his vision.

George W. Wilson’s slightly more favorable analysis of Aristotle’s economic thought in “The Economics of Just Price” still takes as its starting point the conviction that Aristotle’s economic views were a function of his contemporary environment, and turns to the philosopher merely to gain “a better perspective of the relativity of economic analysis.”⁹ Wilson goes so far as to claim that “not even Aristotle’s staunchest admirers ... believe that it makes any difference whatsoever to an understanding of contemporary economics what Aristotle ... had to say—nor did economic analysis derive much, if any, benefit from Book One of the *Politics* or Book Five of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.”¹⁰ Wilson concludes that Aristotle’s Athens was in what might “be dubbed low-level chronic stagnation.”¹¹ Economic growth “was generally not envisioned except through conquest;” and the idea that it could come from “productive use of the economic surplus and technological change” had no purchase. Aristotle’s economic prescriptions befitted such a time: “satisfactions could be raised by decreasing wants rather than assuming them to be urgent and boundless.” Since economic stagnation provoked fears of “instability,” it was predictable that Aristotle would work to shore up those existing “forms of economic organization which had performed so effectively in earlier centuries” by condemning any

⁹ George Wilson, “The Economics of Just Price,” *History of Political Economy* 7, no. 1 (1975): 57.

¹⁰ Wilson, 57.

¹¹ Wilson, 62.

form of exchange that might unsettle the “traditional positions” between “buyer and seller.” Although Wilson’s account is more generous than Schumpeter’s to Aristotle’s quality of thought, he is similarly convinced that Aristotle is a would-be economic theorist hindered by a narrow horizon of experience.

A more contemporary critique by political economist Mark Blyth in *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea* takes a similar approach. Blyth says that Aristotle’s economic arguments were the fruits of a conservative and privileged attitude toward a stable “no-growth” society where economic fluctuations were chiefly the results of short-term crop failures, and where no revolutionary innovations had yet occurred to significantly alter the productivity of human labor.¹² In such a context, people’s experience told them that “the size of the pie changed as little as the size of the share that was assigned to them.” Moreover, with extremely low economic growth, the “economy [was] largely a zero sum game,” where “anyone who hoped to expand their consumption... could only do so by taking resources from someone else.” Blyth argues that these conditions account for the logic of Aristotle’s arguments about human consumption and acquisition in the *Ethics* and *Politics* which, he says, reinforced moderation and austerity among the poor and middling citizens by assigning more frugal ethical standards of consumption upon them than upon the wealthy in society.

Even Karl Polanyi, who praises Aristotle for recognizing emerging economic practices before other thinkers did, concludes that modern “economic theory” will find little value in the economic teachings in the *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* because

¹² Mark Blyth, *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

“the functions of the market mechanism,” which are *the* focus of economic analysis, “escaped Aristotle.”¹³ Polanyi applauds the “stark realism” in “Aristotle’s insights into the connections of economy and society,” and argues against “the erasing of Aristotle’s teaching on the economy.”¹⁴ Aristotle was a penetrating thinker for his time, who attempted to confront “the very first beginnings of market trade” in “the history of civilization.”¹⁵ Polanyi describes this teaching as a permanent contribution to the field of sociology, because it poses the broad “question of the place occupied by the economy in society,” while attacking “the problem of man’s livelihood with a radicalism of which no later writer on the subject was capable—none has ever penetrated deeper into the material organization of man’s life.”¹⁶ Aristotle “divined the full-fledged specimen from the embryo,” finding “links between the petty tricks of the huckster in the agora and novel kinds of trading profits that were the talk of the day,” and recognizing that “early instances of gain made on price differentials” were “symptomatic” of developments in commerce.¹⁷ However, Polanyi insists that Aristotle lived too early to make a permanent contribution to economics as a field because he was not in a position to recognize the “institution which eventually was to link [trade and market], the supply-demand-price mechanism.” This mechanism was “the true originator of ... the commercial practices

¹³ Polanyi, 66, 87.

¹⁴ Polanyi, 79, 66.

¹⁵ Polanyi, 67.

¹⁶ Polanyi, 66.

¹⁷ Polanyi, 68, 87.

which were now becoming noticeable in trade.”¹⁸ More importantly, it was destined to ameliorate these practices, but “in the absence of price-making markets [Aristotle] would have seen nothing but perversity in the expectation that the new urge for money-making might conceivably serve a useful purpose.”¹⁹ Although Polanyi considers Aristotle a first-rate thinker about the relationship between economy and society, he nevertheless undermines the significance of Aristotle’s dire warnings about the dangers of acquisitive desire. The moral and political problems that Aristotle identifies in humanity’s desire for profit—the effects of greed on the human soul—go far beyond the question of utility, and therefore are too radical to be quieted by a more efficient economic mechanism.

What is made clear in all of these critiques is the extent to which Aristotle’s teachings about the intersection between the economic sphere and the human being’s natural good conflict with modern economic theories and assumptions that favor the maximization of profit, increase of the economic pie, and technological innovation. However, the idea that Aristotle’s commitment to the political status quo of Athens drives his economic reasoning—an idea that most of these critics share—should strike us as odd from the start, given Aristotle’s claim in the *Politics* that all of the regimes “now available are in fact not in a fine condition,” and his failure to even include Athens among the finest real regimes he discusses in Book Two.²⁰ More importantly, what are neglected by all of these assessments of Aristotle’s apparent attempt at economic analysis are the many obvious difficulties and unusual arguments Aristotle raises for his reader in these chapters

¹⁸ Polanyi, 86.

¹⁹ Polanyi, 87.

²⁰ *Politics*, 1260b35.

on *oikonomikē* and *chrēmatistikē*. The view that he is simply churning out the necessary analytic data to support economic practices going on around him seems wholly blind to the manner in which he proceeds: presenting conjectural and often cryptic accounts of the human being's primitive past; uniting straightforward natural observations with sweeping and unobservable conclusions about human nature; evoking Midas' golden touch to defend the unnaturalness of currency; and raising unexplored doubts and questions for his reader throughout this tangle of arguments.

Is Aristotle an Economic and Political Realist?

Several scholars have in fact offered strong arguments that Aristotle's true views are anything but straightforward endorsements of the austere economic horizons required for the leisured, un-laboring way of life enjoyed by citizens of ancient Greece. Wayne Ambler, in his article on "Aristotle on Acquisition," and Thomas Pangle, in his book *Aristotle's Teaching in the Politics*, make this case powerfully.²¹ Their arguments deserve close attention, because they tease out many of the difficulties missed in simpler analyses of Aristotle's claims about economics, revealing that the realist pessimism that Polanyi identified in Aristotle's outlook is even starker than he recognized. This effort leads Pangle, for example, to the conclusion that in Book One, Aristotle's grand purpose is to "put in the foreground and defend, while more quietly examining and correcting, the noble or beautiful way of seeing and articulating political life."²² Although I will defend a

²¹ Wayne Ambler, "Aristotle on Acquisition," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 17, no. 3 (1984): 487-502; Thomas Pangle, *Aristotle's Teaching in the "Politics"* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

²² Pangle, 26.

different account of Aristotle's purpose, Ambler and Pangle raise questions that must be answered by anyone who would adequately defend the nobler possibilities of Aristotelian politics against their critique.

Alive to many complexities in Aristotle's text, Wayne Ambler finds that Aristotle "teaches nature's beneficence ... as a problem" in these chapters.²³ He argues that Aristotle is being "un-Aristotelian" here, insofar as he is imposing a much less flexible definition of what is natural in questions of acquisition than elsewhere, departing from his general view "that the naturalness of an institution or practice is to be determined especially on the basis of its contribution to a natural end."²⁴ That is, instead of allowing that something completed by art may still be natural if it is "a fulfillment or completion of nature," Aristotle here dwells on the tension between nature and art, attributing what is natural to what was "found in the simple, spontaneous, and primitive times of man's pre-political past."²⁵ This is achieved by Aristotle's moves to liken "man's acquisition of nourishment to that by the animals," to restrict "his discussion to the acquisition of nourishment alone," to treat "this nourishment as a gift of nature," and to "seem to speak about men in a distant, pre-political age."²⁶ Ambler notes that "if men were hard pressed in these times, Aristotle chooses not to trumpet this fact," instead depicting nature as "kindly toward man and ... able to be so without the assistance of the arts." By stressing this tension and seeming to present nature's gifts as "sufficiently abundant" to dispense

²³ Ambler, 493.

²⁴ Ambler, Acquisition, 490.

²⁵ Ambler, Acquisition, 489.

²⁶ Ambler, 489.

with the need of the arts, Aristotle presents the “implausible” idea that unequipped man is “adequately cared for by nature.”²⁷ In Ambler’s view, Aristotle intentionally encourages the reader’s doubts about nature’s beneficence by coming to strange and increasingly inconsistent conclusions throughout Chapter Eight in Book 1.²⁸ For example, Ambler describes how Aristotle begins with the account that nature is beneficent to animals, subsequently undermines this by presenting animals as a gift a beneficent nature has provided for human use, and finally undermines the view of a nature beneficent to humanity in general by identifying a place for slave-hunting (which benefits some humans by harming others) among the natural ways of life.²⁹ Ambler also argues that the lack of any ready examples of mature animals receiving nourishment from nature in ways analogous to lactation renders this point a “suggestive contrast [rather] than a pattern” for understanding nature’s beneficence to mature human beings.³⁰ According to Ambler, such examples are intended to push the reader towards the conclusion that Aristotle’s real view is that nature’s beneficence to man consists in nothing more than the existence of plants and animals that man can make use of, and thus serves as an invitation to man to make use of all possible acquisitive arts in order to survive.³¹

Ambler anticipates that someone looking to make sense of these arguments will look for a place in the text where Aristotle clarifies “that artless acquisition is natural only

²⁷ Ambler, *Acquisition*, 489, 491.

²⁸ Ambler, 491

²⁹ Ambler, *Acquisition*, 491-492.

³⁰ Ambler, *Acquisition*, 492.

³¹ Ambler, *Acquisition*, 494.

in a rudimentary sense” and that a “more natural ... art of acquisition” belongs to men in their “fully-developed and natural political condition.”³² But such a reader will seek in vain, for “the section on acquisition ... notwithstanding its preoccupation with the question of naturalness ... consistently fails to argue that the naturalness of an institution or practice is to be determined especially on the basis of its contribution to a natural end.”³³ Ambler infers that Aristotle is teaching that “the end does not always ‘naturalize’ the means.” This “leads us to doubt whether political association is compatible with nature” and natural acquisition. “The text on acquisition teaches us to think about nature in a way that makes it difficult to see how the political association can either be natural itself or can confine itself to natural acquisitive practices.” Ambler notes that Aristotle “declines to remind us” that virtue requires physical equipment and presupposes leisure and that the practice of liberality directly depends upon acquisition. He concludes that Aristotle is thereby downplaying the necessary contributions of acquisition to the good life, in order to present a more beneficent view of nature than is warranted. On the basis of such observations, Ambler concludes that for Aristotle, nature is an inadequate standard for moral and political life: “the problem posed by the section on acquisition as a whole is not that Aristotle is blind to the inadequacy of natural acquisition to support leisure and political life... but that he does not treat his account of natural acquisition as establishing binding standards for guiding political practice.”³⁴ He concludes that Aristotle seeks to show that nature is not always a positive political standard, and that

³² Ambler, Acquisition, 490-491.

³³ Ambler, Acquisition, 501.

³⁴ Ambler, 502.

some such standards are opposed to nature. However, Ambler doesn't think that Aristotle means to wholly reject nature as a standard for political life, but to problematize it:

This is [not] to suggest that Aristotle's political judgments are ultimately not rooted in nature, but it does suggest that renewed efforts are necessary to see more clearly how nature does indeed support these judgments. If nature emerges as a standard whose bearing on politics is less direct than we had hoped, it may also be that its foundation is more secure than others have claimed.³⁵

While Ambler corrects the conventionalist interpretation of Aristotle by pointing out the subtleties in Aristotle's text, his conclusion leaves us wondering. How is it that Aristotle's problematizing of nature as a standard for political life could make it a more secure foundation for political life than simpler interpretations acknowledge? Where could the "renewed efforts" that he recommends lead? Thomas Pangle, in his commentary on Aristotle, takes up the challenge with which Ambler has left us. A consideration of Pangle's work may allow us to see more clearly what Ambler has in mind.

Pangle argues that Aristotle presents a "beautiful" account of the city's naturalistic origin in the family as a "new rationalist poetry" which will move "gentlemanly readers" away from traditional piety about the city's origins, "and thereby ... provide a way station where a gentleman friendly to philosophy might spiritually dwell."³⁶ But readers who are more astute than gentlemen will see exaggerations and comical claims in that account which remind them of "humanity's vast need to complete, if not supplement, nature

³⁵ Ambler, 502.

³⁶ Pangle, 34.

through art.”³⁷ Pangle interprets Aristotle’s rhetorical purpose in each of the chapters on acquisition as follows: In Chapter Eight, Aristotle presents a “queer” and false account of nature’s abundance that will point philosophic readers towards the opposite view while encouraging a useful delusion in gentlemanly readers; in Chapter Nine, he “unobtrusively” reveals to philosophic readers how natural scarcity creates a deep tension in the human condition by threatening the possibility of the good life (a dangerous truth that explains why Aristotle presented a false teaching in Chapter Eight); and in Chapter Ten he extends his useful falsehoods to promote the least harmful way for most human beings to live in light of this tension between the necessary and the good.

According to Pangle, the practical goal of Aristotle’s economic arguments is to provide support for non-commercial agrarian classes in the *polis*. Pangle sees evidence throughout Chapter Eight, for example, that Aristotle’s rhetorical target is the farming classes who form “the economic backbone of the Greek *polis*.”³⁸ Aristotle’s natural art of *oikonomikē* is designed to simultaneously prop up and impose limits on the art of farming by “distilling the natural art of acquiring from the unnatural art of money-making, and excluding only the latter.” On one hand Aristotle humbles farmers by understating the contribution agriculture makes to human sustenance (and by extension, the survival of the *polis*), treating it as if it is only “a brief afterthought” in a list of natural livelihoods where nomadism and piracy receive greater attention. On the other, he provides room for the class of yeoman farmers to attain moral superiority over businessmen and merchants by embracing a livelihood that is “practice[d] ... in accord with nature so long as [they]

³⁷ Pangle, 31.

³⁸ Pangle, 53.

refrain from turning [their] farm[s] into ... business[es].”³⁹ This is enhanced in Chapter Ten, where “Aristotle proceeds to draw a tendentiously moralistic civic conclusion in support of independent famers (1258a40ff.): not only the art of commerce, but even the art of exchange is justly blamed, for it is not in accord with nature but involves taking from [others].”⁴⁰ Pangle argues that in these ways, the surface of the text in these chapters props up the role of gentleman farmers in the hierarchy of the city.

However, Pangle presents this surface as a false one that conceals from unreflective readers the strange and contradictory arguments running beneath. Such readers miss many problems in the text, including: the “uncivic” inclusion of the ways of life of pirates and those who wage war to hunt down natural slaves among natural livelihoods; the “curiously weak” rhetorical question by which Aristotle establishes that the *oikos* is essentially concerned with use rather than accumulation of goods; the problematic assumption that civilized life “could be based on nomadism and piracy;” and the assumption that wealth is “correctly conceived as tools” instead of “a wonderfully (or horribly) flexible artificial material, whose value lies precisely in the fact that it gives us a power not limited to and by any specific function.”⁴¹ However, the chief position in these chapters that a thoughtful reader should reject is their presentation of “Nature” and natural teleology. Pangle finds and questions arguments that “Nature gives [livelihoods] directly” to human beings and “that Nature has so designed everything that humans are

³⁹ Pangle, 53.

⁴⁰ Pangle, 59.

⁴¹ Pangle, 52-55.

well taken care of through these livelihoods.”⁴² He finds it even stranger when Aristotle gives “expression to an extreme human-centered natural teleology, such as he never anywhere else in his writings expresses” by stating that plants are for the sake of animals and animals for the sake of man, and concluding that “Nature has made all things for the sake of humans.” Pangle expects intelligent readers to conclude that weird and contradictory assumptions undermine Aristotle’s surface defense of an aristocratic *polis*, and to approach his central claims about natural teleology governing human sustenance with suspicion.

Pangle argues further that Chapter Nine provides clues to Aristotle’s true view of humanity’s economic relationship with nature as well as the reasons he has been defending a false one. Pangle’s gloss on Aristotle’s arguments about money and its effect on human life in this chapter is that they reveal “two fundamental facts about the human condition”: nature is not “motherly” towards human beings but rather confronts them “with terrible material scarcity and painful penury” to which they inevitably respond with a preoccupation with acquiring means to security and comfort, and that “the human being’s awareness of mortal finitude is a truly haunting awareness” that infects them with “a limitless, desperate reaching” for gain.⁴³ On one hand, natural scarcity compels humanity to always “devote an enormous part of its energies” to the accumulation of wealth without any limits, and this gives rise to the city; on the other hand, humanity’s inevitable obsession with acquisition undermines “concern for the good life as the life of

⁴² Pangle, 54.

⁴³ Pangle, 57.

moral and intellectual virtue.”⁴⁴ Therefore, although Pangle’s Aristotle would agree with John Locke that humanity requires the deployment of all available arts of acquisition to survive, he also holds “that to take one’s bearings by the low truth about the exposedness of the human condition is to endanger, or indeed sacrifice, the higher, and more truly human, possibilities of civic and household life.”⁴⁵ Pangle sees Aristotle’s response to these tensions as twofold. First, Aristotle has sought to encourage a false view of natural abundance, especially among gentleman farmers, because their moderate wealth positions them best among those in the *polis* to resist “the gravitational pull that draws everyone toward obsession with ever-increasing profit.”⁴⁶ Through such a noble lie, Aristotle promotes the existence of a class of statesmen and household managers who exhibit “a deep moral uneasiness, reluctance, and regret at the unavoidable concessions that civic and household life must make to love of lucre.”⁴⁷ But Aristotle’s second and more important intention is to point worthy readers beyond politics towards political philosophy as the only way of life that is free from this corrupting love.

Pangle finds confirmation for this sharp distinction between practical and theoretical consequences of economic realities in Chapter Eleven, which he describes as a dramatic “volte-face” on acquisition that explicitly encourages statesmen and household managers to maximize profits immediately after doing so has been condemned as unnatural.

⁴⁴ Pangle, 60.

⁴⁵ Pangle, 61.

⁴⁶ Pangle, 60.

⁴⁷ Pangle, 61.

This is a chapter in which Aristotle turns from “what relates to knowledge” to “what relates to utility.”⁴⁸ Here, under the category of what is useful, considerations are blended together of how best to maximize yields in farming as a natural art of getting goods and how best to succeed in unnatural arts of exchange (trade, moneylending, and wage labor).⁴⁹ Aristotle states that a “detailed and exact discussion” of these things would be “useful” but “crude” to spend much time on.⁵⁰ He provides a brief moral categorization of the livelihoods involved: “the most artful ... are those which involve chance the least; the most vulgar, those in which the body is most damaged; the most slavish, those in which the body is most used; the most ignoble, those which are least in need of virtue.”⁵¹ Aristotle suggests that it would be useful for whatever has been written about how to succeed in the various arts of getting goods to be collected together and studied by “those who honor the art of getting goods.”⁵² He especially emphasizes schemes such as one devised by the philosopher Thales of Miletus and another by a man in Sicily to create wealth by “artfully” arranging monopolies.⁵³ He concludes that familiarity with such schemes is “useful for political rulers,” because “many cities stand in need of money-making and revenues of this sort, just as households do, yet more so.”⁵⁴ Where Aristotle has led up to this chapter by urging household managers and statesmen to

⁴⁸ *Politics*, 1258b9-11.

⁴⁹ *Politics*, 1258b12-30.

⁵⁰ *Politics*, 1258b35.

⁵¹ *Politics*, 1258b36-39.

⁵² *Politics*, 1259a5-6.

⁵³ *Politics*, 1259a10-33.

⁵⁴ *Politics*, 1259b33-35.

recognize natural limits to acquisition, he appears here to be promoting their study of any useful means to increase gain regardless of all that has gone before. This chapter thus readily supports Pangle's arguments that Aristotle wishes to undermine his own rhetorical arguments that individuals in the *oikos* and the *polis* can and should eschew concern for maximizing profits. On Pangle's reading, while gentlemanly farmers would be intended to respond to Aristotle's warnings with restraint and engage in acquisitive practices only with great reluctance, others in the *polis* would be encouraged to adopt the acquisitive practices needed for survival and growth.

Thus, Pangle imputes even more irony to Aristotle's teachings on nature and acquisition than Ambler. Where Ambler sees Aristotle seeking a less direct but more durable connection between the requirements of political life and those of human nature, Pangle sees Aristotle proving the true incompatibility between these requirements to the few philosophic readers who can understand him. However, both draw very similar lines between Aristotle's views of acquisition in theory and practice, emphasizing the failure of theoretical norms drawn from nature to answer the practical necessities of individual and civic life, and drawing the conclusion from this that theory understood in this sense is secondary to practice in economic questions.

Ambler and Pangle both provide powerful arguments against taking it for Aristotle's true view that nature's interactions with needy human beings constitute a form of beneficent, quasi-maternal care. Furthermore, they are right to emphasize that much is at stake in the consideration of nature's provision for man, including the questions of whether nature gives standards for political life and even of to what extent the *polis* is natural rather than conventional. The conclusion they share that Aristotle means for his

reader to see—that physical need poses significant problems for human beings—is unavoidable, especially given the emphasis in Chapter Nine on what Pangle terms humanity’s haunting awareness of mortal finitude. These scholars help us to see the room for tragedy in human life as Aristotle has uncovered it. Human beings respond to their experiences of scarcity and the vastness of their physical needs by developing a concern for gain that knows no limits. Moreover, this concern to acquire can threaten the very possibility for individual and political lives that are worth living. The ordinary experience of human life makes human beings aware that survival is difficult and that they can’t rely on having enough without devoting great effort to acquiring goods. Yet when they devote themselves to acquisition, it readily becomes the guiding purpose of their lives, and compromises the pursuit of higher things that human beings require for happiness. In other words, because of human need, greed poses an enduring threat to the human good.

While Aristotle recognizes tragic potentials in human life, including the dangers of greed in distorting political life, he also offers more cause for optimism than the enormity of these problems might lead us to think. In the first place, if Aristotle does not present nature as a beneficent deity (in Chapter Eight of Book One), dismissals of this characterization are unnecessary. As I discuss below, readers of the *Politics* with the Biblical account of creation in mind may recognize agreement between this account and Aristotle’s statement about a natural teleological ordering that reaches its zenith in the human being. Others may scrutinize, along with John Locke, the optimism of such of a view of nature’s purposes. However, without applying such external lenses to Aristotle’s text, one can see more similarity between the treatment of nature in this chapter and

elsewhere in Aristotle's writings, and an emphasis that is more exploratory than didactic about teleology in human acquisition.

Furthermore, Aristotle's treatment of the relationship between nature and the lives of individual human beings and the political community throughout Book One is tentative, complex and rich. In contrast to Pangle, who argues that Aristotle's identification of the household as a "building block of the city has a powerful and deep tendency to drag the citizenry and civic life down or back to immersion in merely economic concerns," I argue in the remaining sections of this chapter and in the next that Aristotle points to the positive possibilities the household offers to humanity and the political community for elevating and ennobling civic life. In sum, Pangle and Ambler are helpful in exposing the ambiguities in Aristotle's economic teachings. These ambiguities should caution the reader against taking the nature claims presented in these chapters as if they are positive rules of economic conduct that apply as absolutely as they originally appear. On the other hand, as I show in the next section, we ought not to simply dismiss these claims. In light of the critiques of Aristotle's theories of acquisition made by Ambler and Pangle, I will explore two questions in the remaining sections of this chapter: first, what is the place of nature and its relation to politics, as Aristotle presents it in Book One of the *Politics*? Second, does Aristotle present a natural art of acquisition, and if so, in what sense is it natural?

Nature in Aristotle's Political Reasoning

Aristotle's arguments about nature and politics in Book One are anything but predictable and simple. In his *Physics*, Aristotle identifies things which are by nature (*physis*) as those things which "continuously being moved from some principle in

themselves, reach some end” unless they are impeded, where the end is “that for the sake of which” they exist.⁵⁵ If one rigidly applies this account to Aristotle’s claims about things that are by nature in the *Politics*, Aristotle will certainly seem to be saying strange and often “un-Aristotelian” things. However, another reading of these passages is possible, and even more plausible, in that it does not require finding intentional contradictions in Aristotle’s text.

It is true that at the outset of the *Politics*, Aristotle describes humanity’s development of political life as a sort of organic growth—tracing a development that appears to proceed “by nature” as defined in the *Physics*. The noblest (*kállista*) way to study such things as the city, Aristotle says, is to look at how they grow (*phuomena*) from the beginning.⁵⁶ This rule implicitly identifies the city as a natural object in the sense of something that comes to be through a process of growth or natural development. This is confirmed both by Aristotle’s starting points in this investigation—the natural strivings that lead to human community in its primitive form—and his eventual conclusion—that the development that culminates in the city as an end marks the city as something that “exists by nature.”⁵⁷

As I discuss further in Chapter Three, in Aristotle’s “organic” presentation of the city’s genesis, the primitive household comes to light first, and then the village. Although Aristotle states that both of these communities seek self-sufficiency in “mere living,” he argues that the city that arises out of these first communities achieves a fuller realization

⁵⁵ *Physics*, 199b15-20.

⁵⁶ *Politics*, 1252a25.

⁵⁷ *Politics*, 1252a25-b30.

than what they initially sought; that is, it achieves self-sufficiency in “living well.”

According to this approach then, the city should be recognized as a product of a kind of natural growth, driven by needs and impulses inherent in human nature. By providing such an account, Aristotle emphasizes how human beings are drawn into the communal life of belonging in the city by the constraints of their nature—that is, their natural needs, desires and equipment.

However, before Aristotle takes up this genealogical account of the city, he proposes a different one aimed at understanding the different kinds of human ruler and rule in the city.⁵⁸ He says that to understand the differences between political rule, kingly rule, household management and despotism requires an analysis of the city according to the method of “our normal sort of inquiry”—dividing the compound whole into its smallest, uncompounded parts.⁵⁹ By undertaking this analytic method of understanding political things, Aristotle is eventually led to an emphasis on what constitutes human freedom. For in distinguishing these forms of rule, he shows how political rule, or rule over “free and equal persons,” goes far beyond the constraint which defines despotic forms of rule.⁶⁰ This method looks to the parts of the city insofar as they have their own integrity. When he follows the analytic method to understanding the city, Aristotle emphasizes how political union comes about through independent units coming together with some measure of volition and freedom.

⁵⁸ *Politics*, 1252a21-23.

⁵⁹ *Politics*, 1252a7-20.

⁶⁰ *Politics*, 1255b19.

Evidently, there is tension between the two methods Aristotle adopts and their implications about the city. One implies that the city is a product of impulse for human beings, developing spontaneously out of the primitive communal needs of our nature. The other treats the city as a product in part of human freedom and the choice of independent actors. Further, the analytic method treats the city as a sum of its parts, since it suggests that breaking the city into its parts will lay open for us the city as a whole. This is in contrast with the organic model; insofar as the city's end transcends those of household or village, by this account, the city as a whole is revealed to be greater than the sum of the parts that come together in it. So Aristotle's use of these two methods forces us to ask: Is the city a product of freedom or of necessity, and is it merely the sum of its parts, or is it greater than they are? It is possible that Aristotle is contradicting himself or even formulating incompatible teachings for different audiences here, but there is a more plausible, and ultimately more interesting reason why he would employ both of these apparently incompatible approaches?

There is a difficulty inherent in the analytic approach that is revealed as Aristotle proceeds with it. Aristotle looks to nature in Book One, Chapter Five to "discern both the sort of rule of a master and political rule."⁶¹ Just before this, he has stated that the best kind of rule is over better things, because the work belonging to the composite of ruling and being ruled belongs to both together and will be better where both are better.⁶² So his reader is prepared to look to nature for a model of political rule as the better sort of rule, where the ruled is equal enough to the ruler to rule in turn over the rulers. However,

⁶¹ *Politics*, 1254b4-5.

⁶² *Politics*, 1254a24-27.

Aristotle seems here unable to come up with a natural model for ruling and being ruled in turn. Instead, he provides a series of examples of permanent division between ruler and ruled. Aristotle explains each of the examples he gives here—soul over body, intellect over appetite, man over animal, and male over female—as one where reciprocal rule would be “harmful” because of the great superiority of the ruler.⁶³ If such forms of rule are not all despotic, they are closer to it than to being reciprocal. Thus, if the city should be understood as a composite whole where ruling and being ruled is reciprocal, which he will argue in Book Three, it seems in this sense different from every other composite whole in nature.⁶⁴ While “animate things” derive rule and being ruled “from all of nature” insofar as “even in things that do not partake in life there is a sort of rule,” there seems to be something different and unprecedented in the alternation of rule within the city from every other form of natural ruling and being ruled.⁶⁵ Aristotle says that “immediately from birth things diverge, some toward being ruled, others toward ruling.”⁶⁶ While he applies the arguments in this chapter to outline how “nature wishes to” differentiate masters and slaves from birth (if they exist by nature), he simultaneously suggests that nature does not make very clear provisions for alternating rule between free human beings.⁶⁷ Thus, the difficulty of finding a model for political rule suggests severe limits to

⁶³ As I argue in Chapter 3, Aristotle later suggests that inequality between male and female human beings is a much more ambiguous matter, but for the purposes of his explanation here, he clearly emphasizes the permanent inequality between the sexes in general.

⁶⁴ *Politics*, 1277b9-17.

⁶⁵ *Politics*, 1254a30-32.

⁶⁶ *Politics*, 1254a22.

⁶⁷ As I discuss in Chapter 3, Aristotle also says much that seems to undercut any clear natural basis for slavery.

the analytic approach. Beyond this difficulty, this chapter seems to emphasize the difficulties for assimilating the natural in human matters to models of other beings in nature.

Indeed, Aristotle's analogy between political or human developments and natural organic processes faces complicating provisos. Even as he seems to affirm this analogy ("Nature is an end: what each thing is ... when its coming into being is complete is ... the nature of that thing"), he illustrates it with examples of things that undermine it—"a human being, a horse, or a household."⁶⁸ Households do not come to be in the same way as horses. It is plausible to argue that some common internal principle drives the development of every healthy horse to the completed form it possesses at maturity. It is also the case that Aristotle's initial statement about the coming together of male and female for the sake of reproduction claims that this occurs "not by choice, but as in the case of other animals and plants from a natural striving (*hormé*) to leave behind another that is like itself."⁶⁹ However, as I discuss further in Chapter Three, Aristotle's lingering focus on the household provides a view of its completed form as something that goes far beyond a primitive instinctive association, revealing instead how it requires elements of human intention, choice and planning. Without arts to supplement nature, the complex partnerships that combine in the household wouldn't be possible. Nor is the household complete without complexity in its internal relations that its most primitive form lacks, as Aristotle suggests by contrasting the households of Greeks with those of barbarians, who

⁶⁸ *Politics*, 1252b32-34.

⁶⁹ *Politics*, 1252a25-30.

violate nature by treating their women as slaves because their own souls lack freedom.⁷⁰

Though the household is rooted in biological drives and bonds that unite human beings beyond their choosing, Aristotle insists that it is also an association “made” by community in deliberative speech—the same kind of speech as that by which human beings realize their political nature and become capable of associating in freedom.⁷¹

Among other things, the barbarian example suggests that even if the city is required to fully address the questions of rule, justice and participation between diverse human beings, until these questions are dealt with to some extent as they arise within the household, there may be no development toward the city.

Moreover, internal human principles, such as natural inclinations toward certain evils or vices, would more readily impede than direct the constituent members in completing the household. Aristotle himself alludes to this problem:

Man is born naturally possessing arms [for the use of] prudence and virtue which are nevertheless very susceptible to being used for their opposites. This is why, without virtue, he is the most unholy and the most savage of the animals, and the worst with regard to sex and food.⁷²

In other words, the human race is distinguished among animal species by an inherent susceptibility to have its natural drives for reproduction and nourishment end in rapacious violence, oppression and perversity instead of the formation of the cooperative partnerships in which the goods striven for by these drives can be achieved. To the extent

⁷⁰ *Politics*, 1252b2-9.

⁷¹ “He de touton koinonia poiei oikian kai polin (Community in these things makes the household and the city.” *Politics*, 1253a18.

⁷² *Politics*, 1253a34-37.

that it is directed by human choice, and requires virtue, a coming-into-being has some independence from nature—whether it be that of a household, or of a city.

The difficulty in speaking of the development of human things toward their end as natural is a point that Aristotle makes more clearly in *Nicomachean Ethics*. There, he argues that “none of the moral virtues are present in us by nature, since nothing that exists by nature is habituated to be other than it is.”⁷³ Nothing that is “naturally one way” could be “habituated to be another.”⁷⁴ But human beings, Aristotle proceeds to illustrate, can be habituated in one way or another, that is, toward virtue or toward vice. As he says in the *Ethics* passage, virtues are present “neither by nature ... nor contrary to nature,” but “they are instead present in us who are of such a nature as to receive them, and who are completed through habit.”⁷⁵ Aristotle states that “when it comes to human beings,” things are caused not only by “nature, necessity, and chance,” but also by “intellect and all that comes about through” human doing; moreover, the “things that come about through us... do not always do so in the same way.”⁷⁶ In other words, human beings and human affairs “admit of being otherwise.”⁷⁷ This is not to say that human beings, unlike other natural beings, lack natural ends. Rather, human beings differ insofar as their achieving these ends requires effort on the part—including a right use of their freedom. It is precisely because human affairs admit of being otherwise that Aristotle warns against looking for

⁷³ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a20.

⁷⁴ *Ethics*, 1103a23.

⁷⁵ *Ethics*, 1103a24-26.

⁷⁶ *Ethics*, 1112a31-b9.

⁷⁷ *Ethics*, 1139a9.

too much precision about human matters, “matters of action” or those which pertain to “what is advantageous,” stating that they “have nothing stationary about them.”⁷⁸

Aristotle confirms this complexity in the *Politics* when he argues that neither individual human beings nor human households can be complete without the development of the city. The problem mentioned above of completing the household not only requires moral virtue for its solution, but also law: “just as man is the best of animals when completed, when separated from law and adjudication he is the worst of all.”⁷⁹ The “virtue of justice is a thing belonging to the city,” without which man is incomplete because of his potential for savagery.⁸⁰ This idea of natural completion may seem strangely evolutionary, but Aristotle provides a very simple argument for using such language: “everything is defined by its task and its power,” and if its tasks or powers change, we shouldn’t call it the same thing that it was, but “something similar.”⁸¹ Aristotle argues that the tasks of individuals and households change and become more complete with the development of the city. If it is the case that the tasks and powers that define individuals or households are possible only when they exist in the city, it is reasonable to say that they completely attain their natures only in the city. In some way, we are speaking only provisionally or derivatively when we reason about the individual or the household as a complete entity independent of the city. This means that there is ambiguity when we speak of nature in political things, because the completion that nature

⁷⁸ *Ethics*, 1104a4-5.

⁷⁹ *Politics*, 1253a31-32.

⁸⁰ *Politics*, 1253a36-38.

⁸¹ *Politics*, 1253a23-25.

strives for in this realm can be achieved only through human political actions and arrangements. This ambiguity is captured in Aristotle's enigmatic observation about the city: "Accordingly, there is in everyone by nature an impulse (*hormé*) toward this sort of partnership. And yet the one who first constituted [a city] is responsible for the greatest of goods."⁸² The city is an effect of both nature *and* human choice.

These reflections help us to recognize why Aristotle would adopt both the analytical and the organic method despite their imperfect correspondence. That Aristotle's argument that the city is by nature requires both approaches points to the complexity of the relation between nature and politics. On one hand, we understand the city as a natural being by considering it in terms of its end and its beginnings; on the other we can understand the highest and most distinct possibilities for political life only when we look to the city's uncompounded parts and the integrity with which they combine in its community. The fact that the organic model of the city on its own will not show political nature with the clarity that we might expect from it is a result of what is most distinctive in human nature—the natural freedom of human beings. We cannot look simply to the origins of the city and its development toward its end, as we can with other natural beings, in order to see the city's nature, because this will not do justice to human freedom. Nor can we look to the parts of the city alone to see its nature as a whole: the city as an end for human beings is more than a sum of parts. This complexity is contained in the statement that a human being is a political animal.

Therefore an accurate method of political inquiry must proceed with tentative caution when it makes claims about nature and human things. Even if the city provides

⁸² *Politics*, 1253a29-30.

completion to individual and household, Aristotle's intriguing references to the pre-political way of life of the Cyclops in the beginning of the *Politics* and the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* seem to suggest the possibility that the amelioration to life that the city brings could be ever hindered. In Book One of the *Politics*, Aristotle claims that Homer's description of the Cyclops' households, where "each acts as law to his children and wives," could stand as a description of the way that pre-political human beings lived "in ancient times."⁸³ However, he also ends the *Ethics* and points towards the investigations of the *Politics* by stating that in contemporary times in most places, individual men still "live as they please," arbitrarily ruling their families "as the Cyclops do."⁸⁴ We are reminded by the endurance of Cyclopean households that human beings' most animalistic passions endure as well, representing a permanent threat to civilized or political life. For this reason, when Aristotle speaks of the natures of political things, he sometimes refers to what is natural as the end, and at other times as the imperfect striving toward an end.

Consistent with this way of speaking, which reflects his understanding that human beings must be understood both in terms of their freedom to achieve their ends and in terms of those ends themselves, Aristotle speaks not only of households as parts of the city, but also of individuals, just when he draws conclusions about the priority of the city. He even goes out of his way to include himself: "the city is thus prior by nature to the household and to each of us," and "the city is...prior to each individual."⁸⁵ Even if the

⁸³ *Politics*, 1252b23-24.

⁸⁴ *Ethics*, 1180a26-30.

⁸⁵ *Politics*, 1252b20, 25-26.

city is prior to every human being as the end in which they may achieve their particular ends, Aristotle cautions us that we need to consider the individuals who compose it. That parts can be conceived as individuals as well as households indicates that individuals are not simply defined by their work or functions within households, and by the same token not simply by their belonging to a city, however much both households and cities are necessary for their developing their human capacities.

We might formulate Aristotle's position in this way: while the city is more than the sum of its parts, its parts are more than parts of a sum. It is in this context that Aristotle makes the analogy between a body and its parts, on one hand, and a city and its parts, on the other: the latter, like the former, are defined by their function within the whole, but "if the whole [body] is destroyed there will not be a foot or a hand, unless in the sense that the term is similar... but the thing itself will be defective."⁸⁶ This analogy obviously stumbles: it is the case that when the body of an animate being is destroyed, its foot or hand will no longer be a foot or hand in a full sense. However, when a city is destroyed, individuals are still (live) individuals, and may continue their striving for completion, perhaps by refounding, or by coming to belong to other cities. A hand does not have an independent soul, a human being does. Still, none of these observations refutes the observation that Aristotle proceeds to make: "One who is incapable of sharing or who is in need of nothing through being self-sufficient is no part of a city, and so is either a beast or a god."⁸⁷

⁸⁶ *Politics*, 1253a20-23.

⁸⁷ *Politics*, 1253a27-29.

Since human beings “admit of being otherwise,” belong both to households and cities, and exercise deliberation and choice, there is indeterminacy to political nature. In keeping with this indeterminacy, Aristotle maintains a constant interplay in his arguments in *The Politics* between the city as a whole and its parts. This interplay has a character that might be called dialectical: in some cases, the whole comes to our view in a defective way that can be corrected with the recognition of a truth that is clearer in the part, whereas in other cases the opposite holds. As discussed above, Aristotle adopts the principle that the city as a whole should be sought for first in its “smallest parts.”⁸⁸ At the same time, he insists that “one should look at the virtue of the part in relation to the virtue of the whole.”⁸⁹ We can make sense of these seemingly opposed methods of investigation if we recognize that the natures of human things that we are investigating—the individual human being, the household, and the political community—are sometimes striven for but imperfectly attained by the things that exist in the world around us. Our method of inquiry requires caution. Whether we seek to understand the nature of the individual, partial human association in abstraction from the whole city or the larger associations which constitute it, or we seek to understand the whole city in abstraction from its constituent members, what is imperfect or incomplete in either will readily mislead us. The task of understanding these political natures—both of individuals and their associations—which exist in Aristotle’s view along a continuum between an impulse towards a shared end and its perfect attainment—requires of political inquiry a

⁸⁸ *Politics*, 1252a18-22.

⁸⁹ *Politics*, 1260b14-15.

continuous turning between the truths which may be first grasped about the whole and those which are sooner revealed in its parts.

Aristotle's focus on the household in Book One of the *Politics* has already begun to come to light in Aristotle's claims that I have quoted in the discussion above. Such a focus makes sense in the context of a dialectical tension between political part and whole in Aristotle's method. Where one might expect any analytic account of politics to focus only on the political community as a whole and the individual human beings who are the particulars it is composed of, Aristotle finds more complexity. Instead of concluding that human beings are the only basic elementary parts of the city, he describes households too as elementary, despite their evident compound nature. The household is presented first as human beings' first community, arising directly from their "conjoining" for both reproduction and survival, in the development that leads organically to the city.⁹⁰ As stated previously, he emphasizes in this account that the city is "prior by nature" not only to each individual, but also "to the household."⁹¹ Moreover, the household is also identified as a critical political part in Aristotle's account of the diverse forms of rule that make up the city, when Aristotle describes every city as "composed of households."⁹² The implication of this focus upon the household is that an account of the political whole as composed of individuals is insufficient; to understand the city, one must consider the integrity of its smallest compound parts—households—as well.

⁹⁰ *Politics*, 1252b25-31.

⁹¹ *Politics*, 1252b30.

⁹² *Politics*, 1253b2.

So far, in order to clarify Aristotle's method, I have merely quoted these claims without yet discussing the arguments that lead to them, or showing how they establish the special significance of the household among the other forms of association that Aristotle considers in his account of the city's organic growth or the forms of rule that exist in the city. Further, I have not yet considered the parts—free or slave—that make up the household. I do these things at the start of Chapter Three.

In this section, I have shown that while Aristotle understands political life to be natural, this cannot be understood in a simple way. Even as he likens the city to other beings which come about according to more or less determinate rules of nature, he draws the reader's attention to the indeterminacy and freedom entailed in its development. Neither the city, the household, nor the human individual are predetermined, or "naturally one way." Rather, for them to develop well depends both on what is natural to them and on the direction they must take from human choice in the form of law and virtue. Aristotle shows that the individual, the household and the city are intrinsically linked as they strive to realize their natures more perfectly, and his respect for this fact is evident from his keeping each in view as he proceeds to investigate the political things. Within this framework, his consideration of nature as a principle that must be taken into account in humanity's economic tasks is complex and difficult, but prepares us to see the great significance of the household's role in political life.

Aristotle on the Arts of Acquisition

Aristotle presents an account of economic matters in Book One of the *Politics*, in Chapters Eight through Eleven.⁹³ This account is presented as a key starting point in the understanding of rule, the *polis* and political life that Aristotle will develop throughout the work. He begins the *Politics* with the claim that the *polis* is the most authoritative (*kuriotaton*⁹⁴) human partnership, whose end embraces those of the many other kinds of human association. He immediately contrasts his claim with reductive statements that other political thinkers have made: they have argued that the apparently different forms of authority involved in political rule, kingship, management of the private household (*oikos*) and mastery over slaves are really all the same; they have similarly ascribed a mistaken unity to the distinct arts which serve these kinds of authority. Aristotle maintains that these opinions belong to thinkers who are “not speaking nobly” (*ou kalōs legousin*), and he promises to show that they are not true. It is with a view to correcting these errors that Aristotle introduces the analytic method of understanding the city that I have described above, and as a major part of his argument against identifying these types of rule, he turns in Chapters Eight through Eleven to an investigation of one particular form of association—the household—and the expertise proper to managing it—the art of *oikonomikē*. Inasmuch as Aristotle identifies the household (in his organic account) as the elementary natural human community formed when individuals unite for the sake of preservation and reproduction and thus concerned with humanity's daily needs, the question of *oikonomikē* involves an inquiry into how human beings ought to provide for

⁹³ *Politics*, 1256a3

⁹⁴ Alternatively, most lordly or dominating, from *kurios*.

their basic physical necessities.⁹⁵ Although his inquiry bears a surface resemblance to modern economic analysis, the conclusions that Aristotle comes to about how human beings often err in pursuing these necessities are starkly opposed to the tenets of modern market economics.

In Chapter Eight, Aristotle explores the connection between *oikonomikē* and the acquisition of physical goods (*chrēmata*). He begins by distinguishing *oikonomikē* from *chrēmatistikē*, the art of getting goods; whereas *chrēmatistikē* is properly concerned with the *supply* of goods, *oikonomikē* is properly concerned with their *use* in the household.⁹⁶ He makes a simple argument that this distinction is clear: if household management is not concerned with use, “what is the expertise that uses the things in the household?” However, that the use of goods is essential to household management doesn’t preclude the supply of them from forming some part in it, and Aristotle proceeds to weigh this “matter of dispute.” He does so by turning to a consideration of whether some form of acquisitive art is consistent with nature.

The abrupt shift to arguments about what *naturally* occurs for human beings (as well as animals) requires explanation. The (unstated) logic for this shift can be drawn from his definition of the household as a community that comes to exist *by nature* to meet

⁹⁵ See *Politics*, 1252a26-1252b12.

⁹⁶ Aristotle is both creative and flexible in his usage of the term *chrēmatistikē*, as he gives it a very literal interpretation different from how it is typically understood, and stretches it to apply somewhat differently in different contexts. Several scholars have noted that Aristotle’s nominal definition, the art of getting goods (*chrēmata*), ignores an aspect of its meaning that most others *always* mean to imply by the term: its connection to money-making in particular. Although Aristotle treats money-making as one form of *chrēmatistikē*, his more general definition of the term allows it to be applied in these texts where Aristotle considers human ways of life that exclude money. However, this is not the only term he uses for acquisitive art. As I describe in this section, when he concludes that there is a natural art of acquisition consistent with *oikonomikē*, the term used is *ktētike*, which is derived from *ktēsis*, meaning acquisition or possession; he never claims that there is a natural form of *chrēmatistikē*, consistent with *oikonomikē*.

humanity's basic needs: If the household is natural, the art that guides it (and any subordinate arts) must be in accord with nature, and as he will subsequently clarify, this is not true of every kind of acquisitive art. Thus, the lengthy consideration of natural versus unnatural arts of acquisition that occupies the remainder of Chapter Eight and Chapter Nine is required in order to understand what, if any, arts of supplying goods would meet the condition of naturalness required for them to form a part of household management.⁹⁷

Aristotle proceeds by discussing the natural ways of life of animals—differentiated according to the diverse ways nature inclines them to find sustenance—and their parallels in primitive human livelihoods.⁹⁸ Aristotle says that animals' modes of life (*bioi*)—that is, whether they live in herds or scattered—follow their ways of providing nourishment (*trophēs*)—that is, their natures as carnivores, herbivores or omnivores.⁹⁹ By proceeding to link the lives of human beings, too, to the human modes of providing nourishment, Aristotle seems to emphasize how nature constrains and molds the human being along with every other animal.

This element of Chapter Eight, the linking of *bioi* with *trophēs*, is not unique, but rather it echoes the *History of Animals*, where Aristotle argues that animals' various activities and ways of life “differ according to their characters and nutrition.”¹⁰⁰ There, as

⁹⁷ That the nature question is raised here illustrates clearly that whatever etymological or genealogical debt modern economics may owe to Aristotle's analysis of *oikonomikē*, and despite a concern with human physical need common to both, the two arts are radically different.

⁹⁸ *Politics*, 1256a20-1256b.

⁹⁹ *Politics*, 1256a20.

¹⁰⁰ Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 588a18-19. In this dissertation, I cite English translations by the translators of the Loeb Editions of Aristotle's *History of Animals*. The volumes of this translation I refer to are Aristotle, *History of Animals, Volume I: Books 1-3*. Trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), and Aristotle, *History of Animals, Volume III: Books 7-10*. Trans. D. M. Balme (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). Hereafter cited as *History*.

he considers the spectrum of animal life rising from barely animate natures to highly intelligent ones, he argues that we can instructively divide all animals' lives into the acts of "the producing of young" and "those to do with food" because "these two objects in fact engage the efforts and lives of all animals."¹⁰¹ All sensitive animals "pursue their natural pleasure" in doing so, because for them "what is natural is pleasant."¹⁰² He notes how especially with respect to reproduction and rearing of offspring, animals with higher capacities derive greater pleasure from these tasks and thus their lives are arranged differently with respect to them:

Now some simply like plants accomplish their own reproduction according to the seasons; others take trouble as well to complete the nourishing of their young, but once that is accomplished they separate from them and have no further association; but those that have more understanding and possess some memory continue the association, and have a more social relationship with their offspring.¹⁰³

Earlier in the *History of Animals*, Aristotle has noted important features of the ways of life (*bioi*) and activities (*praxeis*) of the human being that set him apart from other animals: some animals are gregarious (*agelaia*) and others are solitary (*monadika*), but the human being is both (*epamphoterizein*); many animals have dispositions (*ethei*) that are like human ones (e.g. spirited, jealous, prudent), but only the human being is deliberative (*bouleutikon*); many animals have memory (*mneme*) and can receive instruction (*didaxis*), but the only one able to "recall past events at will (*anamimneskesthai*) [or recollect] is man."¹⁰⁴ The *History of Animals* provides an account

¹⁰¹ *History*, 588b3-12, 23-589a7.

¹⁰² *History*, 588b30-32, 589a8-9.

¹⁰³ *History*, 588b33-589a4.

¹⁰⁴ *History*, 487b35, 488a1-9, 488b12-28.

of human beings as animals who are at once bound, and liberated by, their natures. While nature sets them at a far remove from other animals by freeing them to direct themselves with respect to reproduction and nourishment, it also binds them like all animals to have their lives and souls shaped by the way they do so.

In fact, without explicitly emphasizing the point, Aristotle suggests in Chapter Eight that the freedom to pursue different kinds of livelihoods allows individual humans to differentiate themselves from each other even more than nature differentiates the “different kinds” of animals, such as carnivores and herbivores.¹⁰⁵ The different human livelihoods create different kinds of people: nomads eat from flocks or herds that they tame, and their way of life is idle except when their animals require new pastures; different kinds of “hunting” (piracy [*lēisteia*], fishing, and hunting for birds and beasts) result in different sorts of human being; and farming the land provides a livelihood for the most common kind of human being.¹⁰⁶ This division results in five primitive human types—nomadic herdsmen, farmers, pirates, fishers and hunters—whose nourishment comes from themselves (*autophutos*) rather than through trade.¹⁰⁷ Although Aristotle does not emphasize the freedom of those who undertake these ways of life to choose them, he does not treat them as if they are assigned by nature either. Instead, he notes that some humans find themselves compelled by a combination of need and pleasure to mix primitive livelihoods: “there are also some who live pleasantly by combining several of these in order to compensate for the shortcomings of one way of life, where it happens to

¹⁰⁵ *Politics*, 1256a27-30.

¹⁰⁶ *Politics*, 1256a30-40.

¹⁰⁷ *Politics*, 1256a42.

be lacking in sufficiency.”¹⁰⁸ When Aristotle speaks of need *and* considerations of pleasure combining to “compel” human beings towards a way of life, he seems to be playfully alluding to choice, for this is the “compulsion” according to which a deliberative animal combines the two.

Having drawn connections in this way between nature’s workings in both animals and humans to provide sustenance, Aristotle states that a form of possession or property (*toiautē ktēsis*) is provided by nature to both animals and human beings from birth and after they are completely grown. He draws an analogy between the way nature provides sustenance “after birth” to the young of some animals through larvae and eggs and to others through milk. Then he extends this analogy to mature human beings: if nature is following a single principle in these two cases of newly born animals, “one must suppose” that for full-grown beings, “plants exist for the sake of animals and that the other animals exist for the sake of human beings,” whether to provide humans with sustenance or clothing or other kinds of assistance. Evoking the general principle that “nature makes nothing that is incomplete or purposeless,” he concludes that nature must necessarily have made all of these for the sake of human beings.”

Obviously the approach Aristotle takes here and the conclusions he comes to thereby raise many questions. However, setting those aside for the moment, for the argument to have any plausibility, it is helpful to parse it out further than Aristotle does. The hierarchical statement about nature’s purposes for plants, animals and human beings, and especially the conclusion that nature made all flora and fauna for the sake of human beings, are surprising, and all too easily bring to mind something like the Creator’s

¹⁰⁸ *Politics*, 1256b8, 2-4.

commands in *Genesis* authorizing human beings to fill the earth and subdue it, and commending every living plant and creature to their use. It would be tempting for those familiar with Scripture to assume that for whatever purpose, Aristotle is entertaining a quasi-theological view of Nature as a divine, providential entity here. However, the statements in their own right don't promote this leap. The hierarchy Aristotle has laid out exists not to establish human dominion over earthly things ordained by a divine Nature, but to illustrate and defend the meaning of the claim that there is a human property in, or possession of, certain earthly things that exists by nature—namely. all those that contribute to human sustenance. Human beings acquire this property from nature itself. This admittedly strange idea of natural property is made comprehensible when Aristotle speaks of animal embryos and babies that acquire nourishment from sources that are undeniably provided for them by nature, that is, the eggs in which they are encased or milk with which they are nursed. Aristotle means his reader to see that an unhatched chick's relationship to the egg it resides in is a form of natural possession or acquisition that can be extended in a meaningful (if limited) way to the obviously less direct relationship between the animal predator and its natural prey, and the human nomad and his herd. Although this analogy is evidently limited, and suggests that nature provides nourishment to natural beings in a range of ways that require significantly different amounts of effort on the part of the different beings, such an example is fruitful if it helps us to think about how simple phenomena where nature is easily observed relate to the much more obscure phenomena presented by human nature.

It is true that when Aristotle proposes the supposition that plants and animals exist for the sake of human beings, he seems to go a step further than he does elsewhere in his

corpus. However, if teleology is truly a phenomenon, it is no doubt a complicated one, and it is not true that there is a consistent model of teleological explanation that applies to every other example Aristotle furnishes in his works. Unless we assume that there is only one valid or instructive way for his teleological explanations to be interpreted, we will wonder at the perspective from which this one might be valid or the purpose for making it, rather than dismissing it at once as inconsistent with Aristotelian thought. If Aristotle's teleological claims are to be taken seriously at all, it must be a very difficult philosophic question how the different natures of things in the cosmos are related to one another. At the very least, if it is true that human beings have a nature which points them toward their good, and if this nature equips them especially well for gaining nourishment flexibly from both plants and animals, then, if nature does nothing in vain (a principle Aristotle invokes many times throughout his corpus), it seems that they ought to consider both plants and animals as natural food.

If Aristotle's statements in this chapter are strange or easily misleading, there is yet good reason for hesitation before setting them aside as a somewhat ironic caricature of "Mother Nature." On one hand, it would be fairer to say that the account is both playful and perplexing on its surface than that it is calculated to mislead naïve readers into easy satisfaction with certain salutary teleological doctrines. Pangle himself describes how "queer" the surface is. In this connection, it is difficult to imagine how a yeoman reader might derive salutary humility about his respectable life as a farmer because it has been likened to piracy; would such a reader not be more likely to note how "uncivic" a way of life piracy is and condemn Aristotle for seeming to approve it? On the

other hand, as I have already shown, important aspects of the account given here are in accord with Aristotle's *History of Animals*.

It is also fruitful to consider the meaning of Aristotle's account in this chapter in relation to a very important argument in *The Parts of Animals*, where Aristotle claims that nature has provided a very special tool for the human being in the form of the hand. Here, Aristotle goes out of his way to correct the claim by Anaxagoras that the human being is the most intelligent animal because he has arms and hands, arguing that it is more "reasonable" to say "that it is because they are most intelligent that human beings are given hands."¹⁰⁹ This is true because "the hands are instruments, and nature, like an intelligent human being, always apportions each instrument to the one able to use it."¹¹⁰ As the "most intelligent animal," it is reasonable that the human being "would use the greatest number of instruments well, and the hand... is, as it were an instrument for instruments."¹¹¹ In this account, Aristotle is explicit in claiming that nature is furnishing human beings for developing arts: "to the one able to acquire the most arts, nature has provided the most useful of instruments, the hand."¹¹² Aristotle rejects here the view that nature has been niggardly toward man, while acknowledging that some have argued for it on the grounds that unlike other animals, the human being is naturally "barefoot, naked,

¹⁰⁹ Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, 687a7-10. In this dissertation, I cite the English translations by James Lennox, from Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, trans. James G. Lennox (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Hereafter cited as *Parts*.

¹¹⁰ *Parts*, 687a10-12.

¹¹¹ *Parts*, 687a18-20.

¹¹² *Parts*, 687a21-22.

and without weapons for defence.”¹¹³ This judgment fails to recognize that while other animals have only one form of protection and cannot exchange their natural armor or weapons, “for mankind it is always possible to have many forms of protection and to exchange them, and furthermore, he may choose what sort of weapon to have, and where.”¹¹⁴ He continues, “For the hand becomes a talon, claw, horn, spear, sword, and any other weapon or instrument—it will be all these thanks to its ability to grasp and hold them all. And for this the form of the hand has been adapted by nature.”¹¹⁵ In other words, nature provides human beings with the intelligence and flexible equipment to harvest food from plants and other animals. This is to confirm that the human being, as an intelligent animal, has been provided with a nature that, like that of other animals, fits him for subsistence, but unlike other animals, provides him with great latitude and ultimately, choice, in how to do so instead of making for him such direct and limiting provisions as nature does for other animals. If the best way to speak of nature’s provision for man is as “beneficence,” Aristotle suggests in the *Parts of Animals* that rather than beneficently caring for unequipped man with spontaneous food, nature beneficently equips man perpetually to find food that is not spontaneously available. Of course, this means that nature equips man, unlike animals, for arts.

Nonetheless, as I have already discussed, despite recognizing the great natural freedom of the human being, Aristotle does not attribute infinite flexibility to human nature. Of course, if there are kinds of possessions natural to human beings, they aren’t as

¹¹³ *Parts*, 687a23-25.

¹¹⁴ *Parts*, 687a26-27, 31-687b2.

¹¹⁵ *Parts*, 687b2-6.

determinative of human livelihoods or modes of life as those natural to lower beings are of theirs. However, by demonstrating essential ties between human acquisition and the natural nourishment of less intelligent animals, Aristotle has prepared the ground for his reader to accept that it is inadequate to consider the human arts of acquisition without reference to the natural ends of the human being. This is the case insofar as each human being, though freer than any other animal, still has a mode of life that follows the way he or she acquires food and other necessities. If some modes of life are inconsistent with the natural human good, arts of acquisition that result in such modes of life are ultimately harmful to the human being. On the other hand, in this chapter Aristotle has defended the principle that there exist natural arts of acquisition consistent with the good of human beings.

Therefore, not only has he shown that there are natural human modes of acquisition—and therefore some art of acquisition consistent with the naturalness of the household, which needs to acquire things—but also that this art is “by nature a part of household management,” since the household is the first human community where men and women work together to provide nourishment to themselves and their young and where natural masters rule over natural slaves, if nature “fulfills its intention,” for the sake of the preservation of each. He concludes that this art must “either be available or be supplied” to household management, and applying his central claim that the human good is political, he defines it as “the art of acquiring those goods a store of which is both necessary for life and useful for the community of a city or household.”¹¹⁶ Of course, this definition draws the reader’s attention to the fact that whereas Aristotle has been

¹¹⁶ *Politics*, 1256b29-30.

considering acquisitive decisions as the special responsibility of the household, the political community as a whole (through the regime) might contend for this responsibility. At this point in his argument, it is crucial to remember the fact that he is assigning the primary economic role to the former; I will address the significance of this fact in the next chapter, especially in my analysis of Aristotle's arguments in Book Two.

Finally, the crucial consequence that Aristotle draws from his account of natural human possessions before turning to a consideration of unnatural arts of acquisition is that natural human wealth has limits. Here, he denies Solon's poetic claim that "of wealth no boundary lies revealed to man."¹¹⁷ Aristotle asserts that natural acquisition (*ktētikē*) aims at "true wealth" (*alēthinos ploutos*), that is, the sum of those things necessary and useful to the *oikos* and *polis*.¹¹⁸ He says this is a limited sum inasmuch as human beings need a definite quantity of goods (not an infinite one) to achieve sufficiency (*to autarches einai*) in property "with a view to the good life."¹¹⁹ Aristotle notes here that real wealth relates instrumentally to the art of household management (since it amounts to "the aggregate of instruments belonging to household managers and political rulers"), and that "no art ... has an instrument that is without limit either in number or in size."¹²⁰ Thus, although he hasn't yet fully defended these positions, Aristotle ends Chapter Eight with the assertions that human wealth in accord with nature must be limited both because it stands to household management as an instrument and because what is sufficient for the

¹¹⁷ *Politics*, 1256b34.

¹¹⁸ *Politics*, 1256b27-31.

¹¹⁹ *Politics*, 1256b32.

¹²⁰ *Politics*, 1256b35-37.

good life of human beings is a limit in physical goods. Pangle criticizes this notion that wealth should be conceived of as tools rather than “a wonderfully (or horribly) flexible artificial material, whose value lies precisely in the fact that it gives” human beings “a power” independent of its specific function.¹²¹ However, such a power could be wealth’s value only if human beings were not natural beings with natural ends. Aristotle teaches that human beings not only have memory, but also power over their memory. This allows them to forget things that other animals cannot. It is easy for animals with so much freedom as humans have to forget that they are animals at all. Aristotle emphasizes in Chapter Eight the constraints of human nature while subtly confirming its freedom, because acquisition is a matter in which man, like any animal, will come up against the limits of his nature, but unlike any other animal, is likely to forget them. In other words, while recognizing human artfulness, Aristotle appeals to the limitations of human nature to deny that the limitless pursuit of goods is consistent with correct economic management of the household, and by extension, the city.

Aristotle’s main account of how exchange and money work in the *Politics* is given in Chapter Nine. It begins with the note that the bounded *ktētikē*, which naturally belongs in the household, is easily confused with a similar art that people “particularly... and justifiably” call *chrēmatistikē*, which pursues unlimited goods and wealth.¹²² Unlike the natural art he has condoned, this one “arises through a certain experience and art” that aims at maximizing profits, and it becomes a possibility only with the creation of

¹²¹ Pangle, 55.

¹²² *Politics*, 1256b40-41.

money.¹²³ Here, Aristotle sketches out a conjectural account of how money developed as a medium of exchange: it naturally happens that people have a surplus of certain necessities and a lack of others, and this being so, a system of barter naturally arises in a human community. This bestows on any possession a use apart from its natural one—its use in exchange. Aristotle argues that the direct system of exchange that developed between people to rectify their surpluses and deficits in necessary goods was a natural form of trade. However, as exchange began to develop between foreigners, the limitations in portability of goods led to a new innovation: people entered into compacts to exchange “iron and silver” in the place of less portable goods because these valuable metals had the advantage of being portable and useful in more “flexible” ways than most other goods. Soon, coinage was instituted by agreement to replace the need to measure out the metal for exchange, and a stock of money came to be. Now an unnatural new expertise developed: an art of commerce dedicated to “discerning what and how to trade in order to make the greatest profit.” This expertise, unbounded *chrēmatistikē*, is “unnecessary” because it aims at the production of wealth with a view to profit simply, instead of aiming to provide needed wealth, the stuff required for the good life of the household (or city).

Aristotle provides a number of arguments against unbounded *chrēmatistikē*. The first arises from the fact that currency’s value is no longer based on the usefulness of the metallic substance coined, but rather is now wholly derived from human agreements. He observes that since money is now merely a product of convention, if something undermined the human compact giving it value, it would be possible to have great wealth and yet starve to death. He notes that this absurdity is colorfully personified by “the

¹²³ *Politics*, 1257a5.

Midas of the fable,” a legendary Phrygian king who lost his ability to eat after he was granted his desire that everything he touched would turn to gold. A second problem is that unbounded acquisition cannot be integrated into *oikonomikē* because it seeks profit as an unlimited end, while *oikonomikē*, like the art of medicine, requires limited means in order to pursue its proper end; Aristotle suggests that this dangerous *chrēmatistikē* would inevitably change the function of a household from sustenance to profit-seeking. He also argues that in the lives of individuals, pursuit of unlimited wealth is inconsistent with orientation towards living well and tends to result in the pursuit of bodily enjoyments rather than the pursuit of higher, non-physical goods. And in a society devoted to money-making, profit becomes like an “end [that] everything else ha[s] to march toward.”¹²⁴ By way of illustration, Aristotle mentions here that courage, military art and medical art can all be used as forms of money-making in opposition to their proper ends. In each of these problems, money is revealed to have an almost infinite flexibility to impose upon and transform the ends beyond itself which it was created to serve. In other words, money is an unlimited instrument whose acquisition can do great damage by altering human modes of life in such a way that it limits the ends available to the human beings living them. Aristotle concludes that unlimited *chrēmatistikē* does not have a place in *oikonomikē*.

While Pangle is correct in seeing that the problems posed by scarcity of resources are acknowledged by the account of the development of money in this chapter much more than it was implied in the previous one, it is not clear that there is as much rupture between their emphases as he suggests. As I have argued above, Chapter Eight does not appear to be a simple apology for the naïve view that nature spontaneously provides

¹²⁴ *Politics*, 1258a18.

goods for humanity with maternal bounty. Neither does the account of money's corrupting influence in Chapter Nine attribute the danger of greed primarily to the fact of scarcity. Aristotle's account of the problems money poses highlights its nearly infinite flexibility rather than an infinity of need that it seems to satisfy. An infinitely flexible means is dangerous regardless of the extent of human needs, because it suggests to human beings that they need not concern themselves with ends at all. The story of King Midas is not the story of a man whose insatiable prayer was for necessary things like food or drink, but for an unnecessary kind of enjoyment.¹²⁵ The moment in the myth that has shocked people from Aristotle's time to our own is not the king's food and drink turning to gold, but his own daughter doing so, because it is here that the conflict between the preciousness of the thing he sought and the thing he forgot to protect is most acute. The myth of Midas is powerful because the preciousness of money so readily defeats wisdom and self-control, not only for those who experience need, but for human beings in general. Regardless of their needs, the pursuit of this seemingly unlimited good easily warps human desires, whether they be for necessary things or for pleasure, so that luxury, comfort and bodily enjoyment crowd out human striving for the things that constitute true human happiness. Aristotle's account emphasizes how this diminishes the *polis* as well as the individual, replacing virtue in the tasks that are essential to political participation with economic calculations and transactions. The problem of greed is not simply grounded in human beings' natural neediness and vulnerability, but also in their natural freedom to forget about their limitations and restructure their lives around new ends that alienate

¹²⁵ c.f. *Politics*, 1267a3-6.

them from their natural good. Thus the considerations of Chapter Nine flow from and complete the considerations of Chapter Eight, rather than contradicting them.

In Chapter Ten, Aristotle adds a rebuke of usury to his economic judgments. The form of *chrēmatistikē* that is most opposed to nature and “most reasonably hated” is that which “involves taking from others”: usury.¹²⁶ This art derives profit from “money itself and not from that for which it was supplied” by assigning value to monetary interest.¹²⁷ Interest, as “money born of money,” is completely disconnected from the end of sustenance which defines “genuine wealth.” Here, the cleavage between Aristotle’s economic teaching and modern economics is acute.

As we have seen, Aristotle seems to qualify his stringent criticism of money-making in the next chapter (Chapter Eleven) when he discusses methods for households and cities to maximize profits.¹²⁸ However, when Aristotle advocates the utility of money-making and monopolistic schemes, he calls them “useful” for “those who honor the art of getting goods” as well as for the sort of “political rulers” who “are concerned only with these matters.”¹²⁹ That is, the utility of such acquisitive schemes exists precisely for those whom greed has infected, which should give us little confidence in endorsing moderated forms of such scheming. His warning against usury stands, insofar as it is rooted in the unjust character of “taking from others.” On the other hand, rather than understanding Aristotle’s “volte-face” as a somewhat tragic concession that practice

¹²⁶ *Politics*, 1258b2-7.

¹²⁷ *Politics*, 1258b6.

¹²⁸ *Politics*, 1258b40-1259a6, 1259a35.

¹²⁹ *Politics*, 1259a5, 34-35.

can never live up to what is good in theory, it is possible that his recommendations anticipate the elevating effect that Aristotle understands the household and ultimately political communities can have on human life. Specifically, the education in virtue, especially moderation and liberality, checks the destabilizing and re-orienting effects of greed. Well-ordered family life and the habituation in virtues of liberality and moderation may provide human beings with the moral equipment they need to engage in less natural forms of *chrēmatistikē* without losing sight of the higher things they should be serious about. If this is true, even while cautioning that some forms of acquisition remain “contrary to nature” and therefore corrupting, Aristotle may be leaving more space than he makes explicit for the cultivation of these acquisitive modes.

In the next chapter, I elaborate on Aristotle’s presentation of the household in Book One, discussing the household as an intermediate political association, including the household’s transcending of the despotic relation of master to slave, as well as the place of the village in the genealogical development of the city. I then turn to Aristotle’s arguments in Books Two, Three and Four about the family and its proper relationship to the regime and the whole political community. I show that in these Books, Aristotle affirms an essential political function for the family in creating and sustaining the virtues that the *polis* depends on, and building the unity that a true common good for the city requires.

CHAPTER THREE

The Political Contribution of Aristotle's *Oikonomikē*: Beyond "Economics"

In this chapter, I take up Aristotle's treatment of the household throughout Books I through IV of the *Politics*, in order to show that the family within it holds critical importance in Aristotle's understanding of what it means to live well within the political community. In the first section, I argue that Aristotle presents the household as the necessary intermediate association where individuals first manifest some of the defining features of political life, in contrast to any despotic relation of master to slave. In the next, in which I discuss Aristotle's criticism of the community of women, children, and property which does away with the private household in Plato's *Republic*, I show how Aristotle identifies the household both as a chief source of the affection that brings about union in the *polis* and as a viable model for a political common good that goes beyond mere cooperation between individuals pursuing their separate interests. Where Socrates is blamed for compromising political life by intentionally legislating the family away in his city in speech, Aristotle also turns in Book Two to a critique of Sparta for compromising it unintentionally. As I discuss next, Aristotle argues that Lycurgus undermined the Spartan *polis* by adopting martial legislation in the regime that failed to include women and ruined the household by neglecting it.

In Book Three of the *Politics*, after defining the citizen and offering a classification of regimes, Aristotle turns again to the household. His focus is now on the city and political life, but by turning back to the household, which he first treated as a forerunner of the full political community, he seems to indicate that politics has not—and

cannot—leave the household behind. It remains part of the city; in this it is unlike the village, which as a stage in the development of the city, seems by now to have been eclipsed. In effect, Aristotle is reminding us not to make the mistakes of either the civic founders in the *Republic* or of Lycurgus in Sparta.¹ In fact, his treatment of the household in Book Three serves as a highpoint both for the book and for the household, revealing that the latter has a pivotal place in humanity’s flourishing, and is an essential source of the “intentional choice” which unites a city in “a complete and self-sufficient life.”² The familial household is not merely the most favorable association for the task of moderating avaricious desire, and thus a potential antidote to the corruption with which this distorting desire threatens political and moral life. The family is also revealed to be a source for the positive goods that political and moral life hold for human beings. In the conclusion of this chapter, I elaborate the view of the family as an antidote to greed and discuss the positive implications Aristotle’s treatment of the family holds for human life.

The Household as an Intermediate Political Association

As I have argued above, the nature of the city as a whole depends on human freedom, and therefore cannot be recognized with the precision one would expect of those natural beings that lack freedom. Therefore, to understand or deliberate about the city, one must find some way to approach it that is cognizant of this freedom. As I shall show

¹ It has been argued persuasively by Leo Strauss and many others that Plato did not intend for the city in speech to serve as a blueprint for actual cities, but used it instead to teach about the nature of the city and the limits of politics. See, for example, Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978). In this dissertation, I focus on what the criticisms of the *Republic*’s city that Aristotle expresses reveal about his own political thought. For discussion of this question, see Mary Nichols, *Citizens and Statesmen* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 41-42.

² *Politics*, 1280b38-1281a1

below, in Aristotle's treatment of the household, such an alternative is provided. Although it is only a partial community, the household shares the character of the political whole in certain crucial ways: it includes diverse forms of rule over those who are free and over members who differ in kind; it is also a site of deliberative speech about the just; and it provides the essential domain for the exercise of the very virtues—liberality and sexual moderation—that elevate human beings above pre-political savagery. The family within the household is also central in achieving the affection (*philia*) that makes the community of the city possible. Although the household may be impeded from fully attaining these goods when it is outside of a good regime, Aristotle speaks as if they naturally get their start within the familial association.

The household is a major focus of Book One, and as I have outlined above, it is shown there to be an elementary constituent part of the city. It is introduced as the first community which arises out of diverse “persons who cannot exist without one another.”³ These persons are the male and female, and the naturally ruling and ruled (i.e., master and slave); these pairs come together in response to natural urges for reproduction (“a natural striving to leave behind another that is like itself”) and preservation, respectively, into “two communities” uniting in a single household.⁴ The household, where the daily needs of human beings are met, eventually extends itself into a village, a collection of households existing “for the sake of nondaily needs.”⁵ From several villages, arises the complete community, the city, where on one hand, the “self-sufficiency” sought by

³ *Politics*, 1252a26-27.

⁴ *Politics*, 1252b10, 1252a27-35.

⁵ *Politics*, 1252b12-16.

human persons who could not exist alone is attained in a common life, and on the other hand, a new purpose supervenes—that of “living well,” rather than mere “living.”⁶ In this movement, the household appears to hold a more critical significance than the village. Even though the latter is dedicated to fulfilling different needs (i.e. nondaily ones) than the household, Aristotle does not attribute new shared purposes beyond preservation or reproduction to these nondaily needs. Moreover, he suggests that villages come to be as natural outgrowths of the familial connections in the household, calling the village “above all an extension” of the household.⁷ He says that this is the case insofar as “kinship” unites members of the original villages and brings them together under the same form of patriarchal kingly rule that he attributes to the primitive household: “every household is under the eldest as king,” so villages were, too.⁸ Thus, Aristotle’s account of the development of the city from its elemental parts privileges the primitive household as the first integral union between human beings.

