

Classics of social and
political thought
(aristotle's 'politics'):
who should rul...



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Aristotle contends that the good man is dissimilar to the good citizen in ways he goes a great length to illustrate. He distinguishes the two for the purpose of facilitating his later arguments concerning the appropriate allocation of sovereignty to the rightful ruler, who he subsequently claims is the good man who excels all others in each and every aspect. Aristotle's distinction further prompts the notion that he advocates a monarchical form of constitution, for the rule of a single good man is equivalent to a constitution of kingship. This can be derived through the following reasoning. Aristotle is convinced that the good citizen can so be defined only in relation to the constitution he is an element of: 'The excellence of the citizen must be an excellence relative to the constitution (1276b16).' The good man on the other hand, 'is a man so called in virtue of a single absolute excellence (1276b16).' He further asserts that the good citizen 'must possess the knowledge and capacity requisite for ruling as well as for being ruled. A good man will also need both (1277b7~1277b16).' From these conclusions of Aristotle, it is evident that the good man and the good citizen differ in the manner of their excellence, but not in their capacity for ruling or being ruled. It should therefore follow that there should not exist impediments to the ruling by the good citizen in the city as opposed to the ruling by the good man due to the fact that they are identical in their competence to rule. However, Aristotle in his later arguments, crowns the good man as ruler: 'in the best constitution there is someone of outstanding excellence. What is to be done in that case? Nobody would say such a man ought to be banished and sent into exile. But neither would any one say that he ought to be subject to others the only alternative left is for all others to pay a willing obedience to the man of outstanding goodness. Such men will be permanent

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kings in their cities (1284b22).’ This passage gives rise to several deductions. Aristotle assumes the existence of the good man in the best constitution which would implicate the fact that the city in context is composed entirely or mainly, of good citizens. Drawing from the earlier conclusion that according to Aristotle’s logic, there should be no preference for rule to be designated to either a good man or a good citizen, there is no explanation for Aristotle to award rule to the good man over countless good citizens. The flow of logic would therefore imply that Aristotle prefers the rule of the good man despite his earlier arguments and since the rule of a single good man is the same as the constitution of kingship, he advocates the monarchy as the best form of government. This fact is reiterated in the last sentence of the passage: ‘ Such men will be permanent kings in their cities.’ Before arriving at the illation that the good man should rule in a city with a monarchical constitution, Aristotle lists the claims of various parts of the city that claim to merit ruling, and one by one states their faults and dismisses them. Through this process, he arrives at the rule of the good man as being the best form of rule, but he fails to consider in certain (not all) claims, various circumstances which would make his dismissal of those claims to rule, hasty and baseless, and therefore make his conclusions concerning the rule of the good man as being the best, doubtful. Aristotle considers the following parts of the city as those laying claim to rule on the basis of merit: the poor majority, the tyrant, the wealthy minority, the better sort of people, the single best man and also, not of the type of citizen but nevertheless, he examines the rule of law. The problem that arises with the rule of the poor majority, according to Aristotle, is that they would ‘ proceed to divide among themselves the possessions of the wealthy (1281a11)’ justified by their notion <https://assignbuster.com/classics-of-social-and-political-thought-aristotles-politics-who-should-rule-the-city/>

of the virtue of them being the majority. This in his view is unjust. But the question can be asked, ' what if the wealth of the rich was accumulated unjustly at the cost of the poor majority from the beginning?' In this instance, would it still be unjust to redistribute the wealth amongst the poor majority? The answer would surely tend to the negative, though Aristotle fails to consider this aspect of the rule of the poor majority. Furthermore, with regard to his notion that the goal of the city is the common good for all, would it not be fairer if not absolutely fair (since the rich are disadvantaged) that the majority became wealthier? Aristotle claims that the tyrant's claim would also be unjust ' for he too uses coercion by virtue of superior power in just the same sort of way as the people coerce the wealthy (1281a11).' In this case, the tyrant's despotism cannot be classified as anything but unjust because he solely benefits himself and not, to even a close degree, the entirety of his subjects, the citizens. The notion of a just tyranny would be a contradiction in terms, for Aristotle claims that tyranny is the perversion of kingship, and any perversion cannot be just due to its virtue of being perverted. Therefore in this manner, Aristotle's dismissal of tyranny as a good form of rule is unflawed. What of the claim of the wealthy minority that they should rule? Aristotle declines their claim on the basis that they would ' plunder and confiscate the property of the people (1281a11)' which would plainly be unjust for the identical reason as attributed to tyranny. This further consideration can be made which Aristotle neglects. He assumes that the wealthy minority will strive for greater prosperity whence given rule, but could it not be thought that they would simply be interested in maintaining their advantage over the majority and not increasing it? If so, their rule will bring about the virtue of stability. Stability would surely benefit the city as a

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whole for it erases factions and revolutions. In this case, would the rule of the wealthy minority still be unjust? It would not seem so. Next, Aristotle considers the rule of the better sort. He sees a problem with this type of rule because besides the rulers, 'the rest of the citizens will necessarily be deprived of honor, since they will not enjoy the honor of holding civic office (1281a11).' This dismissal of the claim for ruling is similar to his next consideration, the claim of the single best man. Aristotle believes that his rule would be unjust 'because the number of those deprived of honor is even greater (than the rule of the better sort) (1281a11).' Aristotle's branding of both these claims as unjust is incorrect due to his following inaccurate (not necessarily always true) assumptions: first, that the citizens would seek rule for honor, and secondly, the honor of holding civic office is only obtained through supreme rule and not through other offices such as those involving administration and judiciary functions. Keeping in mind these inaccurate assumptions that Aristotle makes, it can be viewed that the claim for the rule of the best sort and the best single man is acceptable, if not rather difficult to assert one over the other (it is asserted that the former is better than the latter in the final analysis of this paper). This is true because only in the best form of city, which is not under consideration by Aristotle at this juncture, would citizens desire office for honor, and when they did, they would not be only be content with the honor gotten by supreme rule, rather they would be content with any form of civic office, regardless of its social significance. The last claim for rule that Aristotle considers is not one made by a part of the civic body, but that of the law. He claims that while the claim of the law may appear to be desirable because it excludes human deficiencies such as 'the passions that beset their souls,' it is ultimately not worthy due to the fact <https://assignbuster.com/classics-of-social-and-political-thought-aristotles-politics-who-should-rule-the-city/>

that it might 'incline either towards oligarchy or towards democracy (1281a11),' in which case it will be no better than all the previous claims discussed before. This notion reveals the fact that the claims dismissed by Aristotle thus far have been done so because of their nature being of democracy or oligarchy, both according to him, perversions of the pure forms of government (oligarchy being a perversion of aristocracy and democracy being a perversion of constitutional government) as no form of perversion can be just. The rule of law can be denounced in the following manner as well, which escapes Aristotle's notice in this instance; because law is not set down for every possible situation, it is necessary to have a court of law to decide upon cases beyond its realm. These courts of law would invariably involve the participation of humans as judges and jury, in which case the passions that beset the human soul that is illustrated by Aristotle would come into play, and thus undermine the rule of law. Upon analysis of Aristotle's various dismissals of claims for rule from various parts of the city, it can be seen that his dismissal of the claim of the poor majority, the wealthy minority, the better sort and the single best man may have been expeditious due to the stated avenues of consideration that Aristotle failed to examine, and therefore his claim that the good man should rule inferred from the initial scrutiny of his distinction between the good citizen and the good man, may be erroneous. At this point, it can be considered what alternatives there exist if as Aristotