

The best regime



What is the best regime? Building from his discussion of happiness, virtue, and the good life in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle answers this question elaborately in his later text, *The Politics*. In his elaboration, Aristotle investigates numerous regimes, looking particularly at what claims bring them about and what eventually leads to their downfall. Nonetheless, Aristotle's analysis is consistent with his work in *The Ethics*, and so the highest focus, or aim, remains virtue. Unfortunately, a regime with such a pure focus has never existed; instead it has been stymied by factional conflicts among those who make up the city, and the differing views of justice and inequality that result. Thus Aristotle's answer is twofold: his immediate answer points to those regimes that focus on virtue foremost; at a more practical level, however, he identifies the best regime as one that acknowledges other focuses, such as on wealth and freedom, in addition to the highest focus on virtue. This latter regime is still an aspiration though, and in fact Aristotle admits that it occurs only infrequently. To help realize the best regime in practice then, Aristotle also discusses by what means it may come into being, as well as what aids the rulers have in maintaining its existence. Aristotle begins his work in *The Politics* by looking at the city, and specifically how, as well as for what purposes, it is formed. Based on what he sees as a natural and human impulse towards some sort of sustaining and reproductive partnership, Aristotle notes that all cities, "while coming into being for the sake of living, (exist) for the sake of living well" (Lord, 37). Living well then, both individually and communally, requires a life in accordance with virtue since "the best way of life both separately for each individual and in common for cities is that accompanied by virtue" (198). Happiness will then be the result of such a virtuous life for the city according

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to Aristotle, as he further argues, “ If anyone accepts that the individual [is happy] on account of virtue, he will also assert that the more excellent city is the one that is happier” (199). Aristotle sums up the importance of virtue, writing, “ It is thus evident that virtue must be a care for every city,” especially since living well “ is the end of the city” (98, 99). Not all regimes, unfortunately, care for virtue as Aristotle stresses that they should. Instead there are regimes that care alternatively for wealth, and others for freedom. In addition, there are correct and deviant forms of each of these regimes that Aristotle outlines. Most generally, Aristotle outlines six regime types, three of which are correct regimes “ which look to the common advantage,” and three of which are their deviations, instead looking “ only to the advantage of the rulers” (95). Aristotle then identifies kingship as the most correct regime above aristocracy and polity since kingship is a regime ruled by only one, and it becomes less likely for all to be “ outstanding in virtue” when the regime is ruled by the many. Democracy, which is the deviant form of polity, then follows polity in preference and is followed in turn by oligarchy, which focuses on wealth, and finally tyranny, which is the deviation from kingship. Considering these possibilities, as well as their aims, it begins to become apparent as to which regimes are the best according to Aristotle. Based on his claim that virtue must be a care of every city, and that virtue can meet no upper limit in an individual, kingship and aristocracy then appear to be Aristotle’s top choice as such regimes would be ruled by the one or the few with nearly deific virtue. There are, nonetheless, arguments against the seeming excellence of these regimes - such as that a kingship would not facilitate ruling and being ruled, nor would it allow citizens to participate in politics as part of their leisure - and these

eventually point more towards aristocracy as a better regime. Aristocracy has its own faults though, such as that the poor and the many often confuse it with oligarchy. It does, however, allow ruling and being ruled, especially if it contains a select group of citizens. What becomes most clear regarding the best theoretical regime, however, is that there are many factors that must be considered when matching a city with its best regime, and these factors become increasingly visible when addressing the best practical regime. Regimes such as kingship and aristocracy therefore, where the few - or even the single-most - virtuously elite rule, are nearly impossible in practice. What makes this an impossibility, according to Aristotle, is the perpetual occurrence of factional conflicts that arise due to competing claims of which inequality will determine the ruler. That is, while some claim that virtue should determine the rulers, others claim that it should be wealth, and still others freedom (130). Not surprisingly, such differing claims within the same city and regime can be detrimental, and eventually cause the demise of the regime. Aristotle thus notes " that all those who dispute about regimes speak of some part of justice," which in turn is a debate around equality and inequality (99). Thus, whereas " justice is held to be equality, and it is, but for equals and not for all, inequality is held to be just and is indeed, but for unequals and not for all" (97). These factional conflicts then manifest themselves in alternative claims to power, which are in turn alternative views on justice, or what is equal and unequal within the regime. A common factional conflict then might result from individuals thinking that, " if they are unequal in a certain thing, such as goods, they are (also) unequal generally, while the others suppose that if they are equal in a certain thing, such as freedom, they are equal generally" (98). Thus because " justice is