However, Aristotle’s treatment of the relationship between household and village in this organic account of the city confirms the difficulties with this account that I identified in the previous chapter. As we have seen, as a completion of what was sought by primitive households and villages, the city transforms human life (from seeking mere survival to seeking living well). So, taking this account as a strict natural account, we would expect these associations to vanish.⁹ In one sense, as I explore below, the

⁶ *Politics*, 1252b28-30.

⁷ *Politics*, 1252b17.

⁸ *Politics*, 1252b20-22.

⁹ In the notes to his translation of the *Politics*, Joe Sachs points out that if, as Aristotle argues in the *Physics*, the nature of a growing thing is disclosed by the form into which it grows rather than the materials that go into it, “the beaten path of an imaginary genesis of a city was only a scaffolding” that can “be

differences between the household that Aristotle describes throughout the remainder of Book One and the pre-political household support this expectation. As I show below, in the final chapters of Book One, Aristotle says that heads of households rule over their wives in political rather than kingly fashion.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Aristotle's consideration of household management throughout Book One confirms that the essential functions of reproduction and sustenance that brought pre-political households together continue to define households within the city. By contrast, the village seems to disappear from view much more dramatically in Chapter Two, and when Aristotle confirms a relationship between household and completed city at the end of the chapter, he says nothing about villages. The reason for this silence may be to point us to a failure in his very genealogy of the city. As we have seen, Aristotle argues that the village extends the household in part by extending its rule by patriarchal kings. In fact, he gives this as a reason why cities were "at first" ruled by patriarchal kings as well.¹¹ However, he quietly reveals that the inevitable transformation from villages to political communities hasn't been completed everywhere: "nations are even now" ruled in this way!¹² This means that if primitive villages were extensions of patriarchal rule, they slipped out of Aristotle's discussion without slipping out of existence, for we will find them in nations that still exist, where natural growth into the city has apparently stalled or gone haywire. If subtle, Aristotle's suggestion is yet unmistakable, that the city's coming to be is not inevitable; it must be

kicked away [a]t the threshold of self-sufficiency." Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Indianapolis: Focus Publishing, 2012), __.

¹⁰ *Politics*, 1259b1.

¹¹ *Politics*, 1252b19.

¹² *Politics*, 1252b20.

striven for and can be missed. Aristotle's treatment of nations later in the *Politics* suggests that the type of kingly rule in them is not merely a result of their barbarism or stalled development, but also their intentions—formulated through customs and laws—to dominate their neighbors and aggrandize themselves.¹³ In this way, even as Aristotle presents his organic genealogy of the city, he subtly reveals its inadequate accounting for human choice in political foundings.

However, even before Aristotle has left behind his genealogy of the city, he presents the household as the middle term in the argument that man is political by nature, for this is first inferred from the fact that the household, being the original human community, is directed towards the end of the city. It is in giving supplementary support for the argument that man is naturally political that Aristotle first signals the household's special political significance. He presents speech as a species-making difference of man over animals, for the latter are capable of perceiving and communicating about “the painful and pleasant” through their voices, but only the former can perceive and express “good and bad and just and unjust.”¹⁴ This is done through speech, which “serves to reveal the advantageous and the harmful, and hence also the just and the unjust.”¹⁵ Needless to say, such deliberating speech is essentially political. However, Aristotle does not attribute it only to the city, but rather states that “partnership in these things is what makes *a household* and a city.”¹⁶ From this it is clear that the household is a crucial

¹³ Consider, for example *Politics*, 1285b29-34 and 1324b2-8, 10-13.

¹⁴ *Politics*, 1253a8-16.

¹⁵ *Politics*, 1253a15.

¹⁶ *Politics*, 1253a17. Emphasis my own.

intermediate political partnership. Its primacy becomes increasingly evident in Book Two—where the destruction of households is Aristotle’s overwhelming objection to the *Republic*’s city in speech—and Book Three—where the household is held up as the pre-eminent model for just rule, and as a major cause of the good life in the city, as I discuss below.

Before we can take up the quasi-political character of the household, it is important to identify which parts of it bear this character. On one hand, there are husband, wife and offspring, and on the other, slave and master. From which could it be said to derive something like a political character? We might suppose the latter, but as we have already seen, Aristotle rejects the idea that political rule is the same as mastery from the very start of the *Politics*. It is not mastery and slavery in the household that gives it in Aristotle’s view its political character. From the beginning, Aristotle associates slavery with barbarism in contrast to the reproductive pairing of male and female.¹⁷

Moreover, Aristotle’s investigation of the question of whether slavery is truly natural leads to conclusions which put this association in an exceedingly problematic light. A free man would have to be as different from a natural slave “as the soul from the body.”¹⁸ The difficulty may be foreshadowed when Aristotle first illustrates the claim that the household is a combination of marital and slave associations with an appeal to a verse by Hesiod: “first a house, and a woman, and ox for ploughing.”¹⁹ Aristotle explains that “poor persons have an ox instead of a servant,” thereby substituting a brute beast for the

¹⁷ *Politics*, 1252b8.

¹⁸ *Politics*, 1254b16.

¹⁹ *Politics*, 1252b11.

slave. That is, in the households of the poor, the partnership concerned with providing sustenance between naturally ruling and ruled is fulfilled with a relationship between human beings and livestock!

In any case, the parts of the household reduce to “slaves and free persons.”²⁰ At stake in the question of whether slavery is by nature is the question of whether “mastery is a kind of science,” and ultimately reducible to the same thing as all other forms of rule: household management (*oikonomikē*), political rule (*politikē*) and kingly rule (*basileutikē*).²¹ The conclusion that follows from the discussion is that “mastery and political [rule] are not the same thing and that all the sorts of rule are not the same as one another.”²² At this juncture, monarchic and political rule are not clearly differentiated, but both involve rule over the free.²³ If political speech arises in the household, the natural slave’s participation in it must be severely hampered by the fact that he “participates in reason only to the extent of perceiving it, but does not have it.”²⁴ Of course, if the slave is not so hampered, he is not a natural slave, and his enslavement is unjust. Once again, slavery within the household could not be a source of political rule, in Aristotle’s sense, since sheer force would underlie it. Another barrier to ascribing truly political relations to master and natural slave exists in the fact that the slave is in effect “a sort of part of the

²⁰ *Politics*, 1253b5.

²¹ *Politics*, 1253b17-20.

²² *Politics*, 1255b17-18.

²³ *Politics*, 1255b18.

²⁴ *Politics*, 1254b23.

master—a part of his body, as it were, animate yet separate.”²⁵ The impossibility of slaves attaining to political participation is confirmed in Book Three: there could neither be “a city of slaves or of animals,” for “they do not share in happiness or in living in accordance with intentional choice.”²⁶ Therefore, we must turn to the relations between the household’s free members—male, female, and children—to find some species of political partnership.

Aristotle’s allusion to Hesiod and the fact that an ox might provide the “naturally ruled” that must work to serve the “naturally ruling” in a household suggests that the household dependent on human slavery as an intermediate association on the way to politics is still greatly imperfect in its own right. The household dependent on slavery must incorporate both despotic natural ruling and being ruled *and* political and kingly rule (as I discuss below). For it requires the heads of households to be both masters on one hand and husbands and fathers on the other. However, Aristotle has encouraged human beings to think cautiously about how the way they live with respect to necessary matters affects their freedom to live well. The question of consistency is raised yet again by slavery in the household: can a despotic type, fit by nature and habit to rule slaves, also acquire the habits to be a good husband or father?

As Aristotle’s dialectic proceeds, the relationship described between man and woman progresses from great disparity towards a unique “political” complementarity. As I have described above, at the outset of Book One, there is an emphasis on the inequality between the sexes: “the relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to

²⁵ *Politics*, 1255b9-11.

²⁶ *Politics*, 1280a32-36.

inferior and ruler to ruled.”²⁷ Although it is a sign of barbarism to treat females as if they are slaves, husbands are initially said to direct their households monarchically—“every household is run by one alone”—which distinguishes household management from political rule, which “is over free and equal persons.”²⁸ When Aristotle gives an account of the inequality between man and woman at the end of Book One, he attributes it to the difference in the way that “the element having reason” and “the irrational element [of their souls]... are present” in them.²⁹ Woman, like man, has “the deliberative element,” but unlike his, hers is “without authority” (*akuron*).³⁰

There is some ambiguity in how this lack of authority is to be understood, however, since Aristotle likens the male/female difference in this regard to their difference in virtues, which is not according to degree but in relation to differing functions.³¹ In fact, by the end of Book One, Aristotle has problematized the view that there is simple superiority of the male over the female. Even though the male is “more skilled at leading than the female,” his rule over her is not kingly, but rather, a form of

²⁷ *Politics*, 1254b12.

²⁸ *Politics*, 1252b5, 1255b18-20.

²⁹ *Politics*, 1260a8-11.

³⁰ *Politics*, 1260a12-13. In their studies of Aristotle’s treatment of the differences between women and men, both Mary Nichols and Arlene Saxonhouse note that the meaning of this phrase is ambiguous and that Aristotle does not clarify whether he means that female deliberation lacks authority within the woman’s soul itself or merely lacks authority with others, especially men. Nichols goes yet further, arguing that even if Aristotle means that female deliberation lacks authority over the passions, this may suggest as much criticism of the male soul as the female. She notes that insofar as Aristotle argues at 1254b4-6 that the mind should rule the appetite politically, masculine souls where appetites have too little authority may be as flawed as feminine ones where they have too much. See Mary Nichols, *Citizens and Statesmen* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 31-32; Arlene Saxonhouse, *Women in the History of Western Political Thought* (New York: Praeger, 1985), 74.

³¹ *Politics*, 1260a15-16.

political rule—the rule that occurs when ruler and ruled “tend by their nature to be on an equal footing and to differ in nothing.”³² Of course, it too is an imperfect model of political rule in the city, insofar as it doesn’t feature the “alternation of ruler and ruled” which typically results from this equality. However, Aristotle suggests that the persistence of the man’s rule over his wife is supported by *contrived* differences—those of “external appearance, forms of address, and prerogatives, as in the story Amasis told about his footpan.”³³ Aristotle noted a mutability in the natural relations between men and women when he discussed the transformation worked by law and justice that changed the unintended reproductive urges that first brought them together—often violently³⁴—into something elevating them above other animals. For example, the apparent disagreement between the early claim that man’s rule over his family members is purely monarchic, and the later claim that his rule over the female is political, can be accounted for if we take Aristotle to be mirroring this mutability through the development of his dialectic.

Ultimately, Aristotle argues that although male and female virtues differ according to the “function” of each sex, they both must have a share in virtue.³⁵ Thus “the moderation of a woman and a man is not the same, nor the courage or justice, as Socrates supposed, but there is a ruling and a serving courage, and similarly with the other virtues.”³⁶ These passages suggest that male and female relations differ more according to

³² *Politics*, 1259a43, 1259b7-9.

³³ *Politics*, 1259b5-10.

³⁴ *Politics*, 1252a27-30.

³⁵ *Politics*, 1260a15.

³⁶ *Politics*, 1260a21-23.

their respective functions in the household than according to their natural inequalities. And when the question of their proper virtues is raised again in Book Three (“a man would be held a coward if he were as courageous as a courageous woman, and a woman talkative if she were as modest as the good man”), it is tied to the different complementary roles that they have in household management: “it is the work of the man to acquire and of the woman to protect.”³⁷ The first book ends by emphasizing the importance of the education of women and children to both the excellence of the household *and* of the political community:

Since the household as a whole is a part of the city... both children and women must necessarily be educated looking to the regime, at least if it makes any difference with a view to the city’s being excellent that both its children and its women are excellent. But it necessarily makes a difference: women are a part amounting to a half of the free persons, and from the children come those who are partners in the regime.³⁸

If this warning not to neglect or compromise the care of more than half of city’s persons that is bound up with the household seems to go without saying, some of Aristotle’s most serious and striking criticisms of theoretical and historic regimes in Book Two reveal that it is a persistent temptation of political thinkers and actors to neglect it.

In Book Two, Aristotle focuses on the family in his criticism of Plato’s *Republic* and the Spartan regime. In Book Three, Aristotle clarifies how the relationship between man and woman is elevated from its animal origins by its presence in the city: when men and women “inhabit one and the same location and make use of intermarriage,” marriage can be a “work of friendship (*philia*),” and “friendship is the intentional choice of living

³⁷ *Politics*, 1277b22-25.

³⁸ *Politics*, 1260a12-19.

together.”³⁹ These successive developments in Aristotle’s discussion of the marital relationship reveal a dialectical progress that mirrors the development of the political community from its primitive origins. In the next section, I turn to these steps in Aristotle’s treatment of the family.

Lessons about the Household that Aristotle Takes from Plato’s Republic

The essential contributions of the household to the political whole are revealed in the course of Aristotle’s critique in Book Two of Socrates’ city in speech from *The Republic*, where Aristotle comes closest to making good on his promise from Book One to address “husband and wife and children and father and the sort of virtue that is connected with each of these, and what is and what is not fine in their relations with one another and how one should pursue what is good and avoid the bad.”⁴⁰ Book Two opens with “the natural beginning” for an investigation into what constitutes a “fine condition” of political community.⁴¹ This beginning is the question about how much ought to be shared in the lives of citizens of a political regime: “Of the things that can be held in common, is it better for the city that is going to be finely administered to hold all in common, or is it better to hold some in common but not in others?”⁴² This question is really about how the well-ordered city as a whole relates to the parts of the household: “It is possible for the citizens to hold children and women and property in common, as in the *Republic* of Plato.... Which is better, then, the condition that exists now or one based on

³⁹ *Politics*, 1280b38-39.

⁴⁰ *Politics*, 1260b8-12.

⁴¹ *Politics*, 1260b25-36.

⁴² *Politics*, 1261a1-3.

the law that is described in the *Republic*?”⁴³ Although Aristotle considers diverse aspects of the laws and arrangements in Socrates’ city in speech, his concern with the proper relationship between regime and household is his central focus.

Aristotle’s criticisms of the city in speech revolve around the problems in the partnership of the whole that result from establishing participation in the family on a communal basis. He first attacks the incoherence of a political whole that has been planned without due attention to the condition of its constituent parts. In fact, this incoherence can be reduced to the fact that the household has been completely done away with. Aristotle argues that by making women common to all, Socrates achieves a false unity in the city: “It is evident that as it becomes increasingly one it will no longer be a city. For the city is in its nature a sort of multitude, and as it becomes more a unity it will be a household instead of a city, and then a human being instead of a household.”⁴⁴ Moreover, the city’s self-sufficiency requires a multitude: “a household is more self-sufficient than one person, and a city than a household,” since multiple contributions are needed for self-sufficiency. As Aristotle says, “a city tends to come into being at the point when the partnership formed by a multitude is self-sufficient.”⁴⁵

A second major criticism is that Socrates’ intention to have “all say ‘mine’ and ‘not mine’ at the same time” is neither possible nor desirable.⁴⁶ Those who have wives, children and property in common do not have an individual stake in them and will accord

⁴³ *Politics*, 1261a4-9.

⁴⁴ *Politics*, 1261a15-18.

⁴⁵ *Politics*, 1261b12-16.

⁴⁶ *Politics*, 1261b19.

them “the least care.”⁴⁷ If we share all of these things, we are most likely to simply say “not mine” of them. Moreover, the kinship that arises in a city composed of households is what allows for meaningful shared relations: “The same person is addressed as a son by one, by another as a brother, by another as a cousin, or according to some other sort of kinship, whether of blood or of relation and connection by marriage... It is better, indeed, to have a cousin of one’s own than a son in the sense indicated.”⁴⁸ A truly united community is built like a web from the private relationships and natural sense of ownership that tie the individuals within it to their own relatives and from thence to each other.

A third objection to the community of wives and children is that it compromises the things that are “holy.” That is, impieties such as “outrages or involuntary homicides, for example, or voluntary homicides, assaults, or verbal abuses” of “fathers, mothers, or those not distant in kinship” cannot be easily avoided or expiated for, and the possibility of incest is ignored because the laws restricting sexual intercourse consider only whether “the pleasure involved is too strong.”⁴⁹

What all of these criticisms suggest is that a law that makes families communal effects “the very opposite of what correctly enacted laws ought properly to cause.”⁵⁰ Aristotle states that “we suppose,” and Socrates himself “asserts,” that affection (*philia*) is what makes a city one by freeing it from “factional conflict.” Therefore, affection is

⁴⁷ *Politics*, 1261b24-1262a1.

⁴⁸ *Politics*, 1262a13-14.

⁴⁹ *Politics*, 1262a25-40.

⁵⁰ *Politics*, 1262b2-5.

“the greatest of good things for cities.” However, communal partnership in wives and children dilutes affection, “just as adding much water to a small amount of wine.” Affection cannot bring a city together when the integrity of families is destroyed. Aristotle finds the grounds for this truth in human nature: “There are two things above all which make human beings cherish and feel affection, what is one’s own (*to idion*) [that is, what is private or peculiar to oneself] and what is dear; and neither of these can be available to those who govern themselves in [the] way [of the *Republic*].” Here the contribution of familial association to the political whole is recognized through consideration of its smallest part—the individual. Similar arguments condemn the community of property in the city in speech. Ultimately, Aristotle finds Socrates’ proposals objectionable because “both the household and the city should be one in a sense, but not in every sense. On one hand, as the city proceeds [in this direction], it will at some point cease to be a city; on the other hand, while remaining a city, it will be a worse city the closer it comes to not being a city.” It is “just as if one were to reduce a consonance to unison, or a meter to a single foot.” Socrates is wrong to destroy the guardians’ happiness in order to “make the city as a whole happy. For happiness is not the same kind of thing as evenness: this can exist in the whole but in neither of its parts, but happiness cannot.” In this analysis, Aristotle has shown that the complex harmony by which individual citizens participate in the city as a whole is destroyed if the intermediate structure of the household is done away with.

Lessons about the Household that Aristotle Takes from Sparta

Aristotle criticizes Socrates’ city in speech for undermining the political community by destroying the individual citizens’ natural familial attachments—that is,

Socrates has proposed a political ordering that would wrongly legislate an end to the private natural good that the family provides. This threat to the family and community consists in a most radical form of over-regulation, so here Aristotle might be taken as implicitly advocating for legislators to leave matters pertaining to family life unregulated. Moreover, the error made in the city in speech was rooted in Socrates' insistence that men and women should be treated as the same—a decision that could not be followed in his city without the rejection of natural families and the differentiation of marital and parental roles that comes with them. One might, therefore, suspect that Aristotle would favor a regime that does what it can to step back and leave space for such differentiation as naturally exists between men and women and their familial roles. However, in another high point of Book Two, both possible conclusions are refuted in Aristotle's critique of Sparta, where he attacks its existing regime and that regime's founder Lycurgus for an error of under-regulation that appears to be rooted in treating the differences between men and women as so great that the way of life and moral laws of the city must extend only to men.

Two questions guide Aristotle's examination of the Spartan regime (and other actual regimes): whether some part of its legislation is fine in relation to the best regime, and whether it is opposed to the presupposition (*hypothesis*) and way (*tropon*) of the actual Spartan regime.⁵¹ In other words, Aristotle will consider the fineness of the regime simply, as well as whether there are oppositions between its legislation and its foundational premises. This latter question carries a great deal of weight in an investigation of Sparta, because the Spartan regime is one emphatically dedicated to a

⁵¹ *Politics*, 1269a32-34.

presupposition: the pursuit of “warlike virtue.”⁵² Aristotle says that “the legislator wished the city as a whole to be hardy.”⁵³ However, Aristotle argues that Sparta must receive unfavorable judgments with respect to both of his initial questions, and that there is a single cause of this—Spartan “laxness concerning women.”⁵⁴ This laxness is “harmful with a view both to the intention of the regime and to the happiness of the city.” In other words, the broadest criticisms that Aristotle has to make about Sparta are bound up with the poor character of its women.

Aristotle attributes the condition of the women in Sparta to legislative neglect. He insists that every city ought to legislate with a view to both women and men. Here again he invokes the relationship between household and city, in order to show that women must be considered half of the city:

For just as man and woman are part of the household, it is clear that the city should be held to be very nearly divided in two—into a multitude of men and a multitude of women; so in regimes where what is connected with women is poorly handled, one must consider that legislation is lacking for half of the city.⁵⁵

Although the Spartan regime aimed at hardiness for all, the laws made this “manifest in terms of the men” only, and the legislator “thoroughly neglected it in the case of the women, who live licentiously in every respect and in luxury.”⁵⁶ The women are also said to be so cowardly in times of war that they have threatened the safety of the city: “during

⁵² *Politics*, 1271b3.

⁵³ *Politics*, 1269b20-21.

⁵⁴ *Politics*, 1269b14-15.

⁵⁵ *Politics*, 1269b15-19.

⁵⁶ *Politics*, 1269b21-24.

the Theban invasion,” Spartan women “were not wholly useless, like women in other cities, but they created more of an uproar than the enemy.”⁵⁷ According to Aristotle, this neglect wasn’t completely intended on the part of the Spartan legislator. Originally, the Spartan men spent “much time away from their own land” in the “soldiering life” during their wars with the Argives, Arcadians, and Messenians.⁵⁸ Although Aristotle will soon criticize the Spartan legislator for his limited understanding of the virtue that should be fostered—and for the Spartan inability to live at peace as a result—he begins with a more generous observation about the lawgiver: he says here that the discipline of this life prepared them well to live under laws “once they had leisure,” because “it involves many parts of virtue.”⁵⁹ However, Spartan women had not had this preparation: “they say Lycurgus attempted to lead them toward the laws, but they were resistant, and he gave it up.”⁶⁰ This resulted in “unseemliness in the regime in its own terms.” Rather than a city that is as a whole courageous and tough, Sparta became a city where male citizens were trained, educated and strictly bound to the hard and broadly virtuous life of soldiers, while women undermined the austerity of the city through soft, unregulated lives devoted to pursuit of pleasure and greed rather than virtue.

If it was partly due to circumstances that came about by accident that women’s lives were left unregulated in Sparta, one might suppose that Aristotle is simply proposing an end to such legislative neglect. He has after all initially suggested that the legislative

⁵⁷ *Politics*, 1269b37-39.

⁵⁸ *Politics*, 1270a1-6.

⁵⁹ *Politics*, 1270a4-6. Cf. *Politics*, 1271b1-11.

⁶⁰ *Politics*, 1270a7-8.

presupposition of Sparta was consistent with the Spartiates possessing many parts of virtue and being able to adjust well from life at war to life at leisure. If this is the case, would not the regime be fine if it could simply find a way to treat its women just as it has its men, bringing them in line through stricter education or laws and some participation in the same way of life? Aristotle's further depiction of how relations stand between men and women in Sparta, however, complicates what he has said about the origins of the legislative disparity and militates against such a simple solution to the Spartan problem.

Aristotle's dark picture of male and female relations in Spartan society belies the notion that the regime could be perfected if only women were treated the same way as men by the laws. The first problem emerges with his claim that women will tend to dominate and corrupt men in a soldiering regime: "wealth will necessarily be honored in a regime of this sort, particularly if they are dominated by the women, as is the case with most stocks that are fond of soldiering and war."⁶¹ It seems that the female domination Aristotle describes comes from the centrality of sexual lust to soldiering life; Aristotle alludes to the "not unreasonable" pairing of "Ares and Aphrodite" in fables, and suggests that this cause is behind Sparta having allowed "many matters" to be "administered by the women during the period of their rule."⁶²

For this reason, one might suppose that Aristotle's criticism of the role of women in Sparta is more of an objection against any sort of female rule or even independence than a concern with the love of wealth that he attributes to it. In speaking of harmful arrangements in Sparta, he asks "And yet what difference is there between women ruling

⁶¹ *Politics*, 1269b24-26.

⁶² *Politics*, 1269b27-34.

and rulers who are ruled by women?”⁶³ And his claim that Spartan property laws have contributed to the city’s greed is tied to the fact that Spartan women are allowed to inherit, receive very large dowries, and now hold “nearly two-fifths of the entire territory.”⁶⁴ However, his concern is evidently not simply due to the fact that women have become capable of administering affairs in the city or possessing and to some extent disposing of large fortunes. Rather, the resulting situation that he describes in Sparta is a city of immense disparity in property with the land in “the hands of a few.”⁶⁵ Women’s ability to inherit has played a part in this because legislation disfavors buying and selling of property, but not bequeathing it.⁶⁶ Anyone “is permitted to give an heiress in marriage to whomever he wishes, and if he dies intestate, his heir can give her to anyone he pleases.”⁶⁷ Thus, women’s inheritances and dowries have become a means to make immense estates larger and prevent them from being broken up. There is a shortage of manpower for the all-important army, because land sufficient to sustain “fifteen hundred cavalymen and thirty thousand heavy-armed troops” is supporting fewer than a thousand.⁶⁸ The laws attempt to address this shortage of soldiers by exempting those fathers who produce more children from military duties or taxation; as a result many of these children are doomed to live in poverty.⁶⁹ By this account, Sparta is not so much a

⁶³ *Politics*, 1269b34-35.

⁶⁴ *Politics*, 1270a23-25.

⁶⁵ *Politics*, 1270a19.

⁶⁶ *Politics*, 1270a20-22.

⁶⁷ *Politics*, 1270a26-29.

⁶⁸ *Politics*, 1270a29-31.

⁶⁹ *Politics*, 1270b1-5.

city where martial virtue holds sway, but one where forces of lust and greed are causing widespread poverty, population decline and weakness.

Considering this picture further, one can see that it is not simply the neglect of female virtue by the laws that presents a problem in Sparta—the household itself has been neglected and compromised by the laws of the regime. It would be reasonable to suppose that it is not coincidence that women live more licentious lives in a regime where men, because of their military way of life, are more enslaved by sexual desire. Aristotle's claim that women have received rights to administer civic affairs this way suggests that for these women, sexual activity offers the promise of a form of participation in the affairs of the city that they have otherwise been left out of. On the other hand, the state of marriage and the benefits to women of fidelity will be seriously undermined in a regime where men are often removed from their households for military duties and presumed to be unfaithful while away. At the same time, Aristotle suggests that female heiresses are being married off and bequeathed primarily as a means to unite and preserve vast fortunes. Marriage has become the logical mechanism for amassing great wealth. And because of the ill consequences of this situation, the regime encourages fathers to bear children into impoverished conditions with a view to shirking their own civic and economic obligations. If men and women first came together into the household out of an instinctive urge to leave behind others like themselves, it is a devolution from nature when the city drives them to procreate in order to make their own lives easier at the cost of ruin to their offspring! The Spartan regime leaves no room for the sort of acquisition and care of resources demanded of a prudent household manager. Instead, it fosters different forms of sexual and physical licentiousness on the part of members of each sex,

and careless illiberality in their dealings with one another and with their offspring.

Aristotle presents the ruinous greed of Spartan society not merely as a matter of neglect of the female half of the regime, but a consequence of its presupposition, which left no room to foster or preserve the natural relations within the household or the virtues that it promotes.

After his treatment of women in Sparta, Aristotle raises the incongruity between Spartan laxness and severity again as he concludes his critique of the office of overseers. The overseers cannot bear Spartan law, so they run from it and gratify themselves with pleasure instead.⁷⁰ Interestingly, Aristotle's account of why this occurs seems to treat the purpose (*boulēma*) of the city itself as ambiguous at this juncture: "it is overly lax, though in other respects the city goes to excess in the direction of harshness."⁷¹ This is what the overseers are said to be unable to endure. The suggestion of this account seems to be that the city's very purpose has become too self-contradictory to bear in its division between harshness and laxness. When Aristotle next criticizes the Senate, he says it is an unsafe institution whose officeholders are too affected by "bribery and favoritism" to be trusted.⁷² In particular, he criticizes the fact that men ask for the offices they desire rather than being selected according to merit.⁷³ Aristotle concludes that with this arrangement "the legislator is evidently doing what he has done with respect to the rest of the regime,"

⁷⁰ *Politics*, 1269b35-36.

⁷¹ *Politics*, 1270b30-35.

⁷² *Politics*, 1271a1-4.

⁷³ *Politics*, 1271a10-12.

seeking to make “the citizens ambitious.”⁷⁴ This is wrong because “most voluntary acts of injustice among human beings result from ambition or greed.”⁷⁵ In Aristotle’s presentation of the Spartan Senate, ambition and greed combine together. Even in the arrangements of the political offices of Sparta, Aristotle sees the city afflicted with the vices of greed, softness and luxury. Moreover, he attributes these problems to the very intention of the Spartan legislator. The suggestion seems to be that even if greed and softness weren’t the purpose aimed at by the laws of Sparta, they were characteristics inherently tied to whatever those purposes were.

This conclusion is confirmed in the conclusion to Aristotle’s investigation of Sparta, where he takes up and builds upon the criticism levelled at Sparta in Plato’s *Laws*, that the source of bad legislation in Sparta was its problematic presupposition. The *Laws* critique identifies Sparta’s error with arranging all of the city’s laws to aim at a partial virtue—the warlike virtue that is useful with a view to conquest (*kratein*).⁷⁶ In Aristotle’s restatement, this prepared the Spartans to “preserve themselves as long as they were at war,” but “they came to ruin when they were ruling an empire through not knowing how to be at leisure.”⁷⁷ The Spartans had “no training among them that has more authority than the training for war.”⁷⁸ It seems, then, that even the initial compatibility that seemed to exist between virtuous living and the military discipline Spartan men had received was

⁷⁴ *Politics*, 1271a13-16.

⁷⁵ *Politics*, 1271a16-17.

⁷⁶ *Politics*, 1271b1-4.

⁷⁷ *Politics*, 1271b4-6.

⁷⁸ *Politics*, 1271b7.

illusory. Aristotle's interpretation of this error, "no slight one," is that the Spartans simultaneously aimed at virtue and undermined it by subordinating it to lesser goods—those won by conquest.⁷⁹ That is, warlike virtue was desired because of a fine intimation of the city—"they consider that the good things men generally fight over are won by virtue rather than vice." However, what was not fine was that "they conceive these things"—the things men win in conquest—"to be better than virtue." Though some of what men win in conquest may be honor, power and esteem, evidently much of what is won is plunder. Ambition and greed are inherently conjoined in the desire for conquest. Aristotle is linking not knowing how to be at leisure, and not having a training with more authority than the training for war, with the subordination of virtue to domination over others and the amassing of goods through conquest. What Aristotle says next—that "also poorly handled" were the lack of common funds in the city and the failure of the Spartiates to scrutinize each other's payment of taxes—is introduced almost as if it is a non sequitur.⁸⁰ However, Aristotle's conclusion about this—that the Spartan legislator "has created a city lacking in funds, and individuals greedy for them"—are Aristotle's last words on Sparta in this chapter. It is not merely a poorly-managed treasury that has created this problem. Even the virtue that Spartan laws were written to pursue creates greedy citizens.

The destruction of the household may not have been the aim of Spartan legislation. Men were not submitted to harsh military discipline and kept far from home in the pursuit of foreign conquest with the express purpose of undermining their family

⁷⁹ *Politics*, 1271b7-11.

⁸⁰ *Politics*, 1271b12-15.

life. However, the household could not easily survive their removal. Moreover, the warlike way of life that the Spartan regime was designed to foster was too partial to find room for women; its indifference to them was not an accident. The Spartan regime shows a combination of neglect and mis-regulation with respect to the household. The source of greed in the regime turns out not to be that the female half of its citizens were left unformed by its laws, but that all of the citizens in it were shaped—advertently or inadvertently—by laws that were driven by the grasping and greed of conquest. A greedy and unleisured regime of this sort proved to be incompatible with virtuous domestic life in the household. This resulted in incongruous laws that were at once soft and harsh, and a regime that was luxurious and hungry. As I argue in what follows, by creating a regime incompatible with the household, the Spartan founders also removed an indispensable means to subordinate greed to higher ends and learn the virtues of moderation and liberality required for living well when war is absent.

The Household as a Model for the City

In discussions in Book Three as well, Aristotle treats the family association as lying at the heart of other essential questions about the city. In Chapter Six, Aristotle considers the end for “the sake of which the city is established” and, in order to distinguish between correct and deviant regimes, how different forms of rule allow citizens to participate in this end.⁸¹ He appeals to his definition of human beings as political animals to infer that “human beings strive to live together even when they have no need of assistance from one another, though it is also the case that the common

⁸¹ *Politics*, 1278b15-16.

advantage brings them together, to the extent that it falls to each to live nobly.”⁸²

Although these are “above all” the ends of the city, Aristotle also alludes to the possibility that simply life itself, without “great excess of hardships,” might be a sufficient cause for human beings to “join together, and maintain the political partnership,” since people act as if “there is a kind of joy inherent in [life] and a natural sweetness.”⁸³ If such common advantages are the purpose of political partnership, just regimes will be those that provide these advantages to all free persons. It is household management, the “rule over children and wife and the household as a whole,” which provides Aristotle’s first example of rule that looks to the advantage of the ruled or of all members in common, rather than of the ruler.⁸⁴

Aristotle’s privileging of the family as a model for the common good makes sense if one considers what a ready and natural example the family provides to humanity of the experience of rule which “is either for the sake of the ruled or for the sake of something common to both.”⁸⁵ Complete selflessness may be rare in human relationships, especially hierarchical ones. And it is prudent to assume that the structure of a Greek family in the period that Aristotle writes tended to be characterized by a more rigid hierarchy and firmer mastery between the male head of the household and his dependents than Aristotle considers justified. However, even if this so, sacrifice is inescapable within the human family—just as it is throughout animal families—where children commonly experience

⁸² *Politics*, 1278b19-22.

⁸³ *Politics*, 1278b23-30.

⁸⁴ *Politics*, 1278b37.

⁸⁵ *Politics*, 1278b38-39.

their parents devoting their energy and authority to securing advantages for them even when it comes at high personal cost. Another experience likely to characterize all but the most illiberal households is that many of the sacrifices made there are not perceived as self-denial but something sweet and choice-worthy by the ones who makes them. The significance to the higher possibilities for the political community from the existence of a plausible model for rule that benefits both ruled and ruler is great. By contrast, in the *Republic*, Socrates' likening of a ruler to a shepherd provided Thrasymachus with a support for praise of injustice, since he could question the selflessness of the shepherd, and thereby criticize Socrates as naïve for believing "that the rulers in the cities . . . think about the ruled differently from the way a man would regard sheep," or think about "anything else than how they will benefit themselves."⁸⁶

However, the crowning moment for the family in Book Three arrives in Chapter Nine, when it appears as an essential source of the "intentional choice" that unites a city in "a complete and self-sufficient life."⁸⁷ Aristotle says that no matter how much participation exists between human beings, they do not live in a city unless they share "the partnership in living well both of families (*oikia*s) and kinships (*genes*i) for the sake of a complete and self-sufficient life."⁸⁸ This partnership occurs only when "they inhabit one and the same location and make use of intermarriage," for historically, this is how "marriage connections arose in cities, as well as clans, festivals" and shared pursuits.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ *Republic*, 343b-e.

⁸⁷ *Politics*, 1280b38-1281a1.

⁸⁸ *Politics*, 1280b33-34.

⁸⁹ *Politics*, 1280b35-37.

Again, Aristotle traces the source of the city's unity to affection, as an effect, in part, of partnership in marriages: "This sort of thing is the work of affection: for affection is the intentional choice of living together. Living well, then, is the end of the city, and these things are for the sake of this end."⁹⁰ Moreover, the complete life of the city consists in "living happily and nobly," that is, it is a life of "noble actions."⁹¹ As I discuss in Chapter Six, the city goes further than the family in the opportunities it provides for noble actions. Yet these too have roots in the family: as Aristotle has argued, choice and virtue cultivated in the household will flow over into the *polis*.

Here in Book Three, Chapter Nine, we finally are given a clear picture of what the natures of individual, household, and city are when the political community has completely come into being, and they are presented in a complex relationship to one another. Just as political communities do not always present opportunities for nobility ready to hand, family life does not always rise to the level of friendship that he attributes to a household approaching its defining perfection; perhaps families rarely did so in Aristotle's time. On the other hand, that such perfection was an aspiration for ancient Greeks is confirmed in Homer's *Odyssey*, where Odysseus claims that like-mindedness (*homophrosune*) between man and wife in a good marriage is among the greatest goods, benefitting their friends and meriting the recognition of the community in the form of good reputation.⁹² Even if such perfection was rarely attained, it is notable that while noble individuals and a self-sufficient city are goods that are difficult to grasp and define,

⁹⁰ *Politics*, 1280b37-40.

⁹¹ *Politics*, 1281a2-3.

⁹² Homer, *The Odyssey*, VI.180-185.

most readers in any age are likely to recognize first hand some of the sweetness and friendship that Aristotle attributes to the household in his account of it.

The Household as an Antidote to Greed

Although the household is an essential entity within the city—and in many ways mediates the political partnership of individuals in a city—its own nature is not simply political. This is evident in things that have already been said, but it becomes especially clear in the explicit correction Aristotle gives to those who would reduce the city to a collection of cooperative private households. He argues that even if men lived near one another, and participated in “exchange and alliance,” with laws governing transactions, if “*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,” they would not be living as partners in a city.⁹³ The household must not be treated as a city, or true political partnership will cease. However, Aristotle is relatively silent about the details of how individuals ought to treat their households. The obscurity Aristotle leaves around life within the household in the *Politics* makes it difficult to arrive at certainty about its function within the political community. Yet Aristotle says enough, especially in his critiques of regimes, to support the judgment that the perfected household is essential to countering the impact of greed in human life.

Aristotle appears hesitant to detail the household’s internal structure—an approach which might make sense if political discourse has the potential to expose or undermine the privacy proper to the family and the common life which goes on within it.

⁹³ *Politics*, 1280b17-27, emphasis added.

He engages in limited discussion of how things ought to be within the household with respect to wives and children—providing much less detail in his account of the relations within the family than he does in addressing the questions of domestic slavery or the art of the acquisitive household manager. This suggests that however ironic the context of Aristotle’s reference to what “the poet said of woman” in Sophocles’ *Ajax*, the principle that “to a woman silence is an ornament” may express a principle of some relevance to politics.⁹⁴ There may be something at once so private and so natural in the maternal role in the family that it demands a discrete silence in political discourse. Certainly, one aspect of woman’s role in the family is the pure “work of nature” of providing nourishment to human young.⁹⁵ While Aristotle gives much attention in Book One to the male’s proper expertise in acquiring, he mentions only once that the woman has a complementary protective role. As I have argued, the broader problem of greed that comes to light in Aristotle’s arguments about acquisition is of the greatest relevance to the *polis*. However, the task of guarding the things of the household seems to be less directly involved with the city. If the political philosopher must protect the integrity of the household from the claims of the regime which might overwhelm it, perhaps this is best done by preserving a prudent, but respectful, distance from what goes on within it. Aristotle’s own relative silence about family tasks and relationships in the *Politics* seems to do just this.

Nevertheless, there are still crucial inferences that can be made about the household’s role in moderating acquisitive desire. Although man and woman first united for biological reasons, the deliberation that should exist in the household between

⁹⁴ *Politics*, 1260a30.

⁹⁵ *Politics*, 1258a35.

husband and wife, and in a less complete fashion with their children, marks out higher tasks for the household. The possibility of overcoming potentially infinite physical desires begins with the family because it provides a grounding to each individual in the form of husband, wife, parents or children, who place claims and constraints on one another that are at once nature-bound and choice-worthy. The blood connections within the family make it a more dependable custodian and director of humanity's acquisitive tasks than the *polis* because the obligations of family members are very difficult to ignore. Familial roles will much more stubbornly resist a commercial re-orientation than civic ones because they are to a greater extent imposed by nature. At the same time, family ties promote the cultivation of affection, choice and care—qualities that are sweet enough to draw human beings away from mere concern for their own physical well-being toward their lives insofar as they are connected to others, and the care and the affection that emerge. The extension of oneself in one's love for others, which Aristotle develops more fully in his books on friendship in the *Ethics*, leads one beyond oneself, and beyond mere life, to living well. If it is difficult to resist the transformation of means into ends in the pursuit of material goods, the naturally compelling good of the family provides more hope for limiting humanity's potentially infinite desire to what is truly needed than the less directly felt ties of the political community. Although one would strive to provide goods for those one loves, including material goods, they have ends beyond themselves. One loves not money, or its increase for its own sake, but for the sake of those whom one holds dear.

Aristotle says little that is specific in the *Politics* about the role of the household in cultivating virtue. However, he does insist at the end of Book One that household

management is concerned with this task especially, and suggests that this is a counterweight to its concern with wealth: “It is evident...that household management gives more serious attention to human beings than to inanimate possessions, to the virtue of these than that of possessions (which we call wealth), and to the virtue of free persons rather than that of slaves.”⁹⁶ Furthermore, Aristotle’s critiques of the regimes in Book Two discussed above suggest that the possibility of moderating greed is linked in his view to the preservation of good households. As I have shown, his criticism of the Spartan regime for promoting licentious, luxurious and greedy behavior in its women attributes the fault to neglect of women and disinterest in the fate of the household by the legislator.⁹⁷ The Spartan laws had the effect of detaching men from their own households and left the women who remained behind to live immoderate lives in pursuit of wealth but without education or connection to the virtue of the regime. Aristotle deals with this issue even more directly in his critique of the regime in Plato’s *Republic*. Here Aristotle argues that when the city is made too much of a unity by dissolving the boundaries of marriage and property that define households, it destroys “the functions of two of the virtues, moderation concerning women (it being a fine deed to abstain through moderation from a woman who belongs to another) and liberality concerning property” because “the function of liberality lies in the use of property.”⁹⁸ By depriving human beings of these virtues, a lawmaker would be taking away “good things” from life, such

⁹⁶ *Politics*, 1259b18-21.

⁹⁷ *Politics*, 1269b14-1270a25.

⁹⁸ *Politics*, 1263b10-14.

as the noble pleasure people take in doing good for their friends and connections.⁹⁹ In other words, the possibilities of liberality and moderation are essentially tied to the existence of strong familial households. The *Nicomachean Ethics* provides further insight into the question of moral education and the relationships within the family, and in my chapter on liberality, I explore how the virtues that can liberate individuals from greed are to be cultivated. When Aristotle's treatment of the household in the *Politics* is brought together with his treatment of the family, education and virtue in the *Ethics*, the outline that I have given of the essential support that the household provides to the good life of the political community in the struggle against the persistent pulls of necessity and greed will be brought into greater focus.

⁹⁹ *Politics*, 1263b29, 6.

CHAPTER FOUR

Liberality and the Education of Virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics*

In the previous chapters I discussed Aristotle's nuanced view of nature in regard to human beings, and the care that therefore must be taken by those who wish to understand it. Evidently, a like caution is required of those seeking nature's guidance for action or legislation, especially when they consider the private and public decisions required for the cultivation of virtue and education of the young. In a "prelude" to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle warns against seeking more precision and clarity than the subject matter allows, observing that there is so much dispute and variability about the things that are noble and just that "they are held to be" conventional instead of natural.¹ Conclusions that justice and nobility are merely conventional acquire yet more force from the observable fact that the things that are good for human beings are variable, such that human beings can be destroyed by goods like wealth or courage.² Aristotle rejects this conventionalism, arguing that "a good regime differs from a base regime" insofar as its laws succeed at making its citizens good.³ Thus it seems that his prelude is intended to help people avoid these errors, by preparing them to reason in a way that is appropriate to moral questions, understanding that the truths to be shown in the work will be

¹ *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1094b15-17. Hereafter cited as *Ethics*.

² *Ethics*, 1094b18-19.

³ *Ethics*, 1103b3-5.

demonstrated “roughly,” “in outline,” and in many cases only hold “for the most part.”⁴ Aristotle repeats this warning when he clarifies that the investigations in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are undertaken “not for the sake of contemplation... but so that we may become good.”⁵ The *Ethics* is concerned with matters of action, which are particular and variable.⁶ In keeping with the imprecision inherent in questions about virtue and vice, the *Nicomachean Ethics* proceeds cautiously as it takes up the question of how human nature can be perfected in individual human beings.

The *Nicomachean Ethics* would quickly alarm those expecting nature to serve as a precise and fixed standard that lawmakers, parents, or other teachers of virtue might follow. In discussing habituation, Aristotle speaks frequently of the ways that human nature—in the form of the natural inclinations of human individuals—threatens the formation of character. That is, the task of the person seeking to perfect human nature requires restraining human nature! In particular, the cultivation of virtue depends on redirecting human beings’ inborn desires for pleasure and revulsion to pain. He presents this task as a difficult one, and something that requires a kind of artfulness. In other words, the task of habituation does not simply follow natural principles, because it must protect human beings from natural pitfalls to the moral life. I discuss this in the first section of this chapter.

As I show in the next section, to form properly the pull of pleasure and aversion to pain of the young in this way relies on the double tasks of restraining their engrained

⁴ *Ethics*, 1095a13, 1094b20-22.

⁵ *Ethics*, 1103b26-30.

⁶ *Ethics*, 1104a5.

desires for some pleasures and protecting them against the painful things that might disfigure what is healthy in their natures until they are mature enough to resist both—the virtues of moderation and courage correspond to these tasks, according to Aristotle. However, as I show next, in the section on the virtue of liberality, habituation requires a further liberation through the education of natural desires to embrace what is noble—as in the curing of prodigality—and the care required to mitigate humanity’s general preoccupation with money—to avoid stinginess. This treatment of liberality, prodigality and stinginess introduces a pattern for approaching questions of the noble and the shameful as they pertain to what is liberal in the broader sense of the term. I consider this pattern and show, in the third section of this chapter, how it applies to the virtues described throughout Book Four of the *Ethics*.⁷ Finally, in the closing section, I analyze connections that exist between Aristotle’s account of liberality and the genealogy of a tyrant that Socrates describes in Plato’s *Republic*. The divergences in these parallel accounts are a fruitful basis to reflect on the optimism of Aristotle’s moral philosophy insofar as they reveal his points of departure from Plato’s more pessimistic account of humanity’s capacity for moral perfection.

⁷ My account of liberality as a guiding and unifying element in Book Four is, so far as I know, unique. Scholarship on the *Nicomachean Ethics* tends to treat liberality as a stepping stone to virtues that seem more important or comprehensive. For an example of such an approach, see the interpretive essay by Susan Collins and Robert Bartlett in their translation of the *Ethics*, where liberality is treated as a first, partial attempt at reconciling nobility with concern for one’s good in virtue. In their view, liberality is eclipsed by its grander sister virtue, magnificence, and then by “the crowning moral virtue” of magnanimity. (Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins. “Interpretive Essay,” in *Ethics*, 259-262.) In other scholarship on the comprehensive relationship between the moral virtues in the *Ethics*, liberality is strangely ignored. See, for example: Stephen Salkever, “Teaching the Questions: Aristotle’s Philosophical Pedagogy in the ‘Nicomachean Ethics’ and the ‘Politics,’” *The Review of Politics*, 69 (2007): 192-214.

The Relationship between Human Nature and Virtue

Because the inclinations naturally present in human beings can be cultivated with much more freedom than the inclinations of animals, the mature human being may take many forms, and some of these will be opposed to others. Unchecked human tendencies can lead to great depravity, as Aristotle warns in the *Politics*. This is why the education of the human being requires prudence and law. Without the direction of reason, the inclinations with which a human being is born will often stand in the way of the human being's perfection. At the same time, Aristotle argues that human beings are not even able to reach mature judgment about human things without "fashion[ing] their longings in accord with reason and act[ing] accordingly."⁸ As I described above, Aristotle emphasizes in the *Ethics* that nature in human beings cannot be understood in the strictest sense—in which sense we would insist that what is naturally one way cannot be habituated to be different.⁹ Rather, his account of the human being's cultivated virtues is that they are "neither by nature ... nor contrary to nature," but "present in us who are of such a nature as to receive them, and who are completed through habit."¹⁰ Or again, human beings possess capacities required for virtue "by nature, but we do not by nature become bad or good."¹¹ For this task, the urges that nature implants in human beings must be understood, disciplined and given direction.

⁸ *Ethics*, 1094b26-1095a10.

⁹ *Ethics*, 1103a23.

¹⁰ *Ethics*, 1103a24-26.

¹¹ *Ethics*, 1106a7-9.

Human nature for Aristotle ultimately points human beings toward what is good and noble, but nevertheless, natural inclinations can be misleading.¹² Thus, he notes that human beings, like other animals, incline by nature to pleasure, but that human beings can easily be led astray by pleasure. Pleasure is a uniquely unreliable motive for human beings because in the human case alone, pleasure may arise from “all things done through choice, since both what is noble and what is advantageous appear pleasant.”¹³ Moreover, as Aristotle says, “pleasure has been a part of the upbringing of us all from infancy; it is difficult to remove this experience, since our life has been so ingrained with it.”¹⁴ Moreover, it is very difficult for human beings to “judge [pleasure] impartially.”¹⁵ Aristotle also presents the experience of pain as a threat to the nature of a human being, arguing that it is even more destructive than pleasure, and that it is harder to habituate against the problems caused by pain than against pleasure.¹⁶ That is, unguided human beings naturally follow their inborn desires for pleasure and reactions to pain towards the impairment of their abilities to judge what is good and to act virtuously.

In discussing the guidance human beings require to avoid these natural pitfalls, Aristotle consistently stresses the artfulness of habituation. He depicts the cultivation of virtue as a victory over natural inclinations such as desire for pleasure: “it is more difficult to battle against pleasure than against spiritedness, as Heraclitus asserts, and art

¹² See, e.g. *Ethics*, 1099b23.

¹³ *Ethics*, 1104b33-1105a1.

¹⁴ *Ethics*, 1105a2-4.

¹⁵ *Ethics*, 1109b10.

¹⁶ *Ethics*, 1119a25-30.

and virtue always arise in connection with that which is more difficult: the doing of something well is better when it is more difficult.”¹⁷ In other words, human beings are easily dominated by their natural tendencies toward pleasure (and toward spiritedness), and virtue is a kind of artful liberation from this condition. The sense that virtue is a product of skill and finesse is underscored by Aristotle’s frequent comparison to archery, and the aptness of this metaphor is confirmed when he defines virtue as “more precise and better than every art,” something “skillful in aiming at the middle term.”¹⁸ This middle term lies “between two vices, the one relating to excess, the other to deficiency,” and virtue’s skill “in aiming at the middle in matters of passion and action” reveals that it is “a task to be serious,” and to hit upon “what is well done.”¹⁹ Like the archer, the one aiming at virtue must know what direction and how much force will be required in order to find the path through an individual’s natural disposition with respect to pleasures and pains.

Aristotle begins his account of the particular virtues with extensive treatments of courage and moderation. An obvious reason for this starting point is that these central moral virtues are peculiarly concerned with pain and pleasure respectively, so that discussing the character and habituation of these virtues provides a template for understanding habituation in general. Courage aims at the middle term “concerning fear and confidence,” while moderation is concerned with “pleasures and pains,” albeit “not

¹⁷ *Ethics*, 1105a10-11.

¹⁸ *Ethics*, 1106b14-16.

¹⁹ *Ethics*, 1109a25, 1109b26.

all of them, and to a lesser degree as regards pains.”²⁰ Aristotle specifies that moderation primarily concerns human beings’ most “brutish” bodily pleasures—those of touch especially, that is, pleasures arising from food, drink and sex.²¹ The discussion of these virtues closes with a consideration of habituation that relates them in an interesting way: habituation in courage and moderation reflects a basic dichotomy between pain and pleasure. That is, the cultivation of the former is opposed by our experience of pain, while that of the latter is opposed by our experience of pleasure. Licentiousness, the vice of those excessively attached to pleasure, is the inevitable result of human “longing for pleasure” unless it is strictly governed by reason (or an educator).²² This longing begins with childhood, and if left unchastised “will grow too great” and “drive out calculation” altogether, because it is “insatiable and bombards from all sides someone who lacks sense.”²³ But cowardice, the vice of excessive fear, is even less voluntary than licentiousness.²⁴ This is because “pain unhinges a person and destroys the nature of him who undergoes it,” and this unhinging is what leads to “particular instances of cowardice.”²⁵ If the pains that we experience can corrupt our nature, the educator of the young must be highly vigilant to guard against such damage. It seems then that habituation in courage and moderation require vigilance over the exposure of the young

²⁰ *Ethics*, 1107a35-1107b5.

²¹ *Ethics*, 1118a24-32.

²² *Ethics*, 1107b6, 1119b8.

²³ *Ethics*, 1119b8-11.

²⁴ *Ethics*, 1119a25.

²⁵ *Ethics*, 1119a24-30.

to the most basic experiences of pain and pleasure, because in the natural course of things, these experiences tend to impede the possibility of human virtue.

The cultivation of the virtues of courage and moderation is of the broadest significance to the possibility of a virtuous life, since natural inclinations regarding pleasure and pain have been shown to be fundamental threats to this possibility. Compared with this, Aristotle's next move, to treat liberality, the particular virtue pertaining to money, may appear to be a narrowing of his project. However, I argue in the next section that in his treatment of this virtue, which shares its name with the characteristic quality of a human soul that is free rather than enslaved, Aristotle deepens his account of the artful liberation from humanity's powerful inclinations that virtue accomplishes.

Liberality and the Education of Virtue

As has been stated above, Aristotle argues that each virtue is a mean between two vices. Thus, in the outline of all of the particular virtues that he gives in Book Two, Chapter Seven, he identifies liberality as the mean “concerning the giving and taking of money,” where the names for the vicious excess and deficiency are “prodigality and stinginess respectively.”²⁶ However, he also notes that the three terms do not lie along a single axis—prodigality and stinginess “are excessive and deficient in contrary respects.” prodigals are excessive in letting money go and deficient in taking it, whereas the stingy are excessive in taking money and deficient in letting it go.²⁷

²⁶ *Ethics*, 1107b9-10.

²⁷ *Ethics*, 1107b11-14.

One thing that stands out here is that Aristotle is defining the vices related to money as compounded forms of excess. To be stingy is not simply to take too much, but also to let too little go. Both excesses are inverted in the prodigal person. This suggests at the very least that when people go astray in dealing with money, they tend to err twice over—that it is hard to spend the wrong way without also taking the wrong way and, vice versa. I discuss this further below.

A more startling aspect of the outline Aristotle has given is that one of his two categories of action with respect to money appears to be slippery. Where the liberal person is said to hit the mean in giving (*dosis*) money, stingy and prodigal persons are said to err in letting it go (*prohesis*), the former being deficient in doing so, while the latter are excessive. The noun Aristotle uses here, “letting go,” can also be translated as “throwing off” or “wasting;” it is a word that is used only here in extant Greek literature. Aristotle’s strange word choices here raise an important question: Are these actions with respect to money similar enough for the mean and extremes to be in relation to each other? To give something is, by definition, to direct it *towards others*. The term Aristotle uses for the extremes, letting go or throwing off, implies no such direction.²⁸ Aristotle says nothing about the incongruity between the liberal person and his extremes here. Before moving on to enumerate other virtues and vices, he coyly notes that his reader should rest “satisfied” with what has been said, because it is merely spoken “in outline and summarily.”²⁹ He will speak with more precision about these things later. When he

²⁸ That Aristotle means us to linger on this problem seems to be indicated by the fact that he chooses not to use another, more common word, “to spend” (*dapanan*), here. This term also implies money spent *on something*, and Aristotle will later associate this term with the giving of the liberal person (1109a26), as well as the greater expenditures of the magnificent person (cite beginning of Book 4 section).

²⁹ *Ethics*, 1107b14-16.

does so, the distinction between giving money to a well-chosen object and letting it out of one's hands without thought emerges as the dividing line between liberality and the vice it most resembles, prodigality.

Another important precursor to Aristotle's main discussion of liberality occurs in his famous warnings about Calypso's advice to Odysseus and the "second sailing." He mentions that "giving and spending money," like getting angry, is "an easy thing."³⁰ By contrast, the virtue of liberality is "rare, praiseworthy, and noble" insofar as it is a difficult task and outside of the reach of some to perform.³¹ Aristotle names many conditions that a praiseworthy giver (or actor in general) must judge well about: to whom, how much, at what time, for what purpose and how. It seems at first, then, that the liberal person is praised for his or her superior judgment, and is a kind of knower, and this is supported when Aristotle likens the task to that of a geometer finding the center of a circle.³² However, as soon as this suggestion is made, Aristotle complicates it by suggesting that we may not be as free to make this right judgment as a geometer is in virtue of his or her science. Rather, one who would be virtuous is in the position of Odysseus sailing towards the lesser danger near Scylla to escape the greater one near Charybdis.³³ Odysseus was required to seek out a bad extreme in order to avoid a worse one. Aristotle draws the lesson that it is sometimes too difficult to hit the mean with precision, and in these cases, the task of acting well requires us to opt for a lesser evil.

³⁰ *Ethics*, 1109a26. Here the verb is *dapanan*, to spend.

³¹ *Ethics*, 1109a28-30.

³² *Ethics*, 1109a25.

³³ *Ethics*, 1109a30-33.

Here Aristotle makes a very important claim for his teaching about the relationships between virtues and their correlative vices: “Of the extremes, the one is more in error, the other less.”³⁴ That is, each virtue stands closer to one form of the excess that relates to it than to the contrary excess. This illuminates why Aristotle has paired the vices in the first place; doing so helps to mark a path towards virtue in conditions in which it would otherwise be so difficult as to be impossible. Although this view might be disappointing to those who look for virtue to have the precision and dignity of a science, it is a promising claim for those who are at some distance from virtue’s mean.

The significance of this point is brought into more focus as Aristotle makes the claim I quoted near the start of this chapter, that the pleasures to which people are predisposed make it hard for them to judge well. In fact, Aristotle clarifies that human beings differ from each other in their natural dispositions towards pleasure and pain. So, finding the middle term requires of each would-be actor self-knowledge that is hard to attain on top of good judgment about the conditions in which he or she should act. Aristotle says that we must sense our own inclinations to achieve this: we “must examine what we ourselves readily incline toward, for some of us naturally incline to some things, others to other things,” and our objects are “recognizable from the pleasure and pain that occur in our case.”³⁵ Here he presents a new artistic metaphor for habituation: the natural condition of each human being is like “warped lumber,” and the cultivation of virtue depends on straightening this wood in the manner of a carpenter.³⁶ Each human being is

³⁴ *Ethics*, 1109a35.

³⁵ *Ethics*, 1109b3-5

³⁶ *Ethics*, 1109b7.

naturally inclined to twist in a certain direction away from the virtue of the middle term. Like a carpenter bending a bad board far in the opposite direction to make it straight, “we must drag ourselves away from” the condition of our natural inclinations “toward its contrary” in order to “arrive at the middle term.”³⁷ Although the carpenter has much less freedom in his task than the archer, there is skill in his work to redirect already warped material, just as there is skill in drawing back the bow and aiming well. The problem of habituation can now be seen as one that is relative to the different possible human predispositions. For the individual, this is a problem requiring self-knowledge, and for an educator of virtue, a problem of knowing the inclinations of individual pupils. However, if we return to the example of liberal action that Aristotle raised at the start of these passages, a new consideration presents itself: as I’ve argued in the chapters on the *Politics*, Aristotle recognizes a very common human tendency to err with respect to money and goods—a barely resistible inclination to covet them excessively. If this is the case, we should look to the extreme that is opposed to such covetousness as a hopeful antidote to the dangers to moral and political life arising from greed.

After these preliminaries, Aristotle moves on at the start of Book Four to the more precise treatment of liberality, and its related vices, that he has promised. In his discussion here of liberality, prodigality and stinginess, he dramatically expands upon his account of virtuous habituation. The first indication of this is when he comments on common ways of speaking about both vices. The common view of the stingy, he argues, is that they are “those who are more serious about money than they ought to be.”³⁸ He

³⁷ *Ethics*, 1109b2-7.

³⁸ *Ethics*, 1119b29-30.

does not correct this judgment. The common judgment against the prodigal is harsher: they are “very base people” who have “many vices simultaneously.”³⁹ Aristotle argues that this is a mistaken judgment, based on an error that is “sometimes” made about the nature of prodigality. This error is a failure to distinguish; the word prodigality is sometimes intertwined with other vices. For example, Aristotle says that we call people prodigal if they “lack self-restraint,” or “in their licentiousness, spend lavishly.” For obvious reasons, such people would appear as excessive spenders. However, Aristotle insists that the prodigal human being is properly understood as having a single vice that is different: that of “ruining his own resources.”⁴⁰ This is certainly a grim vice—like a form of “self-destruction,” since one’s resources are means required for one’s life. However, Aristotle highlights that it is a mistake to attribute the baseness that common opinion does to this vice.⁴¹ In contrast, as I discuss below, Aristotle will go on to show that there is a blameworthy baseness at the heart of stinginess. Ultimately, he argues that stinginess is a “greater vice than prodigality,” and one that leads more people astray.⁴² This vice of having too great a concern for money and goods is the vice that is most opposed to liberality.⁴³

Because prodigality does not take money too seriously, it does not have the opposition in principle to the virtue of liberality that stinginess does. Liberality is first

³⁹ *Ethics*, 1119b30-33.

⁴⁰ *Ethics*, 1119b28-1120a2.

⁴¹ *Ethics*, 1119b 31.

⁴² *Ethics*, 1122a14-16.

⁴³ *Ethics*, 1122a14.

said to involve both the giving and taking of money and goods.⁴⁴ Aristotle notes from the outset that people are praised as liberal more for the former than the latter. He soon revisits and elaborates this dichotomy, combining, on one hand, giving with spending, as use of money and, on the other, taking with guarding, as acquisition of it.⁴⁵ However, at this point, a concern with taking correctly quickly falls away. One reason for this is that correct taking—in the sense of not taking from whom one should not—is recognized as an act of justice rather than liberality.⁴⁶ The other reason is that giving to those to whom one ought (spending is eclipsed here, too) is more praiseworthy than taking from whom one ought or than refraining from taking from whom one ought not.⁴⁷ The first is true because “it belongs to virtue more to act well than to fare well,” and the second because it belongs to virtue more “to do what is noble than not to do what is shameful.”⁴⁸ With the emphasis in liberality shifted to giving, its character as a noble extreme, involving superior skill and judgment, comes to light: A liberal person gives “for the sake of the noble and correctly: he will give to whom he ought and as much as and when he ought, and anything else that accompanies correct giving.”⁴⁹ Evidently, both the stingy person and the prodigal lack this discernment and ability; neither gives correctly. However, an important distinction exists in their respective openness to liberality. The stingy person

⁴⁴ *Ethics*, 1119b25.

⁴⁵ *Ethics*, 1120a7.

⁴⁶ *Ethics*, 1120a20-21.

⁴⁷ *Ethics*, 1120a10.

⁴⁸ *Ethics*, 1120a12-13.

⁴⁹ *Ethics*, 1120a25-27.

lacks “the mark of a liberal human being,” since he “would choose money rather than noble action.”⁵⁰ Evidently the prodigal person, who doesn’t choose money even when he needs it to live, is closer to the liberal person in this respect. And there is no inherent reason why he could not give money “with pleasure or without pain” like the liberal person.⁵¹ When Aristotle shows that giving should be privileged over taking in the account of liberality, he is inviting a reconsideration of its relationship to prodigality.

In fact, Aristotle shows that the liberal person may partake of some traits of the prodigal. The liberal person has tendencies that could easily lead to recklessness with his or her own resources. If the liberal person is “not careless” with possessions, it is only because they are needed for helping others.⁵² That is, without stewarding them properly, he may lose his capacity to be helpful. However, “it very much belongs” to the liberal person to “exceed in giving, such that there is little left for himself, for it is typical of a liberal person not to look out for himself.”⁵³ From the perspective of habituation, the distance between liberality and prodigality shrinks all the more.

Aristotle’s account of humanity’s common seriousness about money and necessary goods in his treatment of liberality mirrors his account in the *Politics*. Aristotle argues that common human experiences of hardship and necessity stand in the way of liberality. He associates liberality with those who have not had to work for their own keep: “those who did not acquire what they themselves own but inherited it seem more

⁵⁰ *Ethics*, 1120a29-31.

⁵¹ *Ethics*, 1120a27.

⁵² *Ethics*, 1120b1-2.

⁵³ *Ethics*, 1120b3-6.

liberal, for they are without the experience of need.”⁵⁴ On the other hand, those who have this experience and who must make their own fortunes are likely to become quite attached to the resources that they have poured their labor into to earn: “all people are fonder of the works that are their own, just as parents and poets are.”⁵⁵ Additionally, the liberal person’s unconcern for money makes it very difficult for him to hold on to enough of it: “he is inclined neither to accept nor to safeguard money; rather, he is inclined even to throw it away, since he does not honor money on its own account but rather for the sake of giving it.”⁵⁶ These claims indicate that experience with the normal affairs of life, for one who has not inherited wealth, teaches human beings a desire for money which is at once necessary if they are to be wealthy (or even solvent), and corrupting. Again, Aristotle steps back from his more radical depiction of liberal carelessness, clarifying that the distinction between the liberal person and the prodigal one is that the first “spends in accord with his resources and on what he ought,” while the second “exceeds these.”⁵⁷ However, if he has stepped back from his more alarming descriptions of liberality at this point, he has also committed himself to viewing prodigality as more of a difference in degree than in kind from liberality, at least with regard to spending.

It is by reintroducing the liberal human being’s concern with correct taking of money that Aristotle re-establishes their different natures. Unlike the liberal person, “the prodigal person thoroughly errs” in the pleasures and pains he takes with regard to money

⁵⁴ *Ethics*, 1120b12-13.

⁵⁵ *Ethics*, 1120b13-14.

⁵⁶ *Ethics*, 1120b14-17.

⁵⁷ *Ethics*, 1120b25.

because “the different parts of prodigality ... do not all fit together.”⁵⁸ Prodigality by definition “exceeds in giving and not taking,” but this is not a sustainable condition: “it is not easy to give to all while taking from none,” since “resources quickly run out for those who give their own possessions to others.”⁵⁹ People who enjoy giving but neglect concern for right taking are likely to err. If they aren’t careful to spend in accord with their resources, they are likely to end by taking from some whom they ought not to take from, in order to give to others. In fact, because of this inherent problem with prodigality, Aristotle concludes that most prodigals become stingy! A majority of them “take from where they ought not and are in this respect stingy. They become disposed to taking because they wish to spend but are not able to do so readily, since their own possessions are quickly depleted.”⁶⁰ In fact, the common mistake Aristotle identified at the outset of the discussion of defining prodigality too broadly appears to have a reasonable basis: “many of the prodigal are also licentious, for they spend readily and are lavish in their licentious pursuits; and because they do not live with a view to what is noble, they incline in the direction of pleasures.”⁶¹ Aristotle has associated the corruption of prodigality into stinginess (as well as licentiousness) with its deficient concern for taking. In doing so, he has demonstrated why liberality, even if it emphasizes correct giving, cannot wholly neglect the question of how to take well.

⁵⁸ *Ethics*, 1121a4-9, 15-17.

⁵⁹ *Ethics*, 1121a16-19.

⁶⁰ *Ethics*, 1121a30-33.

⁶¹ *Ethics*, 1121b8-11.

However, Aristotle's positive account of prodigality is not merely included to provide a cautionary perspective on liberality. Instead, he presents the serious possibility that a prodigal person, unlike the baser types he may resemble, can have his ready pleasure in spending and in giving something habituated into liberality. Unless (or until) he degenerates into stinginess, the prodigal shares "the traits of the liberal person: he both gives and does not take."⁶² The prodigal is not "base," "corrupt," or "lowborn," but "foolish."⁶³ Because of their open-handedness, prodigals are educable; they can learn to take pleasure in giving to those whom they ought and to refrain from taking from those from they ought not. Even "age and want" are likely to improve them.⁶⁴ Aristotle confirms that in "not a small way," the prodigal is better than the stingy person. He even goes so far as to call the prodigal person "easily curable," proposing that if he "be habituated in the manner indicated, or changed in some other way, he would be liberal."⁶⁵ While the prodigal "without guidance" is likely to be corrupted, "one who obtains the requisite care could arrive at the middle term and at what is proper."⁶⁶ Considering the threat that this vice represents to the prodigal's preservation of himself, let alone his continuing practice of prodigality, it is remarkable that Aristotle demonstrates such optimism about the prospects of habituating the self-destructive prodigal in the virtue of liberality.

⁶² *Ethics*, 1121a23.

⁶³ *Ethics*, 1121a27.

⁶⁴ *Ethics*, 1121a21.

⁶⁵ *Ethics*, 1121a20, 23-24.

⁶⁶ *Ethics*, 1121b11-13.

On the other hand, he presents stinginess as a great and common peril to the soul. It is “both incurable (for it seems that age and every infirmity make people stingy) and inborn in human beings to a greater degree than is prodigality.”⁶⁷ (These claims are similar to those he makes in the *Rhetoric* in describing the opposing weaknesses of youth and old age.⁶⁸ There he says that the young, who are full of hope and have little experience of want, tend to love honor and victory more than money, but that the elderly, who are “worn down by life” and have experience of how difficult it is to make money and how easy it is to lose it, tend to be stingy.) Most people are “lovers of money,” and “this disposition extends widely and is of multiple kinds.”⁶⁹ Aristotle gives something of a typology of stinginess. From its definition, there arises the major division between those who are deficient in giving and those who are excessive in taking.⁷⁰ Among the former are people called by “such names as ‘thrifty,’ ‘penny-pincher’, and ‘miser’” as well as “the skinflint and everyone of that sort, who are so named because they exceed in giving nothing.”⁷¹ Sitting on the fence are some who “abstain from the property of others out of fear, on the grounds that it is not easy for somebody to take the property of others and not have those others take his in return.”⁷² On the other side are those who “take from anywhere and anything,” performing “illiberal tasks, such as brothel keepers and all of

⁶⁷ *Ethics*, 1121b14-15.

⁶⁸ *Rhetoric*, 1388b31-1390b9.

⁶⁹ *Ethics*, 1121b15-18.

⁷⁰ *Ethics*, 1121b19.

⁷¹ *Ethics*, 1121b21-27.

⁷² *Ethics*, 1121b27-31.

their ilk, and usurers who lend small amounts at high interest.”⁷³ Also among the stingy are thieves who run “the greatest risks for the sake of loot,” and gamblers who “gain from their friends to whom they ought rather to give.”⁷⁴ This is a startling panoply of vices and crimes that Aristotle is laying to the charge of stinginess—from peddling flesh to violent recklessness to betrayal of friends. Moreover, where he took pains to state that we shouldn’t blame intertwined vices on prodigality, Aristotle is laying the blame for all of these injustices on the various species of stinginess.

Aristotle brings home this association of expansive corruption with stinginess in a striking fashion when he compares the stingy to tyrants:

Shameful greediness for gain appears to be what [those who exceed in taking] have in common, since they all endure reproach for the sake of gain, and small gain at that. For we do not call stingy those who take great amounts from where they ought not or of what they ought not—for example, tyrants who plunder cities and pillage temples—but we speak of them more as wicked, impious, and unjust.⁷⁵

This comparison suggests that the crimes of the stingy differ from the wickedness of tyranny only according to degree. Further, although Aristotle surely doesn’t admire tyrants for the grandeur of their crimes, his account here does indicate one sense at least in which the tyrant might be said to be superior to the stingy: the latter reveal their pettiness in compromising all for the sake of “small gain.” Tyrants do not aim so low. Stinginess, an excessive seriousness about money, turns out to be utterly shameless, because it sacrifices all things of real worth in its calculated pursuit of small gain. Insofar

⁷³ *Ethics*, 1121b32-1122a1.

⁷⁴ *Ethics*, 1122a8-10.

⁷⁵ *Ethics*, 1122a2-8.

as this disposition towards money is nearly universal and is intensified by the common experiences of age and suffering, the possibility for human beings to achieve liberality appears extremely narrow. Thus, Aristotle's sympathy for the prodigal makes great sense. Liberality implies a freedom from the serious degradations of soul that money—and more abstractly, necessity—tend to impose on human beings, and only those whose desires carry them beyond concern for material security are likely to reach such freedom. In this sense, the prescribed “second sailing” for most would involve cleaving to prodigality.

Now a fuller picture of habituation is possible than that which moderation and courage offered. As discussed above, Aristotle has suggested that habituation in courage depends on preventing the young from facing certain forms of dangerous and painful experiences: those which would “unhinge” their natures and make them cowardly. Although Aristotle maintains that courage is for the sake of the noble, his emphasis is on resistance and endurance,⁷⁶ and he even admits that “courage is in fact a painful thing.”⁷⁷ Habituation in moderation depends on a guardian setting strict limits to the potential infinitude of bodily pleasure in order to teach moderation, imposing the rule of reason to limit the irrational longing of the young for pleasure. With liberality, however, guardians must also find a way to guide their charges' passions beyond merely responding to the temptations life poses for slavery to the body. Habituation in liberality—in the case of the “curing” of a prodigal—depends not merely on an education in the hard knocks of experience but, more importantly, on an education of desire to embrace noble objects: the foolish spender becomes liberal when he or she learns how to give (and how to refrain

⁷⁶ See, for example, *Ethics*, 1115b11-12, 1115b18-20, 1116a15.

⁷⁷ *Ethics*, 1117a34.

from taking) nobly. Thus Aristotle's presentation of habituation in virtue is deepened as he progresses through the *Ethics*. As I discuss in the next section, his treatment of liberality not only takes this presentation a step further, but also introduces an element that unifies the virtues of Book Four.