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held by all to be a certain equality,” the factions that result always reflect this variation in interpreting equality that occurs between the few and the many, or the poor and the rich (103, emphasis added). Considering this tendency towards factional conflicts, as well as other variations, such as in population and climate, that distinguish each city from the next, Aristotle acknowledges that the best regime for one city may not be the best for all others. Noting this resulting diversity in regimes, Aristotle writes, “ So the varieties of the regimes – how many there are and in how many ways they are combined – should not be overlooked” (119). In addition to this variety stemming from the diversity of circumstances that makes every city unique, Aristotle also points out that the best city is perhaps just an ideal, or “ what one would pray for above all, with external things providing no impediment,” and thus there is a second range of regimes that the city must choose from (118). In this second range, it is then most practical for the city to choose the regime that “ is [the best] possible” and not “ only the one that is at the peak and requires much equipment” (119). Driving this aspiration for the best regime, as Aristotle recalls, is the search for the best life possible, and with the most happiness and thus virtue. Aristotle concludes, “ For it is through hunting for this in a different manner and by means of different things that [groups of] individuals create ways of life and regimes that differ” (209). At this point the rulers’ task seems insurmountable as they must both select and enact a regime that molds best to their city. The rulers, however, are not alone in this task, and in fact Aristotle lists several aids that can help them theorize and implement the best regime. Among these aids are, the application of laws, the aid of citizens, the expansion of a middling element, or essentially a middle class, and finally, education. First, a ruler may use

laws to counteract the passions and appetites of those who will participate in the regime. Aristotle discusses this benefit of laws, noting that it may be “bad for the authoritative element generally to be man instead of law if he has the passions that result [from being human] in his soul” (100). Similarly, “Desire is a thing of this sort; and spiritedness perverts rulers and the best men. Hence law is intellect without appetite” (114). Law can also be useful in cities where “persons (are) similar by nature,” and thus equal in many respects, including matters of honor and virtue. Here, as Aristotle argues, “it is no more just [for equal persons] to rule than to be ruled, and it is therefore just [that they rule and be ruled] by turns. But this is already law, for the arrangement [of ruling and being ruled] is law” (113). Although law may then play a beneficiary role in the rulers’ task, it also has its shortcomings as specific laws cannot be written for every circumstance nor can they enforce themselves without human guardians. Thus Aristotle notes that individuals must be “established as law-guardians and as servants of the law,” or essentially to serve as judges. A second aid of the ruler or rulers may be a carefully defined citizenry that will include those interested in serving the regime, and exclude those who are incapable of participating in government due to natural slavish characteristics or a lack of leisure time. Primarily, as Aristotle notes, “although citizens are dissimilar, preservation of the partnership is their task, and the regime is [this] partnership” (90). Also, as with laws, “a citizen in the common sense is one who shares in ruling and being ruled,” since this is according to his virtue (106). A citizen, though, is not everyone who is not a ruler, and Aristotle reinforces this distinction since farmers, for example, would be incapable of fulfilling the duties of proper citizens. One notable absence in the farmer’s life is then leisure time, or time

“ both with a view to the creation of virtue and with a view to political activities” (211). Nonetheless, citizens – properly defined – can be a significant aid to the rulers of the regimes since they tend towards ruling and being ruled, while also having the time to cultivate their virtue and political involvement. A third aid, or perhaps strategy, that the ruler may employ is “ to increase the middling element, for this dispels the factional conflicts that result from inequality” (164). The middling element accomplishes this in part by mediating reasonably between the extremes to either end, but also by avoiding the passions and desires of these extremes which often lead to their own demise. Thus, in the deviant regimes, where the middling element is often neglected, it is common to see the regime overrun by its own emphasis, such as in a democracy for example, where “ many of the things that are held to be characteristically popular (eventually) overturn democracies” (166). The middling element also often represents the mean between competing claims, such as those between the rulers and the ruled. Thus it is the middling element that knows how to rule and be ruled, as well as how to avoid the tendency to “ become arrogant and base on a grand scale, (or alternatively) malicious and base in petty ways” (134). As Aristotle therefore concludes, “ it is the greatest good fortune for those who are engaged in politics to have a middling and sufficient property” since this element will most often yield “ the most stable regimes” (135, 149). The fourth aid for the ruler, and perhaps the most useful in preserving the regime according to Aristotle, is education. There are several aims of such education, though chiefly it is aimed at preparing non-laborers and non-slaves for lives spent partly in leisure. Thus education for vulgar tasks is to be avoided since such acts are those that “ bring the body into a worse state