The Relationship between Liberality as a Particular Virtue and Broader Freedom of Soul

The same term that Aristotle uses for the virtue of liberality (*eleutheriotes*) is commonly used to describe the quality of a free human being (as opposed to one who is enslaved or slavish.) The sense in which liberality has been shown to represent a liberation from the debasement that may result from the harsh experience of need in human beings' usual experiences of life proves that the virtue concerning the giving and taking of money is closely connected to this broader quality of freedom that shares its name. An understanding of the latter, heavily influenced by Aristotle's discussion of liberality and stinginess, is pivotal in Book Four. The discussion of the virtue of liberality showed stinginess to be not only dangerous, but also contemptible. Aristotle treated cowardice as a reaction to unhinging pain, and licentiousness as a result of unbridled pleasure, but his account of stinginess attributes to it a degree of calculation that these vices lack: a calculation that is ignoble and misguided. The stingy secure inferior goods at great moral cost—and to this extent, they prove themselves slavish and base. In contrast, liberal human beings are defined by their consistent recognition and orientation towards noble objects, while prodigals are inherently inconsistent because they are unwise about the limits to their resources and indiscriminating about the objects of their spending. The lines between vice and virtue in Book Four tend to follow these patterns. In this sense, the book seems to be concerned with the general distinction between what is liberal and what

is base. Thus the magnificent person, who is liberal on a grand scale, “resembles a knower, since he is able to contemplate what is fitting and to spend great amounts in a suitable way.”⁷⁸ The vices opposed to magnificence, vulgarity and parsimony bear parallels to prodigality and stinginess, respectively. While the vulgar person, like the prodigal, is made foolish through a confusion over which objects are worthy of choice (spending “little on what he ought to spend much and much on what he ought to spend little”), the parsimonious person imitates the stingy one in sacrificing the great to the base (he will “be deficient in all respects, and after spending great amounts, he will destroy the noble for some trifle.”)⁷⁹ Aristotle’s well-known discussion of the virtue of magnanimity invokes a decisive refutation of base calculation: “for the sake of what will he do shameful things, he to whom nothing is great?”⁸⁰ On the other hand, the nameless virtue which “seems most like friendship” is guided, like liberality, by its possessor’s discernment of what is worthy: “for the sake of a great pleasure in the future, he will cause a little pain now.”⁸¹ Similarly, the lover of truth comes to light as one who speaks the truth even when there is little on the line: “if he is truthful in the situations in which being such makes no difference, still more so will he be truthful in the situations in which it does.”⁸² Such a person is always on “guard against what is false on the grounds that it is shameful.” At the same time, the blame merited by boasting grows as the good it aims at

⁷⁸ *Ethics*, 1122a35.

⁷⁹ *Ethics*, 1123a27-29.

⁸⁰ *Ethics*, 1123b32.

⁸¹ *Ethics*, 1127a7.

⁸² *Ethics*, 1127b2-7.

becomes less: “he who pretends to be greater than he is for the sake of reputation or honor is not overly blameworthy as a boaster, whereas he who does this for money (or anything that would lead to money) is more unseemly.”⁸³ In all of these cases, the virtuous character is the one who knowingly clings to what is noble, while the base one misjudges the worth of something trivial.

It is only in the virtues with regard to play—that is, the restful part of life involving “passing the time with playful amusement”—that Aristotle explicitly names the liberal person as his standard, using the designation in a broader sense than the liberality concerning money.⁸⁴ Here those “intent on doing anything for a laugh” are condemned along with those who find wit disgusting, while the “playful in a suitable manner are called witty,” a name said to imply versatility, “since witticisms seem to be movements of their character; and characters, like bodies, are judged by their movements.”⁸⁵ The other virtue of play, tact, is defined by the judgment of a liberal person: “it belongs to the tactful person to say and listen to the sorts of things suited to a decent and liberal person.”⁸⁶ This is because “the playfulness of a liberal person differs from that of a slavish one as the play of an educated person does from that of an uneducated one.”⁸⁷ Aristotle notes that the limits of both tact and wit are difficult to define, but the person who is tactful and witty self-legislates against the wrong uses of humor in the very

⁸³ *Ethics*, 1127b11-14.

⁸⁴ *Ethics*, 1127b35.

⁸⁵ *Ethics*, 1128a4-12.

⁸⁶ *Ethics*, 1128a17-20.

⁸⁷ *Ethics*, 1128a20-22.

manner of a “refined and liberal person,” who is “like a law unto himself.”⁸⁸ This positive notion of a liberal character as one that aptly rules itself expresses in a concise way the sense in which the liberal person both recognizes and cleaves to what is noble in the face of baser inclinations which tend to impose themselves on humanity.

In accordance with the centrality of the opposition between liberality and baseness in Book Four, Aristotle turns to shame in the book’s final chapter. Here Aristotle takes pains to argue that although a sense of shame may hold human beings back from vice, shame itself “does not belong to a decent person” and is not appropriate to mature human beings.⁸⁹ This could be taken as proof that Aristotle rejects anything falling short of perfect virtue—“we suppose that [an older person] ought not to do anything that incurs shame.”⁹⁰ However, a different emphasis appears when Book Four as a whole is understood as showing that liberal human beings are disposed to recognize and desire objects that are truly superior to the goods that motivate base people. If this is the case, the final passages of the book reiterate the importance of liberality in the general sense to Aristotle’s understanding of virtue, while pointing towards later chapters that are concerned with “mixed” characteristics, such as self-restraint, that fall short of virtue.⁹¹ Thus, “to be the sort of person to do anything shameful is the mark of someone base.”⁹² At the same time, “to be disposed to feel shame at doing any such thing, and on *this*

⁸⁸ *Ethics*, 1128a29-33.

⁸⁹ *Ethics*, 1128b14-23.

⁹⁰ *Ethics*, 1128b22.

⁹¹ *Ethics*, 1128b34.

⁹² *Ethics*, 1128b26.

account to suppose that one is decent,” is strange.”⁹³ This is a confirmation that virtue itself requires a certain freedom from base desires, “for shame attaches to voluntary acts, but the decent person will never voluntarily do base things.”⁹⁴ Aristotle has offered an account here of what would *not* be a strange basis for supposing oneself virtuous: to be disposed liberally towards actions, pleased by one’s performance of nobler action and not tempted by the satisfaction of ignoble desires. The liberal standard of action might even be more salutary for the curing of base tendencies than shame. If people saw when their own moral calculations amounted to despicable bargains, where small returns were gained at great cost, they might come to desire the freedom that virtue would give them from a life blindly dedicated to no more than increased security from need.

Liberality and the Education of Tyrants

There is one especially surprising feature in Aristotle’s treatment of liberality: the presence of the tyrant. First, as a qualification to his claim that prodigals exceed spending in accord with their resources and on what they ought, he says that “we do not speak of tyrants as prodigal, because for them to exceed their great wealth, through gifts and expenditures, seems no easy thing.”⁹⁵ Tyrants are not prodigal, because their resources are nearly infinite. Later, the passage I mentioned above compares tyrants with stingy men: “We do not call stingy those who take great amounts from where they ought not or of what they ought not—for example, tyrants who plunder cities and pillage temples—but

⁹³ *Ethics*, 1128b27.

⁹⁴ *Ethics*, 1128b29-30.

⁹⁵ *Ethics*, 1120b25.

we speak of [such tyrants] more as wicked, impious and unjust.”⁹⁶ It is strange that the tyrant appears as a sort of boundary figure to both prodigal and stingy characters.⁹⁷ Aristotle’s observations about the tyrant seems to respond to Socrates’ discussion of tyranny in Plato’s *Republic*: in Books Eight and Nine, Socrates traces the origin of the tyrant through a genealogy in which both the stingy and the spend-thrifty—the prodigals—take part.

The Aristotelian implication that the tyrant, albeit due to his practically inexhaustible resources, possesses a certain superiority over the stingy may echo Socrates’ description of the tyrant as a man in whose soul the “great winged drone” of *eros* has been planted.⁹⁸ However, in the Socratic account of the tyrant’s origin, the most corrupting desires are the opposite of those given in the Aristotelian account. In Socrates’ account, as I will argue, stinginess protects the laws—albeit weakly, and with false arguments—while those who freely spend without care of their own well-being are deemed the stinging drones that seduce human beings to ever greater desire.

Socrates recounts in *The Republic* how the nature and nurture of the tyrant culminate in a soul full of desire and deplete of moderation and justice. The tyrant’s oligarchic ancestor is essential to this account because his imperfect commitment to law—rooted in anxiety over his wealth rather than justice—is the only basis of restraint

⁹⁶ *Ethics*, 1122a4-6.

⁹⁷ The twin tyrant references in this chapter have been noted by scholars who find in them the suggestion that liberality itself tends toward tyranny, and consequently support for the view that Aristotle is skeptical about the aspirations of moral virtue. This interpretation is thought provoking, but as I show here, a closer consideration of how Aristotle situates these tyrant references reveals how they are illiberal. In Chapter 6, I address this scholarship further.

⁹⁸ *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 573a

that is passed down through the family. He is summed up by Socrates as a “stingy” person “who honors only the money-making desires while despising the ones that aren't necessary but exist for the sake of play and showing off.”⁹⁹ This oligarchic man, although “more graceful than many” in his ability to suppress lawless desires, is in fact moved by an “insatiable” need to become “as rich as possible.”¹⁰⁰ Something like lawfulness governs his actions, inspired by the kind of fear that Aristotle attributes to some stingy men: he “has a good reputation in ... contractual relations—because he seems to be just” but “he is forcibly holding down bad desires, which are there, with some decent part of himself.”¹⁰¹ He doesn't tame these desires “with argument, but by necessity and fear, doing so because he trembles for his whole substance.” His wealth makes him a ruler, but his greed motivates him to foster rather than control the spending of “those among the youth who become licentious.”¹⁰² He eschews the sumptuary laws that might save the young from wasting their own resources, so that he might himself profit from usury—“buying and making loans on the property of such men.”¹⁰³ In this sense, his rule in the city is proof that “it's not possible to honor wealth in a city and at the same time to maintain moderation among its citizens.”¹⁰⁴ The people thus encouraged to use up their resources are often “human beings who are not ignoble,” compelled “to become poor” by

⁹⁹ *Republic*, 572c.

¹⁰⁰ *Republic*, 555a-c.

¹⁰¹ *Republic*, 554d.

¹⁰² *Republic*, 555c.

¹⁰³ *Republic*, 555c.

¹⁰⁴ *Republic*, 555d.

neglectful rule. In other words, they meet the strict definition of Aristotelian prodigals. However, according to Socrates, a prodigal “spender of his means” becomes either a beggar or a wrongdoer, and thus represents a “disease of a city” just as an idle drone “is a disease of a hive.”¹⁰⁵ This prodigal drone is “full of [spendthrift] pleasures and desires and is ruled by the unnecessary ones, while the stingy oligarchic man is ruled by the necessary ones.”¹⁰⁶

The distinction between unnecessary and necessary desires is crucial here. Necessary desires are those directed to what “we are by nature compelled to long for,” both ones which “we aren’t able to turn aside” and “those whose satisfaction benefits us.”¹⁰⁷ In Socrates’ discussion here, his interlocuter Adeimantus agrees to define as necessary desires for such food, sex and other things as support “health and good condition” of the body and the soul.¹⁰⁸ Unnecessary desires are defined in opposition to these: they are those desires of “which a man could rid himself if he were to practice from youth on and whose presence ... does no good—and sometimes even does the opposite of good.” Thus, the stingy oligarch, who has an insatiable desire for wealth to satisfy his natural needs, lives in a city where he has fostered the growth of a class of prodigal drones with nothing to lose because they have spent all they have on things which do them no good (including spending on noble pleasures).

¹⁰⁵ *Republic*, 552c-d.

¹⁰⁶ *Republic*, 559d.

¹⁰⁷ *Republic*, 558d.

¹⁰⁸ *Republic*, 558e-559c.

The oligarch's son—whose money-making father gave little care to his education—upon coming into contact with such spendthrift characters, is easily seduced but not wholly won over, and “drawn in both directions,” he adopts a way of life that lies midway between the alternatives and is “neither illiberal nor hostile to law.”¹⁰⁹ This is how the democrat comes to be. However, although the “middle desires” of the democrat moderate him to some extent, they are not strong enough for him to preserve his own son from corruption. When the spendthrift drones implant the “great winged drone” of love in the democrat's son, their seduction is successful.¹¹⁰ This great drone is a “leader of idle desires” that conquers the youth's moderation and any of his “opinions or desires accounted good and still admitting of shame.”¹¹¹ The youth inflamed by this tyrannic love becomes a tyrant, the paragon of wickedness, impiety and injustice.

There are strong parallels between Socrates' genealogy of a tyrant and Aristotle's account, in his liberality chapter, of habituation. Both treatments recognize stinginess as potentially insatiable longing for wealth prompted by a concern focused on securing the necessities of human life. Both describe prodigality as not itself ignoble, but also recognize that in its potential for self-destruction, there are the seeds of great wrongdoing.

However, there are key differences as well. In the Aristotelian account, prodigality is both curable and a plausible antidote to the disease of stinginess which naturally corrupts most men. Although Socrates does not deny these things, he emphasizes that prodigality is the corrupter. In Socrates' discussion, the unnecessary

¹⁰⁹ *Republic*, 572c-d.

¹¹⁰ *Republic*, 573a.

¹¹¹ *Republic*, 573a-b.

desires appear as those that “exist for the sake of play and showing off” and that aim at nothing beneficial for human nature. Socrates blames both the oligarchs and the drones for the devolution into democracy, and then into tyranny, and his whole discussion seems intended to show why true arguments are needed to support the laws of a city. In his account, both stingy and spend-thrifty desires lead to the moral corruption toward tyranny. Although a regime based on avarice is no good for the city, it is the unnecessary and inherently lawless pleasures, which exist for “the sake of play and showing off,” that represent the greatest danger to the soul.

These are the same unnecessary desires which Aristotle edifies in Book Four by proposing the standard of liberality, just as he argues that human beings should drag themselves away from the corruption of their money-making desires. He finds Socrates’ “drones” much closer to virtue—and justice—than the stingy, who are on the road to all manner of corruption. By resurrecting Socrates’ tyrant in the chapter on liberality, Aristotle implies that a moral virtue other than moderation must stand at the heart of the virtuous education of passions and desires. Socrates famously draws upon the wisdom of the philosopher king for this task, but such a solution must drastically wipe the slate clean. In contrast, Aristotle suggests that the moral virtues themselves, and the education of the passions they can provide, can not only stave off degeneration, but also contribute to a good human life.

In promoting liberality—both the specific virtue and the broader disposition—and disparaging stinginess and related forms of shameful calculation, Aristotle shows that even within the realm of moral virtue, a human being may be led to act nobly as “a law unto himself.” By re-examining the unnecessary desires and finding what can be edified

in them, he indicates that human beings can be habituated to virtue without having the slates of their souls wiped clean. Book Four presents the possibility that through the achievement of detachment from their concerns with ever securing themselves from base necessity, human desires and actions will be ennobled and liberated.

CHAPTER FIVE

Liberality as an Antidote to Self-Regarding Virtue

I showed in the previous chapter how Aristotle's treatment of liberality and its contradictory vices opens the way to seeing habituation and human moral freedom in a new and more optimistic light than is often recognized. In this chapter, I consider the relationship between liberality and the other moral virtues in another way, focusing on the relationship between liberality and the two moral virtues whose treatment by Aristotle immediately follows his discussion of this virtue: magnificence and magnanimity.

Liberality's place in Aristotle's spectrum of virtues has often been treated as the first stepping stone in the ascent towards the great-souled individual. As I discuss below, Aristotle himself seems to suggest this interpretation with the "ratio" of virtues which he composes when first outlining all of the moral virtues in Book Two and reiterates in Book Four. However, if liberality is a gateway into these virtues, it also has aspects that are markedly different from them, and that seem to be in deep opposition with some of Aristotle's more extreme claims about magnificence and magnanimity. I argue in this chapter that Aristotle is not merely presenting a subordinate virtue that points beyond itself towards magnificence, but also introducing a foil for these virtues. Where the different forms of concern for greatness that animate magnificence and magnanimity risk leading virtuous individuals away from recognition of human limitations, liberality embraces a form of noble action that is more coherently grounded. This is because it points virtuous individuals in the direction of other human beings in a way that supports excellent common life. Insofar as this is true, liberality should be recognized not as a

virtue that is subsumed in the quest for magnanimity, but one that leads us towards a coherent grounding for the remaining moral virtues of Chapter IV, which seek the highest possibilities in the parts of life that human beings share together.

The Reason for Underestimating Liberality

It may be that liberality tends to be given little attention on its own because Aristotle himself seems to diminish its significance relative to the virtues of magnificence and magnanimity. This begins with the peculiar way in which he situates liberality within the outline of virtues and vices in Book 2, Chapter Seven. Here, he first introduces liberality as if it is the only mean with respect to giving and taking money.¹ But a few lines later, after introducing liberality's contrary vices of stinginess and prodigality, he unexpectedly indicates that "other dispositions" exist concerning money—including another virtuous mean! This mean is magnificence, and the first thing he says about it is that "the magnificent person differs from the liberal, the former being concerned with great things, the latter with small."² Aristotle's procedure in this seemingly simplified outline of the monetary virtues makes the question of their relationship rather mystifying. For if liberality is defined as the mean concerning the giving and taking of money, one would reasonably anticipate that magnificence as another money-related mean should differ from it by being concerned with different actions than giving and taking. However, Aristotle's first suggestion about magnificence seems to indicate otherwise—he has reduced the difference between them to the scope or significance of the monetary affairs

¹ *Ethics*, 1107b9.

² *Ethics*, 1107b17-19.

concerned. (Of course, Aristotle is vague here, and he provides no clarification at this point as to whether it is the same kind of actions concerning money or different ones than giving and taking that yield “great things.”) According to this initial comparison of the virtuous mean characteristics concerning money, liberality appears to be the lesser virtue, as it is concerned with smaller things. Of course, if this is the correct understanding of the relationship, Aristotle seems to have been inexact for some reason in introducing liberality—why didn’t he call it one of two means concerning money? Or the mean concerning lesser expenditures of money? Or the mean in money matters concerned with lesser things? If Aristotle anticipates that the reader will be asking these questions, he merely indicates—as he does concerning many questions raised by the Book Two, Chapter Seven outline—that any confusion won’t be cleared up until subsequent chapters: the dispositions related to magnificence “differ from matters related to liberality, but how they differ will be stated later.”³ However, in his next step in the outline, he continues to downplay liberality.

Aristotle turns from dispositions concerned with money to those concerned with another external good—honor. Again, Aristotle introduces a single mean concerned with this good—greatness of soul—and then subsequently brings to light a second one (this time, a nameless virtue).⁴ However, Aristotle makes his introduction of this second virtue by returning to the opposition he drew just previously between liberality and magnificence. He says, “just as we were saying that liberality bears a relation to magnificence, though it differs by being concerned with small things, so also there is a

³ *Ethics*, 1107b20-21.

⁴ *Ethics*, 1107b22, 26.

certain [other] virtue that bears a relation to greatness of soul, the latter being concerned with great honor, the former with small.”⁵ In other words, as liberality (concerned with small things in money matters) stands to magnificence (concerned with large things in money matters), so does a certain nameless virtue (concerned with small honors) stand to greatness of soul (concerned with great honors). As Aristotle makes explicit in his detailed treatment of greatness of soul, honor is the greatest of the external goods, so by creating a ratio between these four virtues, Aristotle is suggesting that liberality is the least of them.⁶

Thus, on the grounds of the outline of virtues alone, Aristotle’s reader is prepared to see liberality as a virtue of secondary importance. On one hand, therefore, one might view liberality’s significance for Aristotle as chiefly an explanatory stepping stone to magnificence.⁷ Or, if one were inclined to order the virtues in terms of their importance to a happy human life, one would likely be led by Aristotle’s example here to think of liberality as the least important of the virtues concerned with the acquisition of external goods—perhaps a necessary subordinate to others, but certainly not the highest or noblest; certainly not, like greatness of soul, “a kind of *kosmos* of the virtues.”⁸ As I stated above, both sorts of arguments have been made by many scholars.

⁵ *Ethics*, 1107b24-27.

⁶ *Ethics*, 1123b21.

⁷ Along these lines, Susan Collins proposes that if we approach an understanding of liberality by taking “Aristotle’s definition of magnificence as our guide—its connection to expenditure, to what is fitting, and to greatness,” we will see “that the difference between liberality and magnificence is essentially a matter of scale.” Susan D. Collins, “Chapter 7: The Moral Virtues in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*,” in *Action and Contemplation: Studies in the Moral and Political Thought of Aristotle*, ed. Robert M. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 138.

⁸ *Ethics*, 1123b36-1124a1.

Moreover, if Aristotle's purpose in laying out the range of virtues is to elevate the "best and most complete" virtue or set of virtues among all of the virtues—those most consonant with the human good and happiness according to the arguments of Book One of the *Ethics*—his apparent denigration of liberality is very important.⁹ If Aristotle is encouraging his readers to make little of the virtue concerned with acquisition and expenditure of money in small matters and admire instead magnificent displays of wealth and the grandeur of great-souled action, is he not the apologist for aristocratic life and unrealistic theorist of economic needs that his modern critics make him out to be? Or if he recognizes the importance of mundane economic matters to human happiness, does he wish to point us to a tragic situation for human beings in which the tragedy of the neediness of the human condition is destined to undermine the serious human being's pursuit of nobility and virtue altogether?

How Magnificence Surpasses Liberality

In his treatment of the virtue of magnificence, Aristotle includes claims that might be taken as confirmation of such suspicions. Magnificence seems to be some excellence added to liberality, since a magnificent person is liberal, but not all liberal people are magnificent.¹⁰ Aristotle begins his detailed treatment of magnificence with the claim that it "surpasses liberality in greatness."¹¹ However, even as he says this, he does not simply reiterate and expand upon his earlier intimation that liberal actions stand to magnificent

⁹ *Ethics*, 1098a14-18.

¹⁰ *Ethics*, 1122a30.

¹¹ *Ethics*, 1122a22.

ones merely as lesser to greater. Rather, he also clarifies now that magnificence is concerned only with half of the field of actions with which liberality concerned—it is not concerned with both spending (or giving) *and* taking, but “only expenditures.”¹² So it turns out that the great things magnificence is concerned with are great expenditures (versus the smaller expenditures of liberality), and Aristotle says that it is precisely “in these expenditures” that magnificence surpasses liberality. Since magnificence is not defined with reference to the amount that one takes or refrains from taking at all, it will presumably also be unlike the virtue of liberality in how its different parts fit together. Aristotle stressed that for the liberal person, taking and giving fitting amounts were acts that essentially hung together, or “correspond[ed] with each other,” and that this consistency was essential to its divergence from prodigality and stinginess.¹³ The first account we are given of what must correspond in magnificent actions is the amount spent, on one hand, and the factors establishing the worth of what was thereby purchased, on the other.¹⁴ As Aristotle explains it, “a fitting expenditure on a great thing... is relative to the person involved and to the thing on which as well as that for which he makes the expenditure.”¹⁵ Nonetheless, this surpassing of liberality seems to be no small matter for their relative excellence, for Aristotle says that magnificence should be understood as “a fitting expenditure on a great thing,” and because of the magnificent person’s capacity to

¹² *Ethics*, 1122a21.

¹³ *Ethics*, 1120b35-1121a1

¹⁴ *Ethics*, 1122a23.

¹⁵ *Ethics*, 1122a23, 25-27.

choose what is fitting in such an expenditure, Aristotle elevates magnificence by likening it—uniquely, among the moral virtues in his treatment—to an excellence of the intellect.

Aristotle says that “the magnificent person resembles a knower (*epistemon*),” because of an ability “to contemplate (*theoreo*) what is fitting and to spend great amounts in a suitable way.”¹⁶ It is not immediately apparent why the shift in scale from ordinary to great expenditures requires a new kind of scientific or contemplative understanding on the part of the spender, but Aristotle leads his readers to an argument for this between 1122b1 and 1122b18.¹⁷ This argument ultimately roots the requirement for contemplation in magnificence in the fact that a great and noble work (*ergon*) is produced through the magnificent person’s large expenditure. Aristotle says that “the contemplation of such a work is wondrous (*thaumastos*), and what is magnificent is wondrous.”¹⁸ In other words, the magnificence of spending large amounts of money well isn’t simply liberality with one’s money on a grander scale, but production of something which is so beautiful, great and fitting for its purpose as to cause wonder or admiration. Presumably, a magnificent person appears to have something like knowledge because to produce something that can be wondered at for these reasons takes a kind of vision or understanding of what is great and noble and worthy.

¹⁶ *Ethics*, 1122a35-36.

¹⁷ In connecting magnificence to contemplation and knowledge, Aristotle seems to echo Socrates, in Book Six of Plato’s *Republic*, where he identifies magnificence as a trait proper to a soul engaged in thought and contemplation about the whole, everything human and divine, and all time and being (486a). According to Socrates’ presentation, however, contemplation of the whole reveals to a philosopher how paltry and insignificant human things are. Thus, Aristotle’s attempt to anchor magnificence in human artfulness and society here suggests that he is not satisfied with the tendency of thought to denigrate the human things.

¹⁸ *Ethics*, 1122b17.

Thus, even though liberal and magnificent deeds could be distinguished at first glance by looking to how much money was spent upon them, doing so does not get us to the heart of what makes an action magnificent. According to Aristotle's claims, when we call an expenditure magnificent, we are no longer primarily concerned with the money spent, as a portion of one's wealth and possessions. Rather we are concerned with the excellence of the work produced by means of this expenditure. Aristotle makes this clear by distinguishing "the virtue (*areté*) of a possession" from that of a work.¹⁹ He notes that "the possession whose price is greatest (such as gold) is the most honored (*timiotaton*), but the most honored work is the great and noble one."²⁰ It is the magnificent work's tendency to evoke wonder that makes it honorable for us. He concludes that "the virtue of a work, its magnificence, resides in its greatness."²¹ Thus, Aristotle's claim that the magnificent person is a knower entails tying the excellence of the virtue directly to the excellence of the wonderful works it is capable of producing.

By focusing on the products of magnificent action, Aristotle reorients a treatment of magnificence that he has begun more elusively just previously. Initially, his approach to recognizing the magnificent person seems almost tautological: employing a formula from "the beginning" of the work that defines a characteristic by the activities *and* the objects which correspond with it, he sets down that a magnificent person must make great and fitting expenditures of money *and* thereby produce great and fitting works.²² It is

¹⁹ *Ethics*, 1122b15.

²⁰ *Ethics*, 1122b16-17.

²¹ *Ethics*, 1122b18.

²² *Ethics*, 1122b1-5.

noteworthy that this exact definition of a characteristic is not clearly stated earlier in the *Ethics*. When Aristotle argues that moral characteristics will be akin to their corresponding activities in Book Two, he does not speak of the objects of these activities.²³ On the other hand, he soon after relates virtuous characteristics with arts, one of the intellectual virtues he discusses in Book Six, on the ground that while both “bring [their] work to a good conclusion” by attending to the mean, virtue “is more precise and better than every art” in this regard.²⁴ This indicates that virtues are somehow concerned with works as objects, and that the excellence of a virtuous characteristic corresponds with the excellence of the work it achieves. However, in the Book Two passages that he refers back to here, the activities out of which a virtuous characteristic is developed appear essential to the definition of that virtue, while the objects it produces arise almost as an afterthought. This fact, as well as Aristotle’s method of proceeding next, seem to privilege the importance of the corresponding activities over their objects. When he says that “the work ought to be worthy of the expenditure, the expenditure worthy of the work, or even to exceed it,” he is insisting that the size of expenditure is more essential to a magnificent deed than the greatness of the work produced.²⁵ This makes sense if the activity of a virtue is more essential than its objects.

Soon after, however, in outlining the qualities of the magnificent person, he will differentiate magnificence from liberality by making a claim that goes in a different direction: the greatness of a magnificent person over a liberal one lies “precisely” in the

²³ See *Ethics* 1103b21-31.

²⁴ *Ethics*, 1106b7-15.

²⁵ *Ethics*, 1122b5-6.

fact that even when both spend equal amounts, the magnificent person's work will be more magnificent.²⁶ In other words, while key traits of the magnificent person align with those of the liberal one—both spend “for the sake of the *kalon*,” do so “with pleasure and unstintingly” and without “strict accounting,” and “spend what [they] ought and as [they] ought”—the precise excellence that distinguishes the magnificent person is *not* how much he spends but how worthy and beautiful the work he produces is.²⁷ And this means that when those marked by the two virtues are both spending similar amounts, it is in fact the liberal person whose spending will exceed the value of the work, and the magnificent person whose work will exceed what he spent.

Why would Aristotle proceed in this elusive and almost contradictory fashion? His strange procedure alerts us to the peculiar significance of beautiful works to magnificence. We can approach an understanding of most of the moral virtues through considering their proper activities—e.g. facing the enemy bravely, not finding pleasure in ignoble sex, giving food to someone in need—but to understand what is essential in magnificence, we have to contemplate the beautiful things that it produces. Ronna Burger notes that Aristotle's account of magnificence is both the first place where the beautiful is “explicitly announced as the common *telos* of all the virtues,”²⁸ and the discussion where the *kalon* can be rendered in English “most naturally” as the beautiful.²⁹ As she puts it, it

²⁶ *Ethics*, 1122b13-15.

²⁷ *Ethics*, 1122b5-12.

²⁸ *Ethics*, 1122b7.

²⁹ Ronna Burger, *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 83.

is in the works of magnificence that “the beautiful shows itself most vividly.”³⁰ What kinds of works can be said to have this wondrous and beautiful character? Aristotle provides examples of both public and private works that are honored or “take[n] seriously” by “the whole city or people of worth.”³¹ In the first category are expenditures “that concern the gods—votive offerings, buildings, and sacrifices,” and “those that concern the entire divine realm and are proper objects of ambition in common affairs,”—a splendidly endowed chorus, a trireme, or feast for the city.³² Listed among the second are weddings and similar things “that occur just once,” things “connected with the receiving and sending off of foreign guests,” and gifts given or reciprocated.³³ Although many of these latter things serve the “common affairs,” not all of them do.³⁴ Aristotle speaks of how a magnificent person produces different gifts and works for gods and human beings, for adults and children, each “suitable” to the greatness of the recipient and the circumstances for which it is produced.³⁵ Though these gifts differ in nature and expense, from a temple to a small but beautiful trinket for a child, they will tend to “have a certain resemblance to votive offerings,” and to “endure over time.”³⁶ Aristotle’s summary of this discussion is that “it belongs to the magnificent person to produce things in a magnificent way in whatever category he should produce something... and in a way

³⁰ Burger, 82.

³¹ See *Ethics* 1122b19, 1123a1-6.

³² *Ethics* 1122b19-24.

³³ *Ethics* 1123a2-5.

³⁴ *Ethics* 1123a5-6.

³⁵ *Ethics* 1123a10-16.

³⁶ *Ethics* 1123a6, 11-14.

worthy of the expenditure.”³⁷ According to Aristotle, we should not simply understand the magnificent person as a big spender, but as someone who produces great and beautiful things for gods, the city and his friends through a kind of contemplation or knowledge of what is due and fitting in each case.

Difficulties with Magnificence

Confronted with the nobility of the objects of magnificent spending, we see that a virtue capable of seeing or knowing how to produce what is worthy of them must be very excellent. However, Aristotle’s description of magnificence as a kind of *theoria* and *episteme* with comprehensive skill to produce noble offerings worthy not only of children and private friends, but the city, foreign cities and the gods themselves, raises thorny questions. A central question is whether we can conclude that magnificent offerings for the gods that evoke human wonder are therefore truly worthy and fitting of the gods in the same way that magnificent expenditures on the common good could be. How could a human being have similar abilities to contemplate what is worthy of the gods *and* of human beings? Burger provides a compelling expression of how one might take this wondrous aspiration of magnificence seriously. She attributes the beauty of the projects Aristotle associates with magnanimity—such as “a ship of war, the chorus for a performance of tragedy, temples or sacrifices to the gods”—to their capacity to “express the greatness of the city but also that which transcends the city, through which it seeks to elevate itself.”³⁸ In other words, in her understanding these works are beautiful insofar as

³⁷ *Ethics*, 1123a16-18.

³⁸ Burger, 82.

they are open, through their dedication to the greatness of the political community, to things that transcend the city. In her account, works are magnificent because their “grandeur... brings our recognition of the gods, along with wonder and contemplation, into the political world,” and for the magnificent person to be able to produce them requires that “he is able to ‘contemplate the fitting’” and “spend for the sake of the *kalon*.”³⁹ However, even as this account attempts to grapple seriously with the highest aspirations of magnificence, it seems to raise problematic ambiguities with the virtue. The difficulty with Burger’s account is that it is not clear that the city’s greatness or (even more than this) its quest to magnify this greatness could be compatible with a fitting recognition of what transcends it. Although an individual and a political community may be edified by the pursuit of things worthy of the highest honor, to the extent that they are pursuing their own greatness, they are acting out of a different motive than wonder for the things beyond them.

In fact, the possibility that a human being could be a knowledgeable producer of works worthy of the gods seems to be foreclosed by Aristotle’s discussion of wisdom (*sophia*) in Book 6, Chapter Seven. Aristotle there argues that wisdom, which combines knowledge about “what proceeds *from* the principles” with “the truth *about* the principles” of “the things most honorable by nature” is understanding (*nous*) as well as *episteme*.⁴⁰ Aristotle associates wisdom with the contemplation of wondrous things—it is not concerned with advantage or the human good as prudence (*phronesis*) is, but rather “things that are extraordinary, wondrous, difficult and daimonic—yet useless too”—the

³⁹ Burger, 82-83.

⁴⁰ *Ethics*, 1141a18-20, 1141b4-5.

kinds of things that “Anaxagoras, Thales, and the wise of that sort” were thought to know.⁴¹ According to Aristotle, it would be “strange” to take prudence more seriously than wisdom “if a human being is not the best of things in the cosmos.”⁴² And they could not be the same intellectual virtues because even if “a human being is the best in comparison with the other animals... there are other things whose nature is more divine than that of a human being—to take only the most manifest example, the things of which the cosmos is composed.”⁴³ It would be impossible to say that the magnificent person was contemplating truly wondrous things in the highest sense unless he or she were contemplating the things that are more divine than a human being. However, if this were so, Aristotle’s arguments in Book 6 indicate that magnificence would not be tied to prudence and the pursuit of the human good or the political community at all.

This leads us to consider that there must be something equivocal about the contemplation belonging to the magnificent person. Aristotle has said that the greatness and beauty of magnificent works lies in their worthiness of wonder or admiration (*thaumaste*).⁴⁴ However, wonder is an ambiguous standard for beauty: as the human response to what is great and beyond us, it is necessarily born out of some form of ignorance and inferiority on the part of the person who wonders. For this reason, the wise person will not wonder at everything that the foolish one wonders at.⁴⁵ Nor could the

⁴¹ *Ethics*, 1141b3-9.

⁴² *Ethics*, 1141a22-23.

⁴³ *Ethics*, 1141a29-1141b3.

⁴⁴ *Ethics*, 1122b7-8, 1123a27-31

⁴⁵ Cf. *Ethics* 1095a25.

producer of a great work share in the same wonder about it that those who admire it without the virtue to produce it do. Without knowledge or understanding about what is noble and fitting, a truly worthy work could not be produced by the magnificent human being. Insofar as the magnificent person's knowledge is responsible for what he produces (and we have seen that Aristotle calls him a "knower" *epistemon*), he may feel pride and pleasure in the beautiful thing that he has made, but whatever wonder his works evoke for him will be qualified by his knowing *that* they were his products and *how* they were produced. He seems to be defined by knowledge and *not* the wonder that for Aristotle characterizes the philosopher.

Another aspect of magnificence that pulls it back from the heights of intellectual virtue is its dependence on external circumstances that are largely out of our control. The great expenditure that helps to delimit magnificence from liberality also makes the former unavailable to many people. From the beginning, Aristotle states that a magnificent expenditure must be fitting, and therefore "relative to the person involved and to the thing on which as well as that for which he makes the expenditure."⁴⁶ Later, Aristotle comes back to this condition of relativity to the person involved: "in all cases... the expenditure is referred to the person who is acting—who he is and what resources are available to him—for the expenditure must be worthy of these and be fitting not only to the work but also to the person producing it."⁴⁷ Of course, putting this together with the required large expenditures shows that magnificence is an exclusive virtue: it wouldn't be fitting but "foolish" and "contrary to what is worthy and proper" for "a poor man" to try to spend

⁴⁶ *Ethics*, 1122a24-25.

⁴⁷ *Ethics*, 1122b24-26.

magnificently, since his resources aren't sufficient.⁴⁸ (This contrasts with liberality, which is simply "spoken of in reference to a person's resources," and "consists... in the characteristic of the giver" in relation to his resources, such that "nothing prevents the person who gives a lesser amount from being the more liberal one, if he gives from a lesser total amount."⁴⁹) From this point of departure for magnificence, Aristotle seems to throw himself into the connection between the nobility of the virtue and its requirement for noble birth: magnificence "is fitting to those who possess these sorts of resources to begin with—whether on their own account or through their ancestors or relations—and to those who are wellborn, of good reputation, and all such things, for all these things possess greatness and worthiness."⁵⁰ At this point in the chapter, the magnificent person who at first resembled "a knower," and whose greatness was said to lie "precisely" in his ability to produce the most magnificent work from a given large expenditure, becomes "especially" the kind of person who is wealthy, wellborn, and of good reputation.⁵¹ Aristotle does not note the discrepancy between being defined by one's knowledge and ability and by one's gifts of fortune here, although he did in his discussion of liberality: "the accusation is leveled against chance that those who most deserve wealth are the least wealthy in fact."⁵² However, this discrepancy can't be ignored in a work so concerned as

⁴⁸ *Ethics*, 1122b26-28.

⁴⁹ *Ethics*, 1120b7-12.

⁵⁰ *Ethics*, 1122b29-33.

⁵¹ *Ethics*, 1122b33-34

⁵² *Ethics*, 1120b17-18.

the *Ethics* is with showing that the virtues are characteristics that are “up to us and voluntary.”⁵³

At any rate, the more essential we take the magnificent actors’ wealth and birth to be to their activities, the less noble or marvelous their works will consequently appear, insofar as they are tied to their wealth as well as to their choice, knowledge and skill. The difficulty for magnificence of bringing these things together anticipates Aristotle’s discussion in Book 10 of the fact that those with “measured means,” who do “not rule land and sea” are able “to do noble things,” and that “private persons” seem to act not less but more decently than “those in positions of power.”⁵⁴ There, Aristotle describes the “opinions of the wise” that noble action is independent of plentiful resources, describing Solon’s “noble” affirmation that the happy are those who do “the noblest things” with “a measured amount of external equipment,” and Anaxagoras’ view that the happy person need not “be rich or politically powerful,” despite the judgment of those who perceive only “external things.”⁵⁵ There is no way to guarantee that a love and understanding of how to produce what is noble will exist in the same person who is born to a large inheritance.

Moreover, when Aristotle concludes his treatment of magnificence, he seems to be warning the reader about a temptation that may be hard to avoid for those pursuing the virtue. Whereas most of Aristotle’s individual treatments of virtues conclude with summary statements relating the vices and virtues, the chapter on magnificence fades out

⁵³ *Ethics*, 1114b27, 29.

⁵⁴ *Ethics*, 1179a4-8.

⁵⁵ *Ethics*, 1179a10-17.

with a focus on the vices of vulgarity and parsimony. Rather than summing up their relation to the virtue, his final word is that “they do not bring reproach, because they are neither harmful to a neighbor nor extremely unseemly.”⁵⁶ It seems strange for Aristotle to finish on this ambiguous note. However, this may be because his account of vulgarity, the vice that is closer to magnificence, is focused on showing us how easily the magnificent person could miss the mark of virtue. When he first described vulgarity earlier in the chapter, he explained that the excess existed “not in the magnitude of the expenditure for the things one ought to spend on, but in making an ostentatious display in the circumstances one ought not and in a way one ought not to.”⁵⁷ Now his first account of the vulgar person seems almost an echo of his description of magnificence, at 1122b5-6, as more concerned with greatness of expenditure than worth of the work: “he who is excessive and vulgar exceeds in spending beyond what is needful.”⁵⁸ Then he provides a caricature of vulgarity: “on small things he lavishes much expense and makes an ostentatious display of himself contrary to what is proper—for example, in giving a club dinner in the manner of a wedding feast or leading a comic chorus clothed in purple in its entrance on state, just as they might do in Megara.”⁵⁹ It is easy for the reader to picture these vulgar displays and recognize the humor in them. However, it is not so clear how the kind of person who gives presents, even to children, as if they are votive offerings⁶⁰

⁵⁶ *Ethics*, 1123a34.

⁵⁷ *Ethics*, 1122a32-33.

⁵⁸ *Ethics*, 1123a20-21.

⁵⁹ *Ethics*, 1123a21-25.

⁶⁰ *Ethics* 1123a6.

would avoid looking similarly absurd. When Aristotle provides us with the standard he is applying, it is not by having us draw a line between spending enough and too much. Rather, the big spender is vulgar when he “supposes that he makes himself an object of wonder” with his money instead of acting for the sake of the noble.⁶¹ The vice in this error is easy to see, but if the magnificent person is defined by producing beautiful works that will elicit wonder from others, how readily can one separate the wonder at the thing made and the maker? At any rate, the ability for the magnificent producer to do so would seem to require something like awe from him—an awareness about the extent to which the beautiful things he provides transcend himself.

As the eager producer of works that cause wonder among other human beings, the magnificent person is inevitably concerned with display, and although it would be vulgar if his purpose was to “display his wealth” or to make “himself an object of wonder,” it would not be proper for him to disguise his part in these works either. Aristotle subtly highlights this difficulty when he discusses magnificent private expenditures. On one hand, his orientation towards what is noble for its own sake is reflected in the fact that “the magnificent person is lavish not on himself but on the common affairs.”⁶² On the other, Aristotle immediately adds that it “belongs to the magnificent person to furnish his home in a way fitting to his wealth (since this, too, is a certain *kosmos*),” furnishing it with “those works that endure over time.”⁶³ In this, the magnificent person seems to be seeking something very close to wonder at himself. In fact, in the next sentence, Aristotle

⁶¹ *Ethics*, 1123a25-27.

⁶² *Ethics*, 1123a5-6.

⁶³ *Ethics* 1123a7-9.

seems to wryly allude to the most enduring ornamental domicile a magnificent person might seek when he distinguishes between what is suitable for gods and human beings, and then temples and burial tombs.⁶⁴ Is the most beautiful home for a magnificent person a place for him to live out his finite lifetime well, or a home for his bones to occupy perpetually?

How Liberality Informs Magnificence

The problem is that while the greatest human beings may be worthy objects of wonder for their inferiors, they cannot be so for themselves. Division emerges in magnificence between the nobility of the object that is the reason for calling the person who produced it magnificent, and the ignobility of the desire to be elevated into an object of wonder on account of one's works. Of course, for Aristotle, virtue seems to involve a kind of outward expression of one's inner worth, such that the pursuit of recognition is therefore intrinsic to it.⁶⁵ However, he shows in his account of magnificence how the concern for displaying ourselves can also debase us: when the producer of a great work wishes to be wondered at by those ignorant of what he knows, on account of their ignorance, as if he himself is a god, he is no longer acting in a way that is worthy of what he is. This will not only bring him into competition with the gods (if they exist), but also with the city, whose good is "nobler and more divine" than his own.⁶⁶ It was the fitting

⁶⁴ *Ethics* 1123a10-11.

⁶⁵ I take this to be the implicit significance of the passage at 1099a3-6 from Book One, where Aristotle appeals to Olympic competition to establish that happiness requires virtue that is active rather than a passive characteristic: "For it is not the noblest and strongest who are crowned with the victory wreath in the Olympic Games but rather the competitors (for it is certain of these who win), so also it is those who act correctly who attain the noble and good things in life."

⁶⁶ See *Ethics*, 1094b10-11.

orientation towards both the gods and the “divine realm” of the city that according to Aristotle made magnificent works “proper objects of ambition in common affairs.”⁶⁷ Although the virtue of magnificence is opposed to the vice of vulgarity, it is not clear that the peculiar excellence of the virtue is sufficient to defend itself against corruption into the vice.

As we come to recognize the limitations and difficulties inherent in magnificence, the importance of liberality in balancing or preserving its goodness emerges. The fact that the magnificent person is liberal doesn’t simply show us that magnificence goes beyond liberality. If taken seriously, it is a demand for liberality to impose its limits upon magnificence, too.⁶⁸ If a magnificent person is really liberal, there is a condition that is not readily apparent in the phenomena magnificent people present that nevertheless defines them: in order to spend nobly or fittingly, they will have to recognize and act in a way that befits their true limitations as well as their greatness. The noble action that defines the liberal person consists not in a wondrous public work, but in the actual aid that he is able to bring to those individuals whom he ought to benefit, when he ought to do so. Among other things, this is why liberality requires us not only to give well, but also to be careful to take in the right way: otherwise we will exceed the limits of our own resources and be tempted into illiberality and injustice. It is the directedness of liberality towards what will actually benefit another human being that ensures that it is a virtue whose parts—giving and taking—“correspond with each other” and “arise

⁶⁷ *Ethics*, 1122b21-22.

⁶⁸ *Ethics*, 1122a29-30.

simultaneously in the same person.”⁶⁹ This direction must come from a recognition of what makes us equal with other human beings—the bounds of prosperity and of need—rather than what superiorities might elevate us above them. If the magnificent person is really to be liberal, his noble expenditures must also be made with concern about his own limits and both the merits and needs of others in mind. He must spend not only in light of the peculiar “knowing” associated with magnificence, but also with a good judgment about other individual human beings and their material circumstances in relationship with his own—a judgment that requires him to understand his limits as well as his worth. Thus the difficulties in Aristotle’s treatment of magnificence cause us to come up against human limitations and the need to reckon with these in order to actually achieve excellence. On this reading, Aristotle’s reminder that “the same thing is not suitable for gods and human beings, or in the case of a temple and that of a burial tomb” might be read as an epigram to the whole chapter.⁷⁰ The aspirations towards greatness of magnificence must be tempered by the realism of liberality in order to make coherent virtuous action possible.

Aristotle gives us confirmation of liberality’s importance even as he seems to dismiss it in this chapter, with a pregnant reference to Homer’s *Odyssey*. In service of an argument that seems to elevate magnificence over liberality, he says: “But he who spends on small or measured things in accord with their worth is not said to be magnificent—as, for example, in the line, ‘I often used to give to a wanderer’—but only he who does so on

⁶⁹ *Ethics*, 1120b35-1121a1.

⁷⁰ *Ethics*, 1123a10-11.

great things.”⁷¹ This is a line spoken by Odysseus in Book Seventeen of the *Odyssey*, when he has just returned home in the guise of a beggar, and is walking among the suitors who are pursuing his wife and despoiling his home.⁷² Stirred by Athena to test which of the suitors are “fair, which unfair,” he goes around the room begging, and some suitors give him bits of food out of pity.⁷³ In response, the most unfair of the suitors, Antinoös, scolds the faithful swineherd Eumaios for bringing another man (the disguised Odysseus) “to eat up your master’s substance,” another vagabond “to ruin our feasting.”⁷⁴ When Antinoös threatens to throw a footstool in Odysseus’ direction, Odysseus comes over and makes an appeal to his pity by telling a tale about suffering a terrible reversal of fortunes.⁷⁵ Aristotle’s quote about liberality (italicized, for emphasis) comes from the beginning of this appeal:

Give, dear friend. You seem to me, of all the Achaians, not the worst but the best. You look like a king. Therefore, you ought to give me a better present of food than the others have done, and I will sing your fame all over the endless earth, for I too once lived in my own house among people, prospering in wealth, and *often I gave to a wanderer* according to what he was and wanted when he came to me.⁷⁶

⁷¹ *Ethics*, 1122a27.

⁷² Homer, *Odyssey* 17.420.

⁷³ Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005), 17.360-367. All quotations from the *Odyssey* that are given in English in this dissertation are taken from this translation.

⁷⁴ *Odyssey* 17.376-379.

⁷⁵ *Odyssey* 17.409-414.

⁷⁶ *Odyssey* 17.415-421.

Antinoös is unmoved by this appeal, and soon after throws the stool at Odysseus' shoulder.⁷⁷ Although the context in which he presents the quote may suggest this view, it would be strange if Aristotle's praise of magnificence was meant to evoke our sympathy for Antinoös in his despising the wanderer and his appeal to liberality!

In fact, by invoking the theme of liberality in the *Odyssey*, Aristotle reminds us of something the aspiration for magnificence tends to obscure: the limits and neediness of even the greatest human being. Bringing together Aristotle's previous account of liberality with the *Odyssey*'s exemplification of the virtue (and its lack), we can see that liberality entails a keen awareness of these limits and this need even on the part of the giver. Odysseus' speech to Antinoös suggests that regular and measured donations to the needy according to their characters and their wants are noble acts, worthy of great men (and, as the reader is in a position to recognize, kings.) At the same time, it roots the argument for these acts in an account of human life that unites greatness with vulnerability—Odysseus tests Antinoös' soul by presenting himself at once as a once great man who regularly helped wanderers and as a decrepit vagrant begging for bits of bread.

The virtue resembling Aristotelian liberality that Odysseus praises in his speech is one that Homer presents in a very favorable light throughout the *Odyssey*. When he presents us with Odysseus' past through the eyes of those who knew him, the hero appears to have been a man justly honored for the qualities of noble giving and taking that correspond together in liberality. In Book Four of the *Odyssey*, Penelope stresses that the suitors' actions lack due gratitude (*charis*) for the good things Odysseus once did for

⁷⁷ *Odyssey* 17.445-452, 462.

their fathers.⁷⁸ However, instead of stressing remarkable acts of largesse, she notes how equal Odysseus was in his treatment of them:

You heard from your fathers before you... what kind of man Odysseus was among your own parents, how he did no act and spoke no word in his own country that was unfair; and that this is a way divine kings have, one will be hateful to a certain man, and favor another, but Odysseus was never outrageous at all to any man.

As I argue in the next chapter, Penelope's account of Odysseus' benevolence in refraining from doing injustice reflects an incomplete notion of liberality that seems to be in tension with Odysseus' own, more generous view. However, Penelope's presentation is like both the fuller view that Odysseus presents and Aristotle's account of liberality in its concern for what is fitting to those to whom it gives. Unlike the suitors, Eumaios expresses gratitude for the liberality Odysseus showed to him as master: Odysseus "cared greatly for me, and granted me such possessions as a good-natured lord grants to the thralls of his house; a home of his own, a plot of land, and a wife much sought after."⁷⁹ The swineherd and the suitors, then, may serve as models for Aristotle's claim about liberality that "gratitude flows to one who gives and not to one who refrains from taking, and praise even more so."⁸⁰ Odysseus' generous treatment has not prevented Eumaios from viewing his master as "godlike," but it also seems to be consistent with pity for him: Eumaios fears that Odysseus is either dead, or wandering now, "in need of finding some sustenance."⁸¹ He further shows in his treatment of Odysseus (disguised as a beggar) how

⁷⁸ *Odyssey* 4.686-695.

⁷⁹ *Odyssey* 14.63-64.

⁸⁰ *Ethics*, 1120a16-17.

⁸¹ *Odyssey* 14.40-42.

pity and honor can be shown together. He insists that “all vagabonds and strangers are under Zeus,” who is also “the god of guests,” and so out of piety as well as pity, he is determined to “entertain and befriend” Odysseus.⁸² He then shows honor to Odysseus by giving him the best cut of a pig that he butchers.⁸³ Odysseus reciprocates in his gracious response: “I wish, Eumaios, you could be as dear to our father Zeus as to me, when I am so poor, but you grace me with good things.”⁸⁴ Even Odysseus’ dying dog Argos recognizes Odysseus with affection due to the care his master long ago took to raise and train him before he had to leave his household in the hands of “careless” servants.⁸⁵ Unlike Odysseus and Aristotle’s liberal person, who are “not careless with [their] own possessions, since [they] wish... to aid some people through these very possessions,” these servants have neglected Argos along with their other duties in Odysseus’ absence.⁸⁶ Even though Odysseus is spinning a tale in his speech to Antinoös, all of these examples attest to a vision of virtue where good stewardship and liberality play an elevated role.

The examples of liberality and illiberality in the *Odyssey* also support Aristotle’s idea that in a different way than the magnificent person, the liberal person is a knower. Eumaios did not have to recognize Odysseus in order to treat him in a fitting and noble way—he merely had to recognize that wanderers are as likely to be godlike men who have encountered hardships as idle men who come to eat up one’s substance. According

⁸² *The Odyssey*, 14.56-68, 387-389.

⁸³ *The Odyssey*, 14.435-438.

⁸⁴ *The Odyssey*, 14.440-441.

⁸⁵ *The Odyssey*, 17.291-321.

⁸⁶ *Ethics*, 1120b3; *The Odyssey*, 17.311-321.

to Eumaios' own account, such a view comes out of reverence for the divine, since Zeus is a friend to vagabonds. Wherever Homer may stand on this belief about Zeus, his account would seem to confirm the nobility of such openness to the unknown stranger's worth. In the world of the *Odyssey*, it is not only Greek heroes who might come near one's bench seeking scraps. Even the goddess Athena herself appears as a stranger in disguise at a door, where all but Telemachus treat her with neglect.⁸⁷ The *Odyssey* presents the roots of liberal action in a person's openness to the worthiness and nobility of other human beings that is not on display. If the magnificent human being is not to be led astray by his skill at producing spectacles that elicit wonder from those who are ignorant about what is truly beautiful and worthy, he must preserve this awareness that not all greatness is on display. By invoking the *Odyssey*, Aristotle suggests to us that if we would avoid the comical self-adulation of the vulgar human being, we must not despise liberality, which helps us to understand our place among "divine" things like the city and even the gods.

In sum, if Aristotle sets us up at first to see liberality as a subordinate virtue to magnificence, he provides threads in his treatment of both virtues to show how important it is as a counter-balance to the excesses to which the aspiration for magnificence might lead. The claim that all magnificent people are liberal means that true liberality is required to undergird magnificence. What is most apparent—most on display—in magnificent action is not what must exist at its core. This may undermine some of the display and some of the aspirations characteristic of magnificence, but by making more

⁸⁷ *The Odyssey*, I.105-120.

room for appreciation and wonder in the soul of the magnificent person, it also prepares the possibility for his works to be truly “suitable for gods and human beings.”

Liberality and Greatness of Soul

A careful consideration of magnificence has shown that it cannot be adequately understood as liberality magnified. When we turn to Aristotle’s crowning virtue of magnanimity, we see that it is not the culmination of an ascent that began from liberality either. Many recent scholars have focused on seeming defects in the virtue of magnanimity to argue that Aristotle intends at least in part to undermine the case for moral virtue or for the virtues that most of the Greeks took seriously.⁸⁸ My purpose in this section of the chapter is not to argue against taking magnanimity seriously, but rather to show more narrowly that liberality is not a stepping stone towards the character of magnanimity and the defects these scholars identify, but rather a kind of antidote or counterbalance to them. Because magnificence is, like liberality, concerned with money, its relation to liberality is both more direct and more instructive than is magnanimity’s. At the same time, because of some of what is shared in the pursuit of greatness that unites magnificence and magnanimity, certain insights about liberality that I have discussed at length above can be applied here as well. For these reasons, my discussion of the relationship between liberality and magnanimity is significantly shorter than my treatment of magnificence.

⁸⁸ Consider, for example: Jacob Howland. 2002. “Aristotle’s Great-Souled Man.” *Review of Politics* 64:27-56; Thomas W. Smith, *Revaluing Ethics: Aristotle’s Dialectical Pedagogy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 116-130; Aristide Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle’s Ethics: Virtue, Rhetoric, and Political Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 28-35. Tessitore falls in this camp by arguing that “the ambivalence of Aristotle’s portrait reflects his deeper ambivalence for the code of the gentleman as it is revealed in the lives of Alcibiades, Achilles, Ajax, and even Lysander” (34).

Magnanimity, or greatness of soul, is widely understood to be a peak of the moral virtues for Aristotle. It is the virtue of the human being “who deems himself worthy of great things and *is* worthy of them.”⁸⁹ If the truly magnanimous person is worthy of the greatest things, Aristotle concludes, he must be the best of human beings, so he must be good, and therefore “what is great in each virtue would seem to belong” to him.⁹⁰ Thus, “greatness of soul... seems to be like a kind of *kosmos* of the virtues, for it makes them greater and does not arise without them.”⁹¹ For this reason, Aristotle states that the great-souled person requires *kalokagathia*—nobility and goodness.⁹² He then sketches out a noble picture of the qualities of the great-souled person (from 1124a5 to 1124b7).

Having argued that magnanimity is a crown (*kosmos*) composed of all that is great in every one of the virtues, Aristotle works attributes of many of them into his complex depiction of the great-souled individual. Unsurprisingly then, there are themes, echoes and elaborations of his account of the liberal individual in this chapter. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the thoroughgoing rejection of petty gain that is characteristic of liberality is also an element of the magnanimous human being’s commitment to worthy action: “for the sake of what will he do shameful things, he to whom nothing is great?”⁹³ The liberal human being’s freedom from attachment to money and preoccupation with need is of course shared by the great-souled human being, too: “he will surely also be

⁸⁹ *Ethics*, 1123b2-3.

⁹⁰ *Ethics*, 1123b27-30.

⁹¹ *Ethics*, 1123b36-1124a1.

⁹² *Ethics*, 1124a3-4.

⁹³ *Ethics* 1123b32-33.

disposed in a measured way toward wealth and political power as well as all good and bad fortune, however it may occur: he will be neither overjoyed by good fortune nor deeply grieved by bad fortune.⁹⁴ In clarifying how the magnanimous individual differs from those who suppose themselves superior to others because of their good birth or fortune, Aristotle observes:

People who possess such goods become haughty and hubristic because, in the absence of virtue, it is not easy to deal with the goods of fortune in a suitable manner. Although not in fact being able to deal with these goods and supposing themselves to be superior to others, they look down on them, while they themselves act in whatever random way.⁹⁵

In other words, the possession of a virtue that deals suitably with the goods of fortune guards against the development of hubris or the unearned sense of superiority over others. This evidently pertains to liberality. Aristotle thus indirectly attributes a property to liberality that he has not mentioned before. However, it seems reasonable that Aristotle is now linking the avoidance of hubris with the possession of liberality—if this is indeed, as I have argued, one of the points that a careful consideration of magnificence was intended to clarify. We meet with liberality’s measured embrace of what is worthy and rejection of what is not in Aristotle’s compelling portrait of the magnanimous human being.

However, as has been widely noted, this beautiful account of magnanimity begins to take a strange turn in the next section of the chapter. For example, having characterized the first account as one of “idealized beauty”—the “lofty detachment” from “preoccupation with honors and the goods of fortune” deriving from “a more fundamental attachment” to “nobility and goodness,” Aristide Tessitore remarks how “even this peak

⁹⁴ *Ethics* 1124a16-17.

⁹⁵ *Ethics*, 1124a30-1124b2.

of nobility is fashioned with feet of clay.”⁹⁶ These feet are the “characteristics of ambiguous attractiveness” presented by Aristotle from 1124b5 to 1125a17: The great-souled man avoids small risks, but upon great dangers “throws away his life, on the grounds that living is not at all worthwhile.”⁹⁷ He wishes so much to be the superior benefactor that he will either outdo—or seem to forget and be displeased by the mention of—any benefaction done to him.⁹⁸ He avoids competing for things “that are generally honored or in which others hold first place,” and is an idle procrastinator except where “a great honor or a great deed is at stake.”⁹⁹ He “is necessarily incapable of living with a view to another—except a friend—since doing so is slavish.”¹⁰⁰ He is not given to wonder, because nothing is great to him.¹⁰¹ To call these qualities ambiguously attractive seems an understatement. Although Tessitore suggests that perhaps each of them can be defended “by connecting them to the more substantial interior state from which they derive,” there seems to be far too much of concern with appearance over substance to many of them to support such an attempt.¹⁰² Although the great-souled human being would without doubt avoid the petty ostentation of the comic patron in the purple robe,

⁹⁶ Tessitore, 30-31.

⁹⁷ *Ethics*, 1124b7-9.

⁹⁸ *Ethics*, 1124b9-16.

⁹⁹ *Ethics*, 1124b27-26.

¹⁰⁰ *Ethics*, 1124b31-1125a1.

¹⁰¹ *Ethics*, 1125a2-3.

¹⁰² Tessitore, 31. It should be noted that Tessitore does not himself undertake such a defense. Rather, he concludes that “it is hard to escape the impression that Aristotle’s concluding remarks are meant to engender ironic distance on the part of the reader.” In his view, Aristotle “simultaneously invites and withdraws admiration” for magnanimity.

the way he is described in this section of the chapter suggests that a focus upon others' recognition of his worth taints his actions.

There is a fundamental incongruity at the heart of the magnanimous individual that may underlie this defect. The great-souled man is defined by concern with his own great worth, but "worth is spoken of in relation to external goods."¹⁰³ He must then be concerned in some way with the greatest of the external goods; as mentioned above, Aristotle argues that this is honor: "we would posit as the greatest... that which we assign to the gods, that at which people of worth aim, and that which is the prize conferred on the noblest people. Honor is such a thing."¹⁰⁴ However, since the great man is truly great, even honor must fall short for him: "there could be no honor worthy of complete virtue... he will nevertheless accept it inasmuch as they have nothing greater to assign to him."¹⁰⁵ Still his pleasure in honor is "measured," and pertains only to "great honors and those that come from serious human beings, on the grounds that he obtains what is proper to him *or even less*."¹⁰⁶ Further on, Aristotle nearly extends magnanimous detachment from the goods of fortune to honor as well: "he is not disposed even toward honor as though it were a very great thing."¹⁰⁷ A few lines later, the magnanimous man is "him for whom honor is a small thing."¹⁰⁸ As the human being who is worthy of the greatest things, the

¹⁰³ *Ethics*, 1123b18.

¹⁰⁴ *Ethics*, 1123b18-21.

¹⁰⁵ *Ethics*, 1124a8-9.

¹⁰⁶ *Ethics*, 1124a6-7. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁷ *Ethics*, 1124a17-18.

¹⁰⁸ *Ethics*, 1124a19.

great-souled individual knowingly lives in a world among others who cannot act towards him as he deserves. As the human being who deems himself worthy of the greatest things, his pleasure in this world is unstable at best, resting tenuously upon his own gracious acceptance of these inferiors assigning him less recognition than what is proper to him. If the magnanimous man exists, his awareness of his own greatness is a great difficulty for him. Could he be content with self-admiration, he might be satisfied, but as a man concerned with honor, he cannot be.

The uglier attributes of the magnanimous man seem to flow from this difficulty. They describe a human being who is nearly incapacitated by his preoccupation with his worth: His life is not sweet to him; he cannot reckon properly with a benefit that he has received; he cannot act unless great recognition will flow to him, and cannot bear duly recognizing those who can do anything superior to him; he cannot conform his life to those of other human beings; and he is incapable of wonder. Strangely, he seems compelled by his desire for the greatest of honors—and his “contempt” for receiving inferior honors—to hide the virtues that might merit them. However, if he does so, he rejects those goods without which he cannot live well as a human being: life itself, justice, virtuous action, community, and with wonder, the possibility of philosophic life.¹⁰⁹ In waiting for a world filled with moments to act to provide him with the perfect moment, the magnanimous person may gamble on an impossibility. Taken to this extreme, the great-souled devotion to one’s own worth could undermine virtue itself.

As I have argued previously, liberality is oriented very differently than this. The liberal person’s characteristic pleasure exists in noble living with a view to others, in the

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b.

form of giving well. This depends on not taking things in an ignoble way, as well—and therefore incorporates reckoning with his own limitations and needs. This reckoning includes awareness of his own propensity toward prodigality. But rather than holding himself back from action, as if in reserve, the liberal person is nevertheless eager to act, according to the circumstances that arise, as he considers factors such as time, place, and recipient. He restrains himself from doing so only in order to steward his resources for sustained generosity. Because the interest that the liberal person takes in other human beings' individual material welfare requires him to take an interest in his own, liberality helps him to share fruitfully in common life. His experience both of the goods his giving provides and also of the limits of his resources that make these goods possible—in effect, his openness to the high and low in human life being bound up together—prepares him for wonder. Rather than being a step on the road to the form of self-regarding greatness that defines magnanimity but also threatens it with dangers, liberality is a form of virtue that points human beings towards what is noblest in the shared life between human beings.

It has been frequently argued that Book Four of the *Ethics* should be viewed as a movement toward magnanimity as a peak of moral virtue that reveals the difficulties that such a peak represents, and seen within this context, liberality is readily dismissed as the first step toward the vision of self-regarding noble action that is intensified in magnificence and then distilled in Aristotle's presentation of the great-souled human being. I have argued instead in this chapter that liberality introduces a significant alternative model of virtue that prepares the ground for noble shared life in private and public. Aristotle's treatment of magnificence and magnanimity show how living

according to noble self-regard may embarrass or incapacitate the individual who is pursuing virtue. The contrast of these virtues with liberality reveals that regard for others must also have an essential place in the good human life. Insofar as this is so, liberality should not be seen as a virtue that is subsumed into the quest for great-souled action, but an alternative side of virtue that helps to lay the framework for Aristotle's treatment of justice as well as the lesser virtues of human beings' communal life.

CHAPTER SIX

Liberality, Like-mindedness, and Tyranny

In this chapter, I explore the contribution to political life that is made by liberality and the other virtues that human beings exercise with a view to their shared lives. I argue that throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, Aristotle emphasizes the ways that these virtues that teach human beings to limit their preoccupation with securing the physical means of life in favor of more liberal ends can become a powerful source in public life of justice, political friendship, and individual happiness.

In the first part of the chapter, I review scholarship that has made the case that liberality tends to enhance inequality in society and promote tyranny. I argue against this judgment throughout the succeeding sections. In the second part of the chapter, I consider the connection between *charis* (the emotion of gratitude and of benevolence/grace/favor) and liberality. I show that Aristotle's account of the shrine to the Graces given in his chapter on reciprocity in Book Five of the *Nicomachean Ethics* points to the importance of liberality in establishing a community that moves beyond a concern for mere living through the exercise of reciprocal giving. In the third section of the chapter, I turn to the *Politics* to show how fundamental the view of political friendship built on reciprocity of virtue is for Aristotle as a means to minimize the problems of civil faction that threaten every political community. Next, I show that Aristotle treats tyranny as the epitome of the injustice and greed brought by civil faction into political life, and that therefore the liberal human being who promotes political friendship through acts such as reciprocal giving appears as the tyrant's nemesis. In the conclusion to the chapter, I consider the differing

views on pleasure that underlie tyranny and liberality to give an account of why Aristotle identifies the liberal person as one who would not choose the wealth of a tyrant over wisdom.

Liberality vs. Tyranny

As I have discussed in previous chapters, the tyrant casts strange shadows over Aristotle's discussion of liberality, being contrasted at one point with prodigal human beings and at another with the stingy. Heeding these references, scholars have argued that Aristotle is coyly alerting his readers to the fact that liberality, which is also contrasted with prodigality and stinginess, bears some of the same aspirations as tyranny.

In this vein, Susan Collins argues that Aristotle draws our attention to the fact that stinginess and prodigality differ from tyranny in order to reveal to us tensions between liberality and justice. Although Collins stops short of tracing tyranny to liberality, she argues that while liberality governs "the action of giving," the beneficial constraints it puts on acquisition problematically come from outside the virtue—from justice.¹ In her view, the discussion of liberality begins an "abstraction from the requirements and concerns of justice" that defines the "ascent of virtue" to its peak in magnanimity. Characterizing Aristotle's comment on the difference between the prodigal and the tyrant as a "wry digression," her interpretation is that Aristotle is showing us that "the means of liberal action... are most amply at the disposal of a tyrant, who may be said to own the entire city." In fact, in Collins' view, although the liberal person is not a tyrant, he necessarily looks on him with something like envy: "from the point of view of the person

¹ Susan Collins, *Aristotle and the Rediscovery of Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.), 59.

who loves to benefit others by giving, and whose specific action and pleasure can be fully indulged only with the requisite means, the tyrant is the most fortunate of men.” Turning to Aristotle’s reference to tyrants’ crimes in his discussion of stinginess at the end of the chapter, Collins provides a very different interpretation than the one I presented in Chapter Four. While I have argued that Aristotle mentions the tyrant in this context in order to emphasize the pettiness of the crimes of the stingy, Collins concludes instead that he means to show that “because the actions associated with acquisition fall under the government of justice, the clearest constraint on a virtuous person who loves noble giving yet has limited means is that obtaining the resources for giving on a grand scale would entail actions that are ‘wicked, impious and unjust.’” As Collins traces the ascent of the virtues from liberality to those involving “great actions”—magnificence and magnanimity—she argues that the problem liberality introduces of lacking constraint from within will persist and intensify, as “Aristotle’s presentation” of the succeeding virtues “will completely abstract from the activity of acquisition and so from the consideration of justice.”

Ann Ward argues yet more forcefully for an opposition between liberality and justice. She agrees with Collins “that Aristotle’s emphasis on unearned resources as the foundation of moral virtue may imply” that tyranny is required for “the practice of the virtues.”² However, she argues that Aristotle’s critique of these virtues is meant to go yet further: even in “free regimes,” the practice of both of the virtues of liberality and

² Ann Ward, “Generosity and Inequality in Aristotle’s Ethics,” *Polis*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2011): 267-278. 268.

magnificence undermines equality and political justice.³ In Ward's account, these virtues arise out of "inherited and unequal wealth," and their practice threatens to place "otherwise equal citizens in an antagonistic relationship as benefactors seek to assert their superiority over recipients and the provision of public goods is captured by private hands."⁴ Ward also argues that Aristotle's account of the virtue of justice "serves not simply to vindicate private acquisition, but rather emphasizes a 'public' redistribution of goods, as it were, to reduce the inequalities generated by inherited wealth."⁵

Ward holds that "Aristotle makes clear in the *Ethics* that the generous person acts not for the sake of the needy, but rather for the sake of the noble," and her argument relies in large part on identifying generous with the wealthy and those of inherited wealth.⁶ Taking this to be necessarily or primarily the case, she invokes Book Four of Aristotle's *Politics*, where the wealthy are described as "arrogant" and "consumed by contempt for the poor," wishing only "to rule 'in the fashion of rule of a master.'"⁷ This would put liberal human beings in permanent conflict with the poor, who are described in the same chapter as "consumed by envy for the rich," and knowing "only... how to be ruled like slaves." Thus, for Ward, liberality is a virtue that is inherently tied to the threat of tyranny: "the rich and the poor are therefore enemies without affection, a situation from

³ Ward, 268.

⁴ Ward, 268-269.

⁵ Ward, 269.

⁶ Ward, 272.

⁷ Ward, 271-272.

which tyranny always threatens to arise.”⁸ She denies that the middling element which is praised in *Politics* Book Four can be liberal, deeming them stingy instead because their virtue is called “mediocre,” rather than “exceptional,” and “the most Aristotle says of middle-class virtue, especially with regard to generosity, is that” the middling “[do not] desire the things of others’ (*Pol.* 1295b30).” In Ward’s interpretation, the middling element merely has the “virtue” of “abstaining from unjust taking,” and therefore coincides with “the money-makers who do not take from the wrong sources in the *Ethics*.” Thus they “do not... share in the virtue of generosity but rather in the vice of stinginess.”⁹ Ward further takes Aristotle’s claims that gratitude and praise flow “to one who gives” as evidence that “those who accept the money or gifts of the generous are demeaned by such acceptance, and that the beneficiaries of generosity are put into an inferior position to their benefactors.”¹⁰ The conclusion of her consideration of generosity is damning: Ward finally argues that liberality’s pursuit of nobility itself is compromised in the practice of this virtue by “an ulterior motive:” the desire to manifest one’s superiority to others or to be recognized as better than the rest.”¹¹

In Ward’s presentation, the inroads that liberality begins towards tyranny are completed by magnificence: both virtues are “more likely to be a product of inherited wealth,” and are “done for the sake of the noble rather than the recipient of the virtue.” However, magnificence implies even greater economic inequality than liberality, and the

⁸ Ward, 271-272.

⁹ Ward, 272,

¹⁰ Ward, 273.

¹¹ Ward, 273.

move from liberality to magnificence is characterized by a magnification of the problems of injustice and inequality. Liberality threatened “needy individuals;” magnificence threatens “the whole community” with “subordination to and dependence on a few private hands.”¹² Ward concludes that:

the capture of the community in private hands, which magnificence seems to require, could reduce the city, a ‘political partnership,’ to a private partnership similar to the family (*Pol.* 1252a5.) Wealthy private individuals practising magnificence in this case would be like heads of households rather than citizens who participate in ‘political rule,’ or in ‘rul[ing] and [being] ruled in turn.’ (*Pol.* 1252a15).¹³

In Ward’s analysis, Aristotle finally undermines the economic virtues by showing that the “socio-political inequality that facilitates both generosity and magnificence” is inconsistent with the equality on which “political justice seems to rest.”¹⁴

In this chapter, I bring together Aristotle’s discussions of gratitude and benevolence with his claims about liberality and reciprocity in the *Ethics* in order to show that far from undermining justice or the political community, liberality promotes the affection and friendship the city requires in order to overcome faction and tyranny.

Liberality and Charis

Far from presenting liberality as a virtue that alienates its possessor from others, Aristotle describes it in Book Four, Chapter One of the *Ethics* as a source of gratitude and love among those who are benefited by it: “Gratitude (*charis*) flows to one who gives...

¹² Ward, 273.

¹³ Ward, 275.

¹⁴ Ward, 275.

and praise even more so.”¹⁵ Moreover, “of all those who act on the basis of virtue, liberal human beings are perhaps loved (*philountai*) most, for they are advantageous to others, and this consists in giving.”¹⁶ In this section of my chapter, I show that when these claims are put together with Aristotle’s account in *Ethics* Book Five, Chapter Five of the city’s promotion of *charis* in reciprocal giving, liberality emerges as a virtue that contributes a great deal to the city’s unity.

Charis is a Greek word requiring two English equivalents because it applies to both of two reciprocal emotions (*pathê*)—those of a benefactor and of a beneficiary. Whereas the *charis* that might motivate a gift-giver is benevolence, the *charis* with which the gift-receiver might greet a gift is gratitude. The English concept of graciousness covers something of both emotions, but it is too vague a term to properly capture either Greek usage. In the *Ethics*, Aristotle classes the emotions among the things present in the soul, undergone with pleasure or pain, but about which a person cannot be “said to be serious or base” or “praised or blamed:” this is because, unlike virtues, emotions exist “in the absence of choice” and are said to move us rather than to be our own possession in the way that virtue is.¹⁷ He notes further, in his discussion of shame at the end of Book Four, that the emotions are more bodily than virtues: “to be bodily... seems to be more a mark of a passion than of a characteristic.”¹⁸ In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines emotions as things in people’s souls that are accompanied by (*hepetai*) pain and pleasure and can

¹⁵ *Ethics*, 1120a16-17.

¹⁶ *Ethics*, 1120a21-23.

¹⁷ *Ethics*, 1105b20-23, 31-1106a6.