and wage-earning sorts of work, for they make the mind a thing abject and lacking in leisure" (230). Thus, since leisure is a time for cultivating virtue, among other things, education should primarily be aimed at preparing the young for such activity. "Essentially (then)," according to Aristotle, "there are four things they customarily educate in: letters, gymnastics, music, and fourth, some in expertise in drawing" (230). Before defining education in such a manner, however, Aristotle makes an important distinction between education that is of the sort that I have just described, and education that he characterizes as "relative to the regime." As he describes, "But to be educated relative to the regime is not to do the things that oligarchs or those who want democracy enjoy, but rather the things by which the former will be able to run an oligarchy and the latter to have a regime that is run democratically" (167). There must then be some sort of moderation that is emphasized in education so that no longer do "the sons of the rulers live luxuriously, while those of the poor undergo exercise and exertion," since this is often what has led to revolution (167). Education must then also emphasize this moderation towards the middle of two extremes. Upon consideration of these four advantages of the ruler, as well as the existence and causes of the factional conflicts that all regimes tend to face, Aristotle's work suggests that polity seems to be the best regime in a practical sense. Granted, it is not a kingship - the most "correct" regime - nor even an aristocracy which, like kingships, focuses on virtue as opposed to wealth or freedom. Further, polity isn't really even its own regime, having its own unique essence; instead it "is a mixture of oligarchy and democracy" (130). Aristotle extends this definition of polity as a mixture by identifying the "three things disputing over equality in the regime, freedom, wealth, and

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virtue," and noting that polity is a "mixture of the two - of the well off and the poor" (130-1). But what is the advantage of such mixture, and thus what makes polity a 'best regime'? Aristotle would surely respond, in parallel with his work in *The Ethics*, that just as virtue is itself a mean - as well as the highest aim - polity, as a mixture, and essentially a mean between the dividing claims of the oligarchs and the democrats, also follows this pattern and is thus choice-worthy. In many ways then, the advantages of polity can be seen in the advantages of the middling element that Aristotle identifies since, "if it was correctly said in the [discourses of] ethics that the happy life is one in accordance with virtue and unimpeded, and that virtue is a mean, then the middling sort of life is best - the mean that is capable of being obtained by each sort of individual" (133). This characteristic of polity becomes especially present as Aristotle discusses how a polity comes into being. As Aristotle notes, "there are three defining principles of this combination or mixture," which are: first, by taking "elements of the legislation of each" regime; second, by taking "the mean between the assessments;" and third, by "taking some from the oligarchic law and some from the democratic" (131). Polity, defined as a mean between oligarchy and democracy, thus becomes more apparent in each of these three mixture types since "the mean too is of this sort: each of the extremes is revealed in (the mixture)" (132). In concluding, however, it becomes increasingly apparent that, noticeably absent in this definition of polity as the most practical regime, is the almost pure pursuit of virtue that exists in theoretical kingships and aristocracies. This certainly goes uncontested, as virtue does not take the defining role in a polity as it does in the other two correct regimes. In a certain sense, however, such is reality: the competing claims of

inequality of the poor, the rich, the virtuous, and the numerous to name a few, are what primarily prevent cities from achieving the best and most correct regimes. But a polity is not void of virtue by any means, and in fact polity is arguably defined in the same manner as is virtue – as a mean, and so it takes on a virtuous quality in this sense. Further, Aristotle would surely hope that the citizens of such a polity would engage both political activities as well as the cultivation of their own virtue – and this could certainly be achieved in a polity where leisure time was available.