¹⁸ *Ethics*, 1128b15-16.

undergo change, claiming that it is through change in them that a person's judgement or decision (*kriseis*) changes from what it was before.¹⁹ It is the *Rhetoric* that features Aristotle's lengthiest discussion of *charis*; in Book Two, Chapter Seven, he focuses on the benevolence of a giver rather than on the gratitude of a receiver. Here he defines *charis* as the emotion that leads someone do a service (*hupourgein*) for one in need (*deomeno*) for that person's benefit, and neither in return for a benefit done to the actor nor to benefit the actor.²⁰ That is, in Aristotle's view human beings are sometimes moved to action by instinctive and unselfish urges to help others who are suffering, and this is benevolence.

Although this emotion of benevolence is evidently closely related to the virtue of liberality, it is important to note the ways in which it differs. As I have discussed previously, a liberal gift is a product of reasoned judgment about how best to use the money involved, and a liberal giver refrains from giving "to just anyone," or "to whom he ought not," or "when and where" it is not noble to do so.²¹ However, according to the definition given in the *Rhetoric*, a person moved by benevolence is simply responding to another person's need, without consideration of whether or not help is appropriate to this person or to the fulfillment of his or her need. Among the perceived human needs that might prompt another's benevolence, Aristotle identifies *orexeis* (desires)—especially those marked by pain over the absence of something—and *epithymiai* (longings)—such as "love, and those felt in sufferings of the body and in times of danger."²² As Marlene

¹⁹ *Rhetoric* 1378a19-21.

²⁰ *Rhetoric*, 1385a18; See Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, 1385a16-1385b11.

²¹ *Ethics*, 1120a6, 28, 1120b3-4.

²² *Rhetoric*, 1385a20-34.

Sokolon notes in her discussion of *charis* in the *Rhetoric*, “benevolence is providing a service to another in painful need without any concern as to whether the needy individual deserved either the pain or the consequent benevolent action.”²³ Moreover, as she argues, *charis* makes no distinction between the thing whose absence is experienced painfully by the person in need and a true judgment about whether this thing is good.²⁴ Thus, a benevolent person might make the mistake of handing a weapon to somebody deranged by grief when asked for it. Or he might give assistance to someone fleeing a just punishment or pursuing an unwilling lover or in other cases when doing so might be unjust or ignoble. It is fitting then that benevolence is never attributed to the liberal person in *Ethics* Book Four, Chapter 1. In its responsiveness to those who are in difficulty, benevolence appears to be ready emotional material for education or re-direction towards liberality. In fact, it seems likely that benevolence might often be found among those prodigal human beings who give without limit rather than spending money without limit on their own interests. However, the virtue of liberality rises above an emotionally-driven response to human suffering in the ways that I have discussed.

It is the reciprocal form of *charis*, gratitude, that Aristotle connects with liberality, and as I have noted above, he does not argue that it characterizes the liberal person, but rather that it flows *towards* the one who gives a gift—presumably from the one who received the gift. Aristotle suggests again that liberal action endears itself to other human

²³ Marlene Sokolon, “Political Emotions: Aristotle and the Symphony of Reason and Emotion” PhD diss., Northern Illinois University, 2003, p213-214. Sokolon further notes that in this regard, benevolence differs from the emotion of pity, which “includes a judgment about whether the suffering deserve the evils they are undergoing.”

²⁴ Sokolon, 219.

beings when he states that because they are advantageous to others, liberal human beings are possibly loved more than any other virtuous type.

A cynical interpretation of these claims might define the love that liberality engenders as little more than the bond of self-interest between recipient and benefactor that Machiavelli famously ridicules in the *Prince* (i.e. “While you do them good, they are yours...”).²⁵ Aristotle gives confirmation that Machiavelli’s view is sound during his discussion of friendship in the *Ethics*, when he argues that “those who perform a benefit seem to love those who receive this benefit more than those who are the recipients of the benefit love those who perform it.”²⁶ Aristotle indicates in particular here that hopes of benefactors for a return of favors “out of gratitude” tend to be disappointed.²⁷ After pronouncing that this seems to be “contrary to reason,” Aristotle provides arguments for why it nevertheless occurs, noting that even if they follow from “a base view,” it is one that “seems characteristically human.”²⁸ Aristotle has previously stated that even though it is noble for those who perform benefits for others to expect nothing in return, most people who do good for others expect a *quid pro quo*, because “all or most people wish for noble things but choose the beneficial ones instead.”²⁹ In other words, even benevolence is rare; most apparent benefactors are really more like lenders. He seems to confirm here that a similar human problem tends to impede gratitude as well: “most

²⁵ Cf. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapters 16 & 17. Especially p. 66.

²⁶ *Ethics*, 1167b16-19.

²⁷ *Ethics*, 1167b23-26.

²⁸ *Ethics*, 1167b26-27.

²⁹ *Ethics*, 1162b34-1163a2.

people are forgetful [of favors done them] and aim more at being done some good than at doing it.”³⁰ However, even as he provides an account confirming that benevolence and gratitude are rare human traits, Aristotle does give an argument, which he says is from nature, that locates real, though one-sided, grounds for affection on the part of a benefactor for his beneficiary.³¹

Aristotle argues that it is natural for a person who performs a benefit to have a similar attachment to the person whom he has helped as an artisan or poet might have for his artistic work.³² Wryly observing that some poets “are exceedingly fond of their own poems and feel affection for them just as if they were their children,” Aristotle notes that similarly for a benefactor, the person whom he has benefitted is loved because he is, in a sense, the benefactor’s work.³³ Unpacking this argument, Aristotle claims that it is natural for human beings to love their own existence and therefore also to love their activities (for “we exist by means of activity”) and their work (“for what he is in his capacity, the work reveals in his activity.”)³⁴ In other words, a human being loves his work as an extension or completion of himself—an instance of his potential coming into act. Since “in his activity, the maker of something somehow *is* the work,” while the work in a case of a benefaction is also, in some sense, the beneficiary, this leads the benefactor to identify with and “delight in” the beneficiary, who has given him the opportunity to

³⁰ *Ethics*, 1167b28-29.

³¹ *Ethics*, 1167b29-34.

³² *Ethics*, 1167b34-1168a2.

³³ *Ethics*, 1168a3-4.

³⁴ *Ethics*, 1168a5-8.

extend his own existence.³⁵ Such an opportunity is an opportunity for the noble, for the “noble is long lasting,” so the benefactor has a natural, and self-serving, reason for long lasting affection and delight in the person whom he has aided.³⁶ On the other hand, from the perspective of the beneficiary, all that the gift represents is “something advantageous,” and therefore something “less pleasant and lovable,” and something whose memory passes away with its usefulness.³⁷ Aristotle’s argument here shows that while benevolence can be a source of enduring affection inclining generous human beings to others, it is not natural for this affection to be returned with equal gratitude.

Therefore, there is a disjunction between Aristotle’s earlier claims that liberal human beings elicit gratitude and love and his later claims emphasizing how limited the gratitude and affection that flow to benefactors is in the course of nature. How should we understand this? One might conclude that Aristotle has just corrected a noble but misguided wish on the part of liberal human beings or those who praise liberality with the more sober reflection that their actions are unlikely to induce the hoped-for warmth from those whom they have aided. However, there is one more important section of the *Ethics* between these two where Aristotle’s discussion of a relationship of benevolence and gratitude suggests another solution to the difficulty: the account of the shrine to the Graces, which comes in his chapter on reciprocity in Book Five, suggests that it is in and through the existence of the *polis* that natural barriers to gratitude may be set aside and

³⁵ *Ethics*, 1168a9-11.

³⁶ *Ethics*, 1168a16-17.

³⁷ *Ethics*, 1168a12-15, 17-18.

liberality may become a source of reciprocated affection instead of inequality or resentment.

After Aristotle states that liberality engenders gratitude, he does not mention gratitude again until the discussion of reciprocity that is part of his treatment of justice in Book Five of the *Ethics*. He turns from the particular forms of distributive and corrective justice to reciprocity in Book Five, Chapter Five. This strange chapter has elicited many competing interpretations and some impatience among scholars.³⁸ The structure is confusing: he begins by considering whether reciprocity as understood by the Pythagoreans and by Rhadamanthus—seemingly retaliation of “harm for harm”—is the just simply (1132b21-32); moves to considering a contrasting form of reciprocity—the “good for good” that exists in exchange and holds together communities concerned with exchange (1132b33-1133a6); gives a lengthy account of the conditions for proportional reciprocal exchange (1133a7-1133b29); then concludes the chapter with a summary and definitions of the natures of justice and injustice (1133b30-1134a16). It is seemingly as support for his move from considering retaliation of harm for harm to exchange of good for good that Aristotle describes people’s construction of a shrine to the Graces to encourage gratitude. He presents it as if to give evidence for the claims that a city is

³⁸ See, for example, M. I. Finley, “Aristotle and Economic Analysis,” *Past & Present*, No. 47 (1970): 3-25; and Desmond McNeil, “Alternative Interpretations of Aristotle on Exchange and Reciprocity,” *Public Affairs Quarterly*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (1990): 58-68. Finley argues at length that the “digression” on reciprocity should *not* be read as “economic analysis,” deeming it instead as one of Aristotle’s many instances of philosophical self-indulgence, or “thinking aloud, so to speak... about a particular nuance or a tangential question that is troublesome” but “highly abstract” and not germane to his “main theme, systematic analysis (15, 9).” McNeil argues that Aristotle’s analysis in the chapter is an “unsatisfactory but instructive” result of the philosopher’s attempt to recognize and judge new economic phenomena in “terms of old, well-established rules,” and that these rules themselves are “in some sense inaccessible to the modern mind (63-64).”

among the communities where “people stay together through mutual exchange”—an exchange that seems in context to be the exchange of goods through trade.³⁹

Before considering further the context given for Aristotle’s allusion to this practice, I will discuss the example itself. Aristotle claims that “people place a shrine to the Graces (*Charites*) along the roadway, to foster reciprocal giving, for this belongs to gratitude: one ought to serve in return someone who has been gracious, and ought oneself, the next time, to take the lead in being gracious.”⁴⁰ This account is very interesting, especially given the *Ethics*’ subsequent discussion of gratitude’s natural weakness that I have related above. Here Aristotle affirms that it is a common human hope and desire (one that “the people” pursues by building a shrine to the Graces) for gratitude to be strengthened and reciprocal giving to be promoted. Gratitude is recognized in this hope not only as a proper response to past benevolence received (“one ought to serve in return one who has been gracious”), but also a proper spur to the initiation of future benevolent action on the part of the one who has been a beneficiary (“one... ought oneself, the next time, to take the lead in being gracious.”) Of course, the decision by people to erect a shrine “to foster” reciprocation of benefaction in the city is a recognition of the fact that gratitude needs encouragement, and thus, of the low human truths that Aristotle explains in his account of gratitude’s weakness. As Sokolon puts it, the use of the Graces “as reminders to the citizens of what holds the city together... suggests that, although benevolence is an important political emotion for the city’s cohesiveness, the

³⁹ *Ethics*, 1132b32-1133a2.

⁴⁰ *Ethics*, 1122a3-6.

citizens need to be reminded of the social value of benevolence.”⁴¹ However, the erection of the shrine also indicates how it is in the power of a community to give gratitude and benevolence new scope. Receiving a benefit in a relationship between two people is advantageous but not noble because it involves faring well rather than acting well, and it tends to widen the inequality between the two. However, the city is a community where those who have been beneficiaries in one relationship or situation have more opportunity to be benefactors in others. The city changes the relationships between isolated individuals by putting many individuals into wider and more future-oriented relationships. (For example, a son may be unable to repay his father for the life he has received from him, but in a city, the son can perform honorable deeds that are a credit to his father.) The city can also provide an education (or a shrine) that changes and ennobles the significance of gratitude for the person who receives a benefit: it can teach him that gratitude can be a liberating spur to future noble action instead of merely an obligatory response to benefits received in the past. The people who erect shrines to the Graces in their cities have found a beautiful way for their cities to encourage the mutual exercise of virtues like liberality. If gratitude and love flow to liberal people, allowing for a two-way bond of affection to grow between those in a position to give and those in need, this seems to be true only because the political community can elevate the possibilities and meaning of benefaction by encouraging reciprocity.

As I have said, the shrine is introduced as if it is an illustration of Aristotle’s broad claim that the political community is held together by mutual exchange of good for good. It works as an illustration to the extent that both commercial exchange and the

⁴¹ Sokolon, 230.

reciprocation of giving entail doing good. Nonetheless, the reciprocal exchange of goods in trade is not the same as the readiness to give and return favors, and as Aristotle proceeds through his account of the former, it becomes clear how significant the differences are between the community of the shrine and the community built on reciprocal trade. It is true that both ideas of reciprocity identify differences in terms of need as the grounding for community: “community comes into existence... out of those who are different and not equal,” and yet these different kinds of people are held together and united by their need (“for if people should not need anything, or not in the same way, then there will either not be exchange or not the same sort of exchange.”)⁴² In both accounts, too, an institution of the city is required to allow these differences to be mediated—where the first account features a shrine designed by the city to foster reciprocal human benefaction that is naturally elusive, the second features money as an invention of the city to make it possible to equalize unequal goods. Aristotle claims that money (*nomisma*) has been made “by agreement,” that is, “by law” (*nomos*), into “a kind of exchangeable representative” of need in order to allow people to equalize the different things that they have to exchange.⁴³ Thus money is a legal institution that enables people to “be equals and partners in a community,” held together “as if they were some single entity” through reciprocity.⁴⁴ However, needless to say, money brings unequal and different members of a community together in a very different way than reciprocation of generosity.

⁴² *Ethics*, 1133a17-19, 27-28.

⁴³ *Ethics*, 1133a29-32, 1133b10, 17-18.

⁴⁴ *Ethics*, 1133b3-5, 8.

Human beings do not need to be reminded by the city of their physical needs; these are immediately present to them. Nor do they require a reminder to exchange with a view to the future; as Aristotle reminds us in this chapter, money is sufficient to promote future economic exchange.⁴⁵ Human beings need to be reminded of the obligation to gratitude because it is quite natural for them to forget it. If cities find it necessary to cultivate gratitude, it is because they find money an inadequate source of unity for a political community. The building of a shrine to the Graces suggests that an account of the city as a community concerned with the mutual fulfillment of human needs is not enough—a shared life of virtues such as liberality is required. Thus, Aristotle’s explanation of the shrine to the Graces points us towards his claims in the *Politics* that the city comes into being for the sake of living, but exists for the sake of living well. The city isn’t simply a place where adjudication and punishment curb the harm that savage human beings might do to each other, nor yet one where human beings transcend violence by uniting in commercial cooperation. Rather it is a place that may assist human beings to learn to live together with affection, gratitude and the mutual exchange of liberal and other virtuous deeds.

Liberality, Political Friendship and Civil Faction

The action that people have taken in building shrines to the Graces that promote gratitude and reciprocity seems to be directed towards building the kind of like-mindedness (*homonoia*) in a community that Aristotle contrasts in Book Nine, Chapter

⁴⁵ *Ethics*, 1133b11-14.

Six of the *Ethics* with civil faction.⁴⁶ Aristotle calls the like-mindedness he is discussing there “political friendship,” insofar as it is shared judgment about what is advantageous and what relates to life.⁴⁷ If the city can succeed in teaching people to recognize in their gratitude for what they have received an impetus to act liberally towards others, it will have taught them to some extent to “wish for what is just and what is advantageous,” and to “aim at these also in common.”⁴⁸ Aristotle states that the possibility of finding such agreement between people depends on their sharing the virtues of decent human beings, because like-mindedness with others depends on being constant in one’s own desires, as the virtuous are: “the decent... are like-minded both with themselves and with one another, being on the same page, so to speak (for with these sorts of people the objects of their wishing remain constant and do not ebb and flow like a violent strait.)”⁴⁹ By contrast, like-mindedness evades “base people” for the most part, because they are greedy for what benefits themselves but slow to perform “labors and public services.”⁵⁰ Lacking the virtue that would be the foundation for friendship, such people fall into “civil faction,” “for when people do not watch over the commons, it is destroyed.”⁵¹

The interconnectedness of virtue and affection between citizens is also a central point in Aristotle’s definition of the city in Book Three, Chapter Nine of the *Politics*. If

⁴⁶ *Ethics*, 1167a24-1167b2.

⁴⁷ *Ethics*, 1167b3-4.

⁴⁸ *Ethics*, 1167b6-9.

⁴⁹ *Ethics*, 1167b4-8.

⁵⁰ *Ethics*, 1167b10-13.

⁵¹ *Ethics*, 1167b13-16.

Aristotle's discussion in *Ethics* Book Five, Chapter Five introduces competition between three different notions of reciprocity as justice (i.e., repaying harm for harm, reciprocal commercial exchange, and the reciprocation of virtue), this chapter in the *Politics* seems to take up the competition again. Requit of harm for harm seems to align with Aristotle's consideration here of the view that the city might "exist for the sake of an alliance to prevent [its citizens'] suffering injustice from anyone."⁵² Economic exchange aligns with his consideration of the view that the city might be an alliance "for purposes of exchanges and use of one another."⁵³ Aristotle criticizes both accounts as insufficient, for "virtue must be a care for every city, or at least every one to which the term applies truly," and he concludes the chapter by insisting that the end of the city is the life of virtue, not merely the shared life at which the two accounts aim: "the political community must be regarded... as being for the sake of noble actions, not for the sake of living together."⁵⁴ This correction of the first two views corresponds with the account of virtuous reciprocation that Aristotle attributed to those who built the shrines to the Graces. Moreover, it is important that he links the claim that the city exists for virtue with the claim that the city requires more affection between its citizens than would exist in a city that unites only for commercial exchange or security from injustice.⁵⁵ He insists that even in a union between citizens that was arranged to secure both of these ends, if "each nevertheless treated his own household as a city" it would fall short, "if, that is, they

⁵² *Politics*, 1280a34-35.

⁵³ *Politics*, 1280a35-36.

⁵⁴ *Politics*, 1280b6-7, 1281a2-3.

⁵⁵ *Politics*, 1280b25-30, 35-40.

shared in a similar way when joined together as they had when separated.” As I discussed in my chapter on the household, Aristotle insists that in order to come to share together in a political way, people must “inhabit one and the same location and make use of intermarriage,” and unite through clans, festivals and shared pursuits.⁵⁶ His explanation for this is that this way of sharing in life is “the work of affection; for affection is the intentional choice of living together. Living well, then is the end of the city and these things are for the sake of this end.”⁵⁷ In this chapter too, Aristotle seems to confirm that the city’s existence as a community directed towards virtue corresponds with its existence as community united by affection; while private life and the household must be preserved in a city, the citizens must also choose affection and political friendship, which requires them to link their private lives through intermarriages, shared pursuits, and most importantly, virtuous, noble acts.

Moreover, in the beginning of this chapter, Aristotle links the two incomplete notions of the city that he refutes in this chapter to the two partial and competing understandings of justice that he presents throughout the *Politics* as the most enduring causes of civil faction. These competing claims are those that Aristotle attributes to the deviant regimes of democracy and oligarchy: the rule of the people is based on the view that “those who are equal in any respect... are equal simply,” while oligarchic rule is based on the view that “those who are unequal in a single respect” – namely, wealth— are “wholly unequal.”⁵⁸ Aristotle’s correction of the views that the city is an alliance to

⁵⁶ *Politics*, 1280b35-38.

⁵⁷ *Politics*, 1280b37-1281a1.

⁵⁸ *Politics*, 1301a28-37.

prevent injustice or accommodate trade is presented as an elaboration of his claim that the dispute between the oligarchs and democrats over justice speaks “to a point of a kind of justice,” but is silent about “the most authoritative thing.”⁵⁹ Upon concluding that the city exists for the sake of noble actions, he addresses the claims of the democrats and oligarchs again, stating that it is “those who contribute most” to a community of noble actions, not those who exceed others in freedom or wealth but fall short in “political virtue” who have “a greater part in the city.”⁶⁰

The potential for factional conflict between oligarchy and democracy is explored by Aristotle throughout much of the *Politics*, where it is shown to be a threat that exists by necessity in any city. This is because it is rooted in a basic economic situation that obtains everywhere: there are (a few) rich and (many) poor people in every city, and one cannot be both simultaneously.⁶¹ In contrast with this, other population groups—e.g., “the warriors, farmers, and artisans”—that are necessary for a city and are usually divided “can come together in the same persons.”⁶² Aristotle concludes that the impossibility of wealth and poverty coming together is why the “well off and the poor” “are particularly held to be parts of the city.”⁶³ The difference between oligarchy and democracy follows this difference. Oligarchy exists wherever “people rule on account of wealth,” while

⁵⁹ *Politics*, 1280a22, 25-26.

⁶⁰ *Politics*, 1281a4-9.

⁶¹ *Politics*, 1291b6.

⁶² *Politics*, 1291b2-6.

⁶³ *Politics*, 1291b6-12.

democracy exists wherever the poor rule.⁶⁴ Aristotle insists that “what makes [these two regimes] differ is poverty and wealth” not (as many would argue) whether the many or the few rule.⁶⁵ However, the wealthy and the poor do not, in Aristotle’s view, claim that they should rule simply on the basis of their economic states. Rather, Aristotle says that the dispute between these regime types occurs because it happens that the “few are well off, but all share in freedom.”⁶⁶ In this way, the difference between the poor multitude and the wealthy few that happens to come about in any community creates a constant dispute over justice.

Aristotle argues that democracy arises among the multitude who are not well off because despite their economic inferiority, “all alike are free persons.”⁶⁷ On account of their equal share in this common freedom, the many consider themselves “to be equal simply.”⁶⁸ Their error lies in taking the equality that does exist for them in a certain respect as a grounds for simple equality that they cannot justly claim.⁶⁹ Thus, to democrats, freedom replaces any other consideration that might ground merit. In a further consideration of the democratic notion of freedom, Aristotle identifies two parts. The first is that democrats put number before merit by accepting that justice is simply what the majority legally wishes.⁷⁰ The second is that democrats take freedom to be the absence of

⁶⁴ Politics 1280a1-4.

⁶⁵ Politics 1279b40-1280a1.

⁶⁶ Politics 1280a4-6.

⁶⁷ Politics, 1301a30.

⁶⁸ Politics 1301a29-31.

⁶⁹ *Politics*, 1301a28-29.

⁷⁰ *Politics*, 1317b4-11.

slavery, and slavery to be “not living as one wants;” thus they identify freedom simply with living as one wants.⁷¹ In this view, democrats wish to rule not so much out of a claim to dominate over others, as a claim “to merit not being ruled by anyone, or failing this, to rule and be ruled in turn.”⁷² Thus, the democratic element competes for rule in hopes of achieving the freedom to live as if there were no ruler.

On the other hand, Aristotle says that oligarchy arises “as a result of those who are unequal in regard to property” conceiving themselves to be “unequal simply.”⁷³ In their case, wealth replaces any other consideration that might ground merit and is taken for general superiority and a claim to a greater share. There is partial justice in the oligarchs’ claim because “the wealthy... have the greater part of the territory, and the territory is something common; further, for the most part they are more trustworthy [than the poor] regarding agreements.”⁷⁴ The strength of their claim depends on the extent to which the city can be said to exist “for the sake of possessions,” because if possessions were the end of the city, the wealthy who have a greater economic share in the city than the poor would thereby be taking a correspondingly greater part in the city.⁷⁵ Aristotle argues that viewing the political community this way, the wealthy few “seek to aggrandize themselves” through rule.⁷⁶ Since each group has a “conception” that it merits a part in

⁷¹ *Politics*, 1317b12-14.

⁷² *Politics*, 1317b15-17.

⁷³ *Politics*, 1301a34-37.

⁷⁴ *Politics*, 1283a31-34.

⁷⁵ *Politics*, 1280a26-31.

⁷⁶ *Politics*, 1301a35-36.

the regime that it does not, and this unmerited part cannot go to the one without being denied to the other, the rich and poor constantly “engage in factional conflict.”⁷⁷

Aristotle also argues that enduring enmity between the very rich and poor in a city results from the burden that either economic situation poses to the individual’s capacity for virtue and justice. On one hand, those who receive many of the gifts of fortune are in an unfortunate situation from the perspective of moral excellence: for the “very well off,” “it is difficult to follow reason.”⁷⁸ Those who are “overly handsome, overly strong, overly well born, or overly wealthy... tend to become arrogant and base on a grand scale.”⁷⁹ This is largely because of the luxury in their upbringing: they “neither wish to be ruled nor know how to be” from childhood, “for the effect of living in luxury is that they do not become habituated to being ruled even at school.”⁸⁰ Consequently, as adults they “do not know how to be ruled by any sort of rule, but only to rule like a master.”⁸¹ On the other hand, living in penury also makes it difficult to follow reason, and those who are “overly indigent, overly weak, or very lacking in honor” tend to become “malicious and base in petty ways.”⁸² On their own, these people “do not know how to rule but only how to be ruled, and then only to be ruled like a slave,” and where the very wealthy are “consumed by contempt,” the poor are “consumed by envy.”⁸³ Aristotle notes that these problems

⁷⁷ *Politics*, 1301a39-40.

⁷⁸ *Politics*, 1295b2, 9.

⁷⁹ *Politics*, 1295b5,10.

⁸⁰ *Politics*, 1295b14-18.

⁸¹ *Politics*, 1295b20-21.

⁸² *Politics*, 1295b7-11.

⁸³ *Politics*, 1295b19-23.

promote injustice: “acts of injustice are committed either through arrogance or through malice.”⁸⁴ At the same time, the enmity that exists between very rich and very poor precludes the affection that the political community requires; Aristotle remarks that “enemies do not wish to have even a journey in common.”⁸⁵

When we return to this conflict as it is treated in *Politics* Book Three, Chapter Nine, it becomes clearer why Aristotle would present the city’s concern for virtuous living rather than mere living as a response to the factional conflict between oligarchy and democracy. His explanation in this chapter of how each party to the dispute can be seeking a real part of justice and yet fail to be just is that it is self-concern that gets in the way of good judgment. Aristotle confirms that there is something correct in each claim. By the many poor, “justice is held to be equality, and it is, but for equals and not for all.”⁸⁶ By the wealthy few, “inequality is held to be just and is indeed, but for unequals and not for all.”⁸⁷ The problem is that neither side sees the limits to its own merit. Aristotle argues in this chapter that the incompleteness of the views he is correcting comes from the tendency of self-regard to cloud an individual’s judgment about his own worth: both oligarchs and democrats “disregard this element of persons and judge badly” because “the judgment concerns themselves, and most people are bad judges concerning their own things.”⁸⁸ By this account each side of the conflict is too grasping to recognize

⁸⁴ *Politics*, 1295b11-12.

⁸⁵ *Politics*, 1295b23-25.

⁸⁶ *Politics*, 1280a11-12.

⁸⁷ *Politics*, 1280a13-14.

⁸⁸ *Politics*, 1280a14-16.

where real justice lies. As I have noted above, Aristotle argues that real justice lies in a recognition that it is the politically virtuous who “have a greater part” in the city.⁸⁹

At the same time, the politically virtuous are not those who act to defend their possessions or aggrandize themselves, but rather those who choose to live together and share in a community of noble actions. As Aristotle states in his discussion of factional conflict, “those who are outstanding in virtue would engage in factional conflict most justifiably, yet they do it least of all.”⁹⁰ The “free” and the wealthy are competing for a share in the city because they don’t recognize the greatest good that the city can provide; both sides merely think of the city in terms of what can be possessed, and for this reason, both see political life as essentially a competition over the external goods that exist in a city. However, Aristotle’s presentation of the city as a community of virtue pushes away from such a view towards a more gracious and affectionate view of things, one that makes political friendship possible. This is the view that the city is a community where mutual exchange of good deeds can occur—the kind of community that people build the shrine to the Graces to foster.

Aristotle’s claim that the true city is an affectionate community united by reciprocation of benefits and virtue is not left as an expression of impractical political hope in the face of intractable factional conflict. Rather, Aristotle indicates in his analysis of hypothetical, historical and possible regimes that means could be found to foster such a way of life. In particular, Aristotle’s insistence that the element in the city with middling economic resources might assist in bridging the rivalry between oligarchic and

⁸⁹ *Politics*, 1281a6.

⁹⁰ *Politics*, 1301a40-1301b2.

democratic factions can be interpreted as an important step in this direction. Reliance on the middling element in the city should not be treated simply as a pragmatic shift by Aristotle away from concern for political virtue in favor of reliance on a salutary form of stinginess. Middling wealth is not on its face inconsistent with extreme excellence. Aristotle himself notes that his teaching in the *Ethics* that virtue is a mean results in the conclusion that a “happy” and “unimpeded” life is also “the middling sort of life.”⁹¹ As I have discussed previously, there is ample reason given in the *Politics* and the *Ethics* to take seriously the view that both adversity and prosperity hinder the development of virtue, and in the economic realm in particular, extreme wealth and poverty are both impediments to the development of liberality. Aristotle’s claims that excess of good or bad fortune tends to make it more difficult to follow reason are consistent with his presentation of virtue elsewhere. The middling sort are described as those who “neither desire the things of others... nor others their things;” this is not to say that they are stingy.⁹² The stingy people who are described as abstaining from others’ property in Book Four, Chapter One of the *Ethics* do not do so out of a lack of desire for the property of others, but out of fear that they will lose their property if they act on such a desire: “some... abstain from the property of others out of fear, on the grounds that it is not easy for somebody to take the property of others and not have those others take his in return.”⁹³ Though this fear leaves them “satisfied... neither to take from nor to give to

⁹¹ *Politics*, 1295a35-39.

⁹² *Politics*, 1295b30-32.

⁹³ *Ethics*, 1121b18-31.

another,” it does not imply a lack of desire for that which belongs to others.⁹⁴ Moreover, the fact that these people fear losing their property if they should indulge such a desire suggests that they may be much more well off than the middling, who are, at any rate, described by Aristotle as people whose things are not the object of desire for others. Although virtue is not such a thing as can be guaranteed by economic status, it is reasonable according to what Aristotle teaches about stinginess in the *Ethics* to look for liberality in those of moderate wealth more than the excessively wealthy.

Furthermore, when Aristotle says that 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,” he need not be taken to be eulogizing an empty wish.⁹⁵ Even though Aristotle first describes the existence of a politically engaged element in the city with “a middling and sufficient property” as a matter of “the greatest good fortune,” he soon complicates the idea that it depends merely on fortune.⁹⁶ He does this first by noting that the larger the population in a city, the more numerous the middling element will be.⁹⁷ In the second place, he suggests that Greek leaders have intentionally failed to “provide for” a strong middling element because they preferred their own advantage over what was best for their cities.⁹⁸ In other words, the rarity of regimes where a middling element plays a role is a matter of political intention and custom, not mere chance. It is

⁹⁴ *Ethics*, 1121b31-32.

⁹⁵ *Politics*, 1295b25-27.

⁹⁶ *Politics*, 1295b40-1296a1.

⁹⁷ *Politics*, 1296a9-13.

⁹⁸ *Politics*, 1296a30-1296b.

true that in Book Two of the *Politics*, Aristotle criticizes proposals to overcome factional conflict by legislating a “moderate level of property for all,” as a failure to reckon with the insatiability of desire that leads to this conflict in the first place.⁹⁹ However, he also suggests there that these insatiable desires might be moderated in those “educated by laws.”¹⁰⁰ Moreover, as I have been arguing, even in building a shrine to the Graces, a city would be undermining economic divisions and the vices that come with them by encouraging people to share their wealth when need and opportunity coincide. If proceeding in these ways wouldn’t create a new economic class in the city, it might well help to foster among the moderately wealthy a class of people who regarded themselves as “equal and similar... to the extent possible.”

Aristotle also suggests that the best form of polity—and one that resembles aristocracy in this regard—is one that exists as so fine a mixture of oligarchic and democratic elements that it can “be held to be both—and neither.”¹⁰¹ It is this quality of the Spartan regime that provokes the highest praise of that regime that is given by Aristotle, and in explaining it, he focuses less on the institutional arrangements of rule in Sparta than on the extent to which it is a city that overcomes economic division and achieves common action: “In the first place, for example, as far as the rearing of children is concerned, those of the wealthy are reared in similar fashion to those of the poor, and they are educated in a manner such that the children of the poor can also afford it.”¹⁰²

⁹⁹ *Politics*, 1266a38-1267b8.

¹⁰⁰ *Politics*, 1266b31-32.

¹⁰¹ *Politics*, 1294b11-14, 35-37.

¹⁰² *Politics*, 1294b22-25.

This indistinguishability continues to be fostered “in the age following” and “when they become men.”¹⁰³ The wealthy and the poor are not “marked off” from each other, all receive the same sustenance from the common messes, and the rich dress in a way that is not out of reach of the poor.¹⁰⁴ Although Aristotle is not stinting in his criticisms of Sparta elsewhere, he gives the city the highest praise as one that is so unified that “none of the parts of the city would wish to have another regime.”¹⁰⁵ No doubt, this *homonoia* exists in large part because of Sparta’s efforts to educate its children in common. Although Aristotle will ultimately criticize the specific nature of Spartan education quite harshly,¹⁰⁶ he begins Book Eight by stressing that common education of the young should be a legislative priority above all,¹⁰⁷ and therefore praises the Spartans who “most of all pay serious attention to their children, and do so in common.”¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, this whole account of how affection has been fostered in Sparta between rich and poor suggests that here, through active choices in how to go about education, sharing public meals, and choosing attire, the Spartans have created a functional “middling element” despite the sharp economic division between rich and poor in the city. In his introduction to Joe Sachs’ translation of the *Politics*, Lijun Gu argues that this passage shows that Aristotle is interested in “the mixing... less of offices and properties than of actions,” insofar as “it is

¹⁰³ *Politics*, 1294b25-26.

¹⁰⁴ *Politics*, 1294b27-29.

¹⁰⁵ *Politics*, 1294b37-38.

¹⁰⁶ *Politics*, 1338b10-32.

¹⁰⁷ *Politics*, 1337a12-25.

¹⁰⁸ *Politics*, 1337a30-31.

about how two extreme groups, the rich and the poor, can come together by acting toward a middle in their everyday life—from raising and educating their children, to taking their daily meals.”¹⁰⁹ Gu notes that since “there is no mention of a middle with respect to property in Sparta,” but “Aristotle still considers this a ‘beautifully mixed’ middle regime,” Aristotle must think “that a middle regime can be composed” not so much of a “middle possession” as of a “middle doing.”¹¹⁰ Even if Sparta does not achieve perfect justice or full virtue in Aristotle’s view, it seems that as a function of its common education and customs of shared life, it achieves a high level of affection and overcomes the war between poor and rich that causes so much enmity and injustice in cities. By emphasizing Sparta’s success in this regard despite its many failings, Aristotle promotes confidence that a city dedicated to a fuller account of political life could foster reciprocation of liberality and virtue.

A final illustration of liberality’s part in “watching over the commons” can be gathered from a return to the discussions of reciprocity in Homer’s *Odyssey*. In the previous chapter, I noted that both Penelope and Odysseus make claims that gratitude should be paid to the one who acts benevolently. However, their claims reveal a difference in their judgments about what constitutes benevolence. Penelope becomes an accuser of humanity in general in her lament in Book Four about the suitors’ ingratitude towards Odysseus. She says that there is no gratitude for good deeds done in the past, and evidence of this is that while the suitors’ fathers praised Odysseus for doing no wrong to

¹⁰⁹ Lijun Gu, introduction to Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Indianapolis: Focus Publishing, 2012), xxxiii.

¹¹⁰ Gu, xxxiv.

any in the land and showing no preference, their sons are eating away his son's wealth.¹¹¹ In this statement, Penelope identifies Odysseus' mere failure to act unjustly towards the suitors' fathers as a good deed done to them. This suggests that according to her judgment, Odysseus was so much greater than these men that it was benevolent for him not to mistreat them. Although Penelope is upset for good reason at the unjust and harmful behavior of the suitors, this judgment implies a problematic and illiberal vision of benevolence. Homer suggests that Penelope's judgment is flawed by later putting the same lament against human ingratitude in the mouth of the suitors' soothsayer Leiodes as he fruitlessly begs Odysseus to spare his life. The "good deed" that highhanded Leiodes expects gratitude for is having refrained from mistreating the serving women in Odysseus' home.¹¹² Odysseus' account of gratitude and benevolence, which I discussed in the previous chapter, is much more gracious and liberal than that of his wife or Leiodes. According to his claims, gratitude is owed to the one who feeds a beggar rather than the one who opts to not commit outrages against those with less power, position or virtue. Moreover, Odysseus' argument looks to the initiation of benevolence, rather than simply the return of gratitude. Aristotle's affirmation that the one who feeds the wandering beggar is liberal is an endorsement of Odysseus' account that it is best for human beings to give and receive benefits in return.

¹¹¹ *The Odyssey*, 4.695.

¹¹² *The Odyssey*, 22.319.

Liberality and Tyranny

Aristotle's account of the erection of shrines to the Graces stands in sharp contrast to a another kind sacred architecture project that he describes in the *Politics*. In Book Five, Chapter Eleven, he gives a surprising interpretation of some of the most magnificent temples and monuments of the ancient world as works undertaken with the aim of degrading the human beings who built them. Aristotle identifies "the pyramids in Egypt, the monuments of the Cypselids, the construction of the temple of Olympian Zeus by the Pisistrads, and the work done by Polycrates on the temples of Samos" as projects of different tyrants united in the same pursuit: securing their power by diminishing their subjects.¹¹³ He argues that tyrants plan these works in order "to make the ruled poor, so that they cannot sustain their own defense, and are so occupied with their daily needs that they lack the leisure to conspire."¹¹⁴ Giving double emphasis to the point, he states that "all of these things have the same effect—lack of leisure, and poverty, on the part of the ruled."¹¹⁵ People might tend to view buildings like the Pyramids as beautiful works of art that give cause for wonder at the sophisticated communities from which they sprang or even at the gods and rulers whom these monuments honor. However, Aristotle rejects this interpretation: the works really represent the naked use of authority to diminish people's freedom and virtue. By making the subjects of tyrannical cities poorer, and taking away their freedom and time for acts of public or private virtue, these tyrannical monuments achieve the opposite of what shrines to the Graces do: they take away the means that

¹¹³ *Politics*, 1313b19-27.

¹¹⁴ *Politics*, 1313b20-22.

¹¹⁵ *Politics*, 1313b25-27.

these subjects might have for reciprocal giving; more broadly, they deprive the people of the opportunity and inclination to cooperate in acting virtuously and liberally together. Thus, they deprive the subjects of the opportunity for political friendship as well.

Aristotle's account of the Pyramids is given as part of a fuller picture of the mode in which most tyrants rule. According to this account, what is true in the case of the Pyramids is true throughout the tyrant's administration: the tyrant does everything that he can to remove the possibility for political friendship and liberality from his subjects. He eliminates the great and their high thoughts, and at the same time, he forbids "common messes, clubs, education, or anything else of this sort."¹¹⁶ He simultaneously works to undermine affection and virtue in the city, "guarding against anything that customarily gives rise to two things, high thoughts and trust."¹¹⁷ Tyrants work to root out any friendship that may exist among their subjects: "a feature of tyranny is to slander them to one another, and set friends at odds with friends, the people with the notables, and the wealthy with themselves."¹¹⁸ As part of the elimination of mutual trust, the tyrant must eliminate shared education and pursuit of the truth: "leisured discussions (*scholai*) are not allowed, or other reasonings-in-common connected with leisure (*syllogoi scholastikoi*), but everything is done to make all as ignorant of one another as possible, since knowledge tends to create trust of one another."¹¹⁹ The tyrant attempts to undermine life in the private realm and household as well: "residents... are made to be always in

¹¹⁶ *Politics*, 1313a38-1313b2.

¹¹⁷ *Politics*, 1313b2-3.

¹¹⁸ *Politics*, 1313b17-19.

¹¹⁹ *Politics*, 1313b3-6.

evidence and pass their time about the doors [of the tyrant's palace]; in this way their activities would escape notice least of all, and they would become habituated to having small thoughts through always acting like slaves."¹²⁰ In addition, the tyrant proceeds intentionally with the undermining of family unity which, as I have argued, was achieved in Sparta by accident: Aristotle argues that tyrants tend to empower women and slaves in hopes that they will "denounce their husbands."¹²¹ Tyrants further remove the means to reciprocal exchange through excessive taxation and the time for leisure by warmongering.¹²² The rule of most tyrants is aimed at uprooting the modes of shared living and the reciprocity of virtue that Aristotle associates with a true political community, and in which, as I have argued, liberality plays an important part. Moreover, in his extensive efforts to combat trust, affection and economic freedom in his regime, the tyrant seems to recognize as his nemesis the human being who pursues a life that is liberal in the broad sense:

It is also a feature of tyranny not to delight in anyone who is dignified or free; for the tyrant alone claims to merit being such, and one who asserts a rival dignity and a spirit of freedom takes away the preeminence and the element of mastery of tyranny; hence these are hated as persons undermining the tyrant's rule.¹²³

Here Aristotle makes clear that even as tyrants rule for their own benefit rather than any common advantage, their deviant regime makes a claim about justice, too. They claim to merit preeminence and mastery over everyone on the grounds of possessing sole dignity

¹²⁰ *Politics*, 1313b6-9.

¹²¹ *Politics*, 1313b33-39.

¹²² *Politics*, 1313b27-29.

¹²³ *Politics*, 1314a6-10.

and freedom. Thus, it is not only the ambitious whom they must oppose, but any human being who appears to possess the broadly liberal virtues and in whom others can put their trust.

It should not be surprising that Aristotle presents tyranny as the enemy to liberality, because he argues that tyranny unites the faults of rule by the wealthy few and by the poor multitude. Aristotle argues that the “unmixed and final sort of oligarchy” and the “extreme sort of democracy” are forms of tyranny—they “happen to be tyrannies divided” among many.¹²⁴ Conversely, he states that tyranny itself “is composed of the ultimate sort of oligarchy and of democracy” and that it “involves the deviations and errors of both of them.”¹²⁵ Aristotle describes unmixed oligarchy as the regime that results when oligarchs become wealthy and few enough that they have the strength “to rule without law” in a “sort of rule of the powerful” that “is close to monarchy.”¹²⁶ This deviant regime is “tighten[ed]... excessively with respect to their properties and in the extent of their friendships.” The extreme form of democracy is “the counterpart” to this: “the multitude has authority and not the law;” the law is ignored as “decrees” become authoritative instead.¹²⁷ Tyranny rejects law altogether in favor of the personal rule of a single individual. I have argued above that liberality can play an important role through reciprocity in mediating the claims of the rich and the poor. Tyranny represents an alternative way to bring these claims together in the character of the tyrant, albeit by

¹²⁴ *Politics*, 1312b38.

¹²⁵ *Politics*, 1310b4-6.

¹²⁶ *Politics*, 1293a30-34.

¹²⁷ *Politics*, 1293a33, 1292a4-9.

compounding their corruptions instead of finding the common ground between what is correct in them.

In Aristotle's account, tyranny reaches the apogee of both the greedy urge for aggrandizement that typifies oligarchs and the hatred of restraint that is an element of democratic freedom. Aristotle states that from oligarchy, a tyranny borrows "having wealth as its end."¹²⁸ This is because "it is only in this way that it can both defend itself and provide luxury."¹²⁹ And like oligarchs, a tyrant distrusts and mistreats the multitude.¹³⁰ However, the tyrant also resembles democrats: his "war on the notables" aims to eliminate rival (and more elevated) claims to authority.¹³¹ Moreover, Aristotle presents the basis for tyrannical domination as a logical extension of the democratic claim that justice is majority rule. This claim would justify the many in dividing "up the things that belong to the minority."¹³² However, Aristotle notes that it "would also mean that whatever actions a tyrant undertook would necessarily all be just; he is stronger and uses force, just as the multitude does with the rich."¹³³ An unqualified claim to majority rule and tyranny alike boil down to a claim that might makes right. The other principle of democracy, the pursuit of untrammelled license, is also found in the tyrant. In democracies where rule by decree has replaced rule by law, "everyone lives as he wants and 'toward

¹²⁸ *Politics*, 1311a10.

¹²⁹ *Politics*, 1311a10-12.

¹³⁰ *Politics*, 1311a12.

¹³¹ *Politics*, 1311a15-16.

¹³² *Politics*, 1281a15-20.

¹³³ *Politics*, 1281a23-24.

whatever [end he happens] to crave,’ as Euripides says.”¹³⁴ When Aristotle states that “the tyrant’s goal is pleasure” instead of the noble, he confirms that the tyrant lives this way, too.¹³⁵ Both extreme democracies and tyrants suppose that it is “slavery” to “live with a view to the regime,” and freedom to live by unrestrained desire.¹³⁶

The significance of the tyrant’s life of pleasure is made clearest in Aristotle’s account of the role that is made for flattery in his deviant regime. The tyrant shares a susceptibility to flattery with the many who rule in a democracy: “the flatterer is held in honor by both—the popular leader by peoples, as the popular leader is a flatterer of the people, and by tyrants, persons approaching them in obsequious fashion, which is the work of flattery.”¹³⁷ The reason for the popular leader’s power over an extreme democracy is its lack of law: “under a democracy that is based on law a popular leader does not arise, but the best of the citizens preside.”¹³⁸ However, when law loses its authority, the people try to rule as a “many-headed” monarch, but “become like a master,” holding flatterers in honor.¹³⁹ That is, in losing the rule of law, a democracy loses the prudent guidance of its best citizens and becomes susceptible to the most persuasively flattering voices around—those of demagogues. The tyrant dispenses with law, and a community where law could exist, altogether. In praising the mixed regime, Aristotle has

¹³⁴ *Politics*, 1310a33-35.

¹³⁵ *Politics*, 1311a5.

¹³⁶ *Politics*, 1310a35-36.

¹³⁷ *Politics*, 1313b40-1314a1.

¹³⁸ *Politics*, 1292a7-9.

¹³⁹ *Politics*, 1292a11-13, 17.

claimed that it is advantageous for human beings “to be under constraint and unable to do everything [they] might resolve to do.”¹⁴⁰ This is true insofar as “the license to do whatever one wishes cannot defend against the mean element in every human being.” Unfortunately, “the corruption of human beings is insatiable,” and “people constantly need more until they go beyond all bounds. For the nature of desire is infinite.”¹⁴¹ The tyrant’s desires make him a many-headed monarch, too, but by eliminating any restraint to his power he has thrown off any defense against his meanest element. His baseness is evident in his love of flattery. Aristotle says that tyranny “is friendly to the base, for they [tyrants] delight in being flattered, and no one would do this who had free thoughts: respectable persons may be friends, but they will certainly not flatter.”¹⁴² The baseness of the tyrant is clear from the fact that he wants such “friendships” and thinks it choice-worthy both to receive and to initiate flattery. The tyrant must continue to tyrannize because real friendship with his subjects is impossible for him: in choosing to have his desires “ebb and flow like a violent strait,” the tyrant has made himself incapable of achieving like-mindedness or friendship with himself or others. A tyrant (like Jason) is hungry for rule because he does “not know how to be a private individual.”¹⁴³ Aristotle suggests, through emphasizing the tyrant’s pursuit of flattery, that he has failed to grasp what the liberal and free human being possesses.

¹⁴⁰ *Politics*, 1318b40-1319a4.

¹⁴¹ *Politics*, 1266a38-1267b8.

¹⁴² *Politics*, 1314a1-4.

¹⁴³ *Politics*, 1277a25-26.

Conclusion

The tyrant's pursuit of pleasure is something that deserves careful consideration by the political philosopher because human beings learn from observing tyrants' choices to take pleasure more seriously. In his consideration of opinions about human happiness and the good in Book One of the *Ethics*, Aristotle describes how the choices of the powerful are assumed by many to be wise. In discussing the competing claims for the best life in Book One, Chapter Five, Aristotle claims that the life of pleasure—“a life of fatted cattle”—is not taken seriously by those who perceive it in the many, where it appears slavish.¹⁴⁴ However, he says that those who choose it “attain a hearing because many people in positions of authority experience passions like those of Sardanapallus,” an ancient tyrant famed for his decadent way of life.¹⁴⁵ Human judgment about what life is choiceworthy inevitably gives extra weight to the choices that are made by those who seem least impeded, and on account of his seemingly limitless resources and authority over his subjects, the tyrant seems to be such a person.

Aristotle is not deaf to this judgment. Rather than setting aside considerations of pleasure, he shows that tyrants and fatted cattle are not unique in pursuing it. According to Aristotle, the political community pursues pleasure, too. In his discussion of political friendship in *Ethics* Book Nine, Chapter Nine, Aristotle likens the city to the communities that make it up, stating first that both exist “to provide... things conducive to life,” and that this is why lawgivers of the city “claim that the advantage held in common is what is

¹⁴⁴ *Ethics*, 1095b20-21.

¹⁴⁵ *Ethics*, 1095b22-23.

just.”¹⁴⁶ However, here it is through an acknowledgement that the city has something in common with communities that “seem to arise on account of pleasure—like communities of Bacchic revelers and members of a dinner club,” that Aristotle shows why justice as common advantage should not be taken as a mere shared pursuit of the means to preserving life.¹⁴⁷ Rather than interpreting Bacchic revels and dinner clubs as mere satisfactions of people’s physical desires for nice wine and food, Aristotle attests that the pleasures found therein are more elevated: those entailed in “performing a sacrifice and... getting together with others.”¹⁴⁸ These pleasures are shared, elevated activities. The city, too, unites people in the pleasures of performing sacrifices and hosting gatherings, according to Aristotle.¹⁴⁹ However, here he recognizes yet nobler purposes for these activities: by performing them, the people in the city work towards “distributing honors to the gods and providing a pleasant rest for themselves” in the form of “leisure.” He concludes from this that the common advantage that people seek in the city is not “present advantage” but “that pertaining to life as a whole.” Evidently, common advantage pertaining to life as a whole is so comprehensive as to encompass the exercise of virtue. This account indicates that the social pleasures in particular can point beyond themselves towards “life as a whole,” leading human beings beyond blind concern for present advantage towards justice and fellowship in the city. These sorts of pleasures are evidently different than the ones that tyranny pursues.

¹⁴⁶ *Ethics*, 1160a9-14.

¹⁴⁷ *Ethics*, 1160a19-27.

¹⁴⁸ *Ethics*, 1160a19-21.

¹⁴⁹ *Ethics*, 1160a23-25.

In Book Ten of the *Ethics*, Aristotle describes the pleasures that the tyrant fails to pursue as liberal pleasures. He argues that the pleasures of play (*paidin*) are wrongly judged by many to be good because they are pursued by powerful tyrants, and suggests that a different class of pleasures—liberal pleasures—are the antidote to this mistake.¹⁵⁰ He says that people with “a certain charming dexterity” in the playful pleasures “are well regarded by tyrants, for they make themselves pleasant in the very things the tyrants are after, and such are the sort of people tyrants need.”¹⁵¹ And because “those in positions of authority devote their leisure to them,” such pleasures “seem apt to produce happiness.” However, Aristotle cautions here that “perhaps people of that sort are not proof of anything,” because “neither virtue nor intellect, from which the serious activities arise, consists in the exercise of authority.” Here Aristotle contrasts the “bodily” (*somatikas*) pleasures of play with “pure and liberal pleasure (*hedones eilikrinous kai eleutheriou*):” we should not expect those “who have not tasted” the latter and “seek refuge” in the former to know what is most choiceworthy.¹⁵² In this passage, Aristotle confirms that the liberal human being and the tyrannical one differ according to what they find pleasant: where the tyrant pursues physical excess, there are higher, liberal pleasures to be tasted in virtue and the life of the mind.

There is a third, indirect, reference to a tyrant in Book Four, Chapter One of the *Ethics* that has been less remarked on than the other two. This reference comes in

¹⁵⁰ *Ethics*, 1176b9-1176b20.

¹⁵¹ *Ethics*, 1176b13-16.

¹⁵² *Ethics*, 1176

Aristotle's claim that the liberal person is "not content with the view of Simonides."¹⁵³ The view that Aristotle alludes to here is explained in the *Rhetoric*, where he describes Simonides' remark "about the wise and the wealthy."¹⁵⁴ He recounts how Simonides the poet was asked by the wife of Hiero, the tyrant of Syracuse, whether "it is better to be wealthy or wise."¹⁵⁵ According to Aristotle, Simonides answered, "'wealthy' – for he contended that he sees the wise spending their time at the doors of the wealthy."¹⁵⁶ The wealthy person whom Simonides refers to is, of course, the tyrant, who, like Hiero, can gain the company of wise men and poets at will. Thus, Aristotle's claim for liberality must be that the liberal person would not esteem someone wise for spending time at the doors of the rich, or look for wisdom at the doors of the tyrant. The "wise" human being who chose to employ his gifts for the sake of the wealth with which a tyrant might reward him would be stingy, not liberal; since he is more serious about money than wisdom, he is more serious about money than he ought to be.¹⁵⁷ In this passing allusion in his account of liberality, Aristotle prompts us to consider whether liberality might be not only a basis for a life of political virtue, but also necessary to preserving that space for wisdom or intellectual life that is threatened by the insatiability of human desire.

¹⁵³ *Ethics*, 1121a7-8.

¹⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1391a9-10.

¹⁵⁵ *Rhetoric*, 1391a10-11.

¹⁵⁶ *Rhetoric*, 1391a11-12.

¹⁵⁷ cf. *Ethics*, 1119b30.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

Scholars who examine Aristotle's economic theory focus on Book One of the *Politics*, for that is where Aristotle discusses the household (*oikos*) and the arts of acquisition and money-making, and makes his sharpest criticisms of amassing wealth. Although he considers these acquisitive arts under the umbrella of his analysis of *oikonomikē*, or household management, from which modern economics derives its name, and with which it shares a concern for human beings' physical needs, Aristotle's arguments criticizing sophisticated, interest-based modes of acquisition as unnatural put him at odds with contemporary economic thought. Modern economic theorists present Aristotle as a would-be analyst of economic practices who failed to come to grips with the promising potential in newly emerging market mechanisms due in part to his attachment to the aristocratic conventions of his time. A more interesting group of scholars pays closer attention to tensions and difficulties raised in Book One, arguing that despite Aristotle's surface defense of aristocracy, and his serious and illuminating recognition that pursuit of wealth undermines human beings' concern for the good life, Aristotle is much more aware of the need for acquisitive arts and the consequent limits of politics than his arguments from nature suggest.

I have shown that both interpretations require qualification. Turning to Aristotle's treatment of the household in Book One of the *Politics*, I have shown that here, Aristotle emphasizes the moral danger posed by human beings' pursuit of wealth while

simultaneously bringing to light the household as the natural association where human acquisition primarily takes place and ought to be, and can be, moderated.

Aristotle speaks about the household in Book I both as an association under a form of rule (*oikonomikē*) distinct from kingly, political, or masterly rule, and as the first community in which individuals unite out of their needs to reproduce and provide subsistence on the road to the development of the city. These two views of the household emerge from two distinct methods of inquiry about the city: the first is an attempt to recognize the city as a whole by analyzing it into its uncompounded parts; the second is an attempt to recognize the city as an organic growth from human beings' natural political drives. I show that by adopting these two distinct methods within the first two chapters of the *Politics*, Aristotle signals a complex view of the city and of human nature. The organic account, by presenting the city as an organic growth driven by human impulses, emphasizes human beings' natural constraints, desires and equipment that direct them irresistibly to a communal life of belonging. The account that looks at parts of the city as independent units who come together suggests some measure of volition or freedom in political union.

In Aristotle's organic presentation, the household comes to light first, and then the village. Both communities are said to come together seeking self-sufficiency as "mere living," but when villages unite to form a city, the achievement of self-sufficiency comes with a new purpose for the city: living well. It is striking that at this point in Aristotle's account, while the village fades from view, the household does not. In addition, it is with consideration of the household and household management that Aristotle returns to his first method. By interworking both methods in his consideration of the household,

Aristotle shows that this human community has a special nature: it is an association that is naturally more intimate and enduring than others (and for this reason, one we might expect to include the least freedom). However, even when Aristotle is in the midst of his organic explanation of the city, he notes that *like* the city, the household is “made” by deliberative speech, the speech which makes humans political and capable of freely coming together. The household has a duality to its nature that corresponds to the tension between natural human belonging and freedom.

The problem of acquisition, a problem that Aristotle identifies as the proper concern of the household, is shown by his treatment to be a special manifestation of the tension between humanity’s natural belonging and freedom. Human beings have more freedom than any other natural creature over the means at their disposal to acquire the nourishment and supplies that they need to survive from the world around them. Nature has been more generous to them than to any of the plants or the other animals in this regard. However, human beings share a certain constraint with all of the other natural organisms: the way that they acquire the goods for life shapes the lives that they lead. This creates potential for a specifically human corruption: human beings tend easily and freely to acquire in the ways that come to hand, but they don’t necessarily do so with a view to the way of life that is best for them. What other animals are taught by the natural limits to their appetite must be revealed by reason to the human being: there is a natural limit to the things needed for the life of a household or a city—what Aristotle terms real wealth.

Aristotle’s account of the introduction of money and its consequences emphasizes how this institution creates new desires and a new pursuit for human beings that make it

much more difficult for them to see wealth as a means to natural human ends. Aristotle stresses how at times “money seems to be something nonsensical and to exist altogether by convention, and in no way by nature” because it can become completely devalued and useless “with a view to any of the necessary things.” He notes how the fable of King Midas illustrates the possibility of a greedy prayer turning everything, including food, to inedible gold. Aristotle shows through his account of how money works and how it changes human desires that its almost infinite flexibility creates dangerous and ill-recognized temptations for human beings to indulge the freedom in their nature while becoming blind to the constraints.

However, through his continued emphasis on the household throughout the first three Books of the *Politics*, Aristotle reveals that the special nature of this community provides a partial antidote to the corrupting influence of greed. By keeping the household in focus at the end of his organic account of the city, Aristotle suggests that however much the household is completed by the development of the city, it maintains its place as essential for human and political flourishing. Moreover, by his insistence that deliberative speech about the just and unjust mark the household as well as the city, Aristotle confirms that desires beyond the necessary ones concerned with reproduction and food—desires for justice and reasoning together, at a minimum—have roots in the household.

Aristotle’s critique (in Book Two) of the treatment of the household in Plato’s *Republic* demonstrates that the preservation of the household is a critical concern for him because of how the family can channel human beings’ natural love of self out into affection for others. His critique of the city in speech in the *Republic* highlights how the abolition of the household accomplished by making wives, children and property

common undermines the goal of civic unity that it is proposed to promote. Aristotle agrees here with Socrates' assertion that *philia* is the source of unity that does the greatest good for the city by freeing it from factional conflict. However, the solution of abolishing the household violates human nature, Aristotle argues. Human affection is rooted in the nature of the human being; one loves "what is one's own and what is dear." The city in speech fails in part by neglecting this human teleology. By abolishing the boundaries between citizens' private lives in their own households, the city in speech eliminates the true source of affection and barrier to faction. Aristotle also notes that the function of "two of the virtues," moderation concerning women, and liberality concerning property, would not be possible if people didn't have wives and property of their own.

Like the city in speech, the Spartan regime occupies a prominent place in Aristotle's examination of regimes in Book Two. There too, the place of the household takes a central role in his critique. He again emphasizes the political cost of the deterioration of the household. In this case, such deterioration is not the result of an overregulation but an oversight: the Spartan regime was so dedicated to masculine martial virtue that it neglected the virtue of women, who had no part in military life. Aristotle describes the natural relations within the household being corrupted in Sparta due to this neglect, and finds that even as the city aimed at military discipline and virtue, it became greedy and lustful as a result, following in some sense the moral corruption of its women, the "half of the city" left unregulated. Throughout the Spartan regime and social order, Aristotle shows how households have fallen apart, parents fail to care properly for their children's needs, and, in short, the regime lacks the virtues of sexual moderation and liberality concerning property that require the existence of households.

As I return to show after turning to the *Nicomachean Ethics* to consider Aristotle's account of liberality, the virtue that involves the right disposition toward money, Aristotle ultimately presents the household as an important but not sufficient element in the fully virtuous life of the political community, in Book Three of the *Politics*, where the private cultivation of affection and virtue within the walls of the household is met with a corresponding public cultivation of these things.

Aristotle's account of moral virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* also reckons both with freedom as a good belonging to human beings and with the threats to human happiness from the passions, especially greed. In my first chapter on the *Ethics*, I present the centrality of liberality, the virtue that involves the right disposition toward money, to his exposition of the virtues. As we learn from Aristotle's discussion of the nature and cultivation of human virtues and vices, the tension between freedom and constraint belonging to human beings complicates Aristotle's account of habituation, just as this tension made the city and its parts difficult to grapple with in the *Politics*. Once again, Aristotle shows that unchecked human tendencies can lead to great corruption of our nature. Human beings are free; the capacity for virtue is natural to us, but "we do not by nature become bad or good." Pleasure and pain readily cloud human judgment, and more than do other individual animals, human individuals differ with respect to their dispositions towards even the most natural pleasures and pains. While habituation is like archery in the precision and skill it employs to aim at the middle term with respect to pleasure and pain, it is like carpentry, too, in wrestling with the constraints of the individual material that it must reshape. Aristotle uses both of these analogies. In his presentation of the virtues of courage and moderation, he teaches the vigilance required

over the most basic experiences of physical pain and pleasure that tend readily to impede the possibility of virtue in the natural course of human life.

In this context, we can understand the virtue of liberality—the virtue opposed to the widespread preoccupation with money emphasized in Aristotle’s discussion of acquisition in the *Politics*. With liberality, Aristotle introduces consideration of more complex elements of the task of habituation, and launches his redirection of human beings away from the ready temptation of small gain towards pursuit of noble objects.

In discussing liberality and its corresponding vices of stinginess and prodigality, Aristotle emphasizes that stinginess—the vice of excessive concern for money—is much greater and more common than prodigality—which does not make money too seriously—and more opposed to liberality. Liberality is unlike both in its capacity to give money away well and nobly, but it is specifically the stingy person who chooses money over noble action, and Aristotle suggests that prodigality is quite educable. Aristotle’s account in the *Ethics* emphasizes, as does the *Politics*, how common human preoccupation with money is in the face of human experience of need, while identifying grounds for optimism about the prospects of redirecting self-destructive prodigality into virtue. And here, Aristotle expands on his account of how damaging excessive love of money is, showing the vice refracted across a wide spectrum of corrupt deeds, while simultaneously driving home its shortsightedness with respect to the ends it pursues. He does so when he contrasts the pettiness of the gains these deeds achieve with the more ambitious corruption of tyranny. In the face of the common and degrading consequences of the vice of stinginess, Aristotle’s argument encourages human beings to bend their moral dispositions in the direction of prodigality in hopes of making liberality possible for them.

I show that Aristotle's treatment of the specific virtue of liberality establishes a pattern for thinking about virtue that links it to the general quality of a free human being (versus a slavish one) that shares its name (*eleutheriotes*) in Greek. Virtue liberates a human being from the debasement that results from the constraints that human beings typically face in many parts of life. As we have seen, echoes of Aristotle's arguments about liberality and stinginess resound throughout the other virtues and vices of Book IV: many vices are identified as not only dangerous but contemptible and, like stinginess, rooted in misguided calculation that secures small gain at great cost to the noble; others appear to be inherently inconsistent and confused, like prodigality; by contrast, many of the virtues derive their integrity from a consistent and knowing embrace of noble objects. By the end of Book IV of the *Ethics*, Aristotle is appealing (in his account of the virtues of play) to the standard of a liberal person whose character reveals itself to others in suitably witty "movements" and "educated" playfulness that reflect the fact that such a person can rule himself well. A person with virtues in this broader liberal sense knows how to constrain himself and act coherently in the face of varying conditions that easily lead others astray.

Aristotle includes several references to tyrants near the end of his discussion of liberality. Suggestive parallels with Socrates's genealogy of the tyrant in Books VIII and IX of the *Republic* highlight what is distinctive about Aristotle's account and shed light on the scope and purpose of his treatment of the virtues. Whereas Socrates' account attributes the tyrant's moral corruption most directly to the human desires that exist for purposes other than sustaining life—what he calls "unnecessary" desires such as "play and showing off"—Aristotle likens the spectrum of evils flowing from stinginess to the

tyrannic spectrum. In doing so, he connects comprehensive corruption with the preoccupation with providing the basic necessities of life, while promoting the unnecessary desires insofar as they may be elevated and manifest more freedom from this preoccupation.

Further consideration of the relationship between liberality and the other moral virtues presented in the *Ethics* highlights its central importance to Aristotle's understanding of a good human life. Not only does Aristotle present liberality as a model for the education of non-necessary desires, but he also subtly suggests that the particular form of nobility that liberality is concerned with—one which recognizes how to give fitting aid to other human beings in need—requires a salutary recognition of the human constraints that the virtuous actor shares with those whom he helps. This is shown by contrasting liberality with the virtues that are more directed towards greatness, magnificence and magnanimity. The latter virtues seem to have greater tendencies to overlook or neglect the limits of the noble actor, and Aristotle suggests that these tendencies can threaten the coherent exercise of these virtues.

In his outline of the virtues in Book Two, liberality appears to be the least important of the virtues concerned with external goods (wealth and honor) that human beings seek to acquire. However, Aristotle's accounts of magnificence and magnanimity in Book Four—and the difficulties that he attributes to these virtues—establish liberality's great importance as a model for coherent virtuous action.

Magnificence is introduced by Aristotle as if it is liberality on a grander scale; he says that magnificence is concerned with greater expenditures, and that it surpasses liberality precisely in these expenditures. He also says that the magnificent character must

be liberal, while the liberal one is not necessarily magnificent. Nonetheless, there is another crucial difference between the virtues: liberality entails taking as well as giving, and even if the latter is more central, the coherence of the virtue (and its avoidance of prodigality) depends on the liberal person ensuring that his giving and his taking correspond with each other. Magnificence, on the other hand, is concerned only with expenditure, not acquisition; Aristotle identifies a different sort of correspondence within it: correspondence between the person spending, the amount spent, and the worth of the work produced thereby. Aristotle likens the magnificent person to a knower for his capacity to produce such a great work with his money, and describes the works themselves as objects of wonder. He goes on to specify that these works may be fitting for the gods, the city, or private recipients.

However, as I show, it is ambiguous whether the magnificent person acts towards the gods or the city (both identified by Aristotle as divine here) out of due wonder himself, or whether he is in fact acting out of desire for undue wonder about himself from those who are more ignorant than he. Aristotle makes it clear that the desire to make oneself an object of wonder is vulgar, not magnificent, but he also suggests that the magnificent person's taste for display makes such a mistake hard for him to avoid. I argue that if he is to avoid it, he will have to rely on the liberality that Aristotle attributed to him to do so, for the coherence of liberality would remind him of his human limitations when he is tempted to divinize himself through magnificent works.

To support this argument, I discuss the implications of Aristotle's reference to Homer's *Odyssey* in his discussion of magnificence. On its surface this reference appears to belittle liberality's small acts like charity "to a wanderer," but when considered in

context, it shows that such gracious acts, rooted in awareness of common human vulnerability, can prepare human beings to respond fittingly to the hidden worth and nobility of each other, and perhaps of gods as well.

Finally, I turn to a consideration of how a concern for greatness is manifested in magnanimity, which represents a “peak” of moral virtue. The magnanimous person’s focus on others’ recognition of his worth is a threat to his own life of virtue. Concerned especially with honor, and yet unable to receive from those he knows to be less than himself the honor befitting his greatness, the magnanimous person lives with a quandary that Aristotle suggests can be incapacitating for him. In Aristotle’s presentation of the magnanimous man’s life “losing its sweetness” and coherence, there is a foil to liberality.

In contrast, the form of nobility comprised in the noble giving of the liberal person requires him to reckon more fruitfully with his own limitations: if he is to give nobly and well, the liberal person must recognize his own financial limits and wrestle with his strong propensity toward prodigality, or else he will begin to *take* ignobly and illiberally. Because the liberal person takes pleasure in an activity that teaches him to pay more careful attention to other human beings as well as himself, he has a grounding for coherent action that the pursuit of greatness tends to undermine. In the latter part of Book Four, where Aristotle turns to virtues that are manifest in our living with others, liberality remains as a standard for action. As so much of life involves activities in which human beings must concern themselves with others, this quality of liberality is shared with many of the lesser virtues Aristotle describes.

Not only does Aristotle’s account of liberality offer hope concerning the possibility of widening human beings’ private moral possibilities for conquest over greed,

but it also furnishes important political consequences. Aristotle's account of deviant regimes in the *Politics* reveals that insatiable human desire for wealth and physical satisfactions leads to faction and tyranny. His treatment of liberality and reciprocity suggest that the virtue can play a powerful role in resisting tyranny and facilitating justice and political friendship.

Scholars who emphasize the similarities between liberality and magnificence and notice Aristotle's focus on tyrants in his account of liberality have concluded that for Aristotle, liberality tends in a tyrannical direction. Susan Collins argues that liberality begins an abstraction from the constraints of justice that reaches its climax in magnanimity, and that the tyrant is "the most fortunate of men" from the perspective of liberal desire, since he has the fullest means to benefit others. Ann Ward agrees, and argues further that Aristotle intends to show how the practice of liberality and magnificence threaten "equality and political justice," elevating benefactors at the cost of beneficiaries and preserving the harsh factional divisions between rich and poor that foster tyranny. Against these views, my interpretation of Aristotle's teaching on liberality reveals the virtue's great opposition to tyranny and tyrannical desires.

Aristotle claims that liberality begets gratitude (*charis*) in those whom it benefits, and more love towards liberal human beings than toward those who exercise other virtues. However, these claims are difficult to square with Aristotle's discussion of the emotion of benevolence (the reciprocal form of *charis* to gratitude) in the *Rhetoric*, and his account of the relationship between gratitude and benevolence in the friendship books of the *Ethics*. The first shows how *charis* falls short of true liberality. The second provides a nature-based argument that real and enduring affection exists in a benefactor

towards his beneficiary, but that an equal return of affection and gratitude from the beneficiary is unlikely.

However, I show that a solution to this difficulty is presented in Aristotle's chapter on reciprocity in the *Ethics* (Book V, Chapter 5.) Here Aristotle shows that the political community can elevate human nature by providing people with a coherent framework to set aside natural barriers to gratitude and liberality and foster reciprocated noble deeds, affection and political friendship, or like-mindedness (*homonoia*), in their place. Aristotle claims that "people" build a shrine to the Graces (*Charites*) to foster reciprocal giving as an exchange of *charis*. The shrine teaches that gratitude should serve not only as a reminder to beneficiaries to make returns for goods done them in the past, but also as a spur to them to initiate future benevolent actions. A Shrine to the Graces shows the possibility and importance of cultivating gratitude; more generally, it encourages the exchange of virtues in people's shared lives. As such, Aristotle's account of this temple serves not simply as an illustration of the mutual exchange of good for good, through trade mediated by money, that Aristotle focuses on throughout much of the reciprocity chapter. In addition, his account provides a subtle indication that the political community requires a greater form of unity—the unity that comes from exchange of virtuous deeds.

Thus, the account in this chapter is consistent with that in Book Three, Chapter Nine of the *Politics*, where Aristotle establishes that the political community exists "for the sake of noble actions, not for the sake of living together." Both accounts link the city's existence as a community directed towards virtue, on one hand, with its existence as a community united by affection, on the other; it is here that we finally recognize more fully the connection between the household and the city's achievement of its purpose:

while private life and the natural affection within the household must be preserved as necessary conditions for lives of moderation, liberality and the performance of many noble deeds, the citizens must yet choose to link their private lives through intermarriage, shared pursuits, and, most importantly, virtuous noble deeds in order to achieve political friendship and civic affection.

This teaching is presented in the *Politics* as a corrective response to the enduring factional conflict between the many poor and few rich whose competing understandings of justice inform the deviant regimes of democracy and oligarchy, respectively. Aristotle argues that each faction, and the conflict between them, exists in every city, even where neither group is in authority. Moreover, each faction is partially just in its claims: the many are correct that those who are equal ought to have an equal share, while the rich few are correct that those who are unequal ought to have an unequal share. Aristotle argues that both *principles* are correct, but each faction errs in applying them because people are deceived by their natural self-interest into misjudging their own merits. Moreover, each faction espouses a deviant view of rule: the many desire rule as freedom to live as they want (instead of as slaves) as if there were no ruler at all, whereas the few desire rule to aggrandize themselves over others. Aristotle's teaching that the city is a community of reciprocating virtue where the true source of merit is noble deeds (not wealth or freedom) points away from justice as a competition over the greatest share towards a more liberal view that can square recognition of virtue with political friendship. Moreover, as I have outlined, in his account of reciprocal giving, Aristotle suggests that liberality and good civic education might help to build affection and unity between the factions. Aristotle's account of the unity Sparta has achieved between rich and poor

through common education and common deeds gives hope that even as economic difference endures, human choices in public and private life can minimize it.

Aristotle recounts how tyrants, in contrast to liberal human beings, who inspire love and affection in fellow citizens, proceed by doing all that they can to upset private life, aspiration to virtue, trust, and economic freedom among their subjects. Tyrants seek through these actions to fully undermine the private and public sources of liberality and reciprocity among their subjects. At the same time, instead of mediating the conflict between rich and poor, the tyrant unites the worst deviations of oligarchy and democracy, greedily seeking aggrandizement, like the rich few, and hating any restraint upon his desire, like the many poor. Far from being liberal and capable of self-rule or coherent action, the tyrant is thoroughly base. Aristotle confirms this by emphasizing that tyrants wish to both initiate and receive flattery; this is the only form of reciprocation and friendship for which a life defined by unimpeded pleasure and greed fits him. The tyrant seems to be a living manifestation of what insatiable pursuit of wealth and physical pleasure can bring about in a soul and in a political community.

In the first Book of the *Politics*, Aristotle provides dire warnings about how insatiable greed or concern with the goods that ought to support life can lead to great private corruption. When he turns, in Book Three, to considerations of regimes, he shows that the political costs of these preoccupations can culminate in civil faction, division and tyranny. These unsettling dangers are rooted in the complexity of human nature, which at once imposes constraints and offers great freedom—freedom that can lead us wrong when it ignores human limits, and yet paradoxically may point us to higher perfections—both moral and intellectual—when it achieves some detachment from these limits. My

argument presents Aristotle's teachings on the household and liberality as critical means for human beings to learn to resist the threat of greed by navigating the relationship between our natural constraints and our natural orientation towards ennobling freedoms.

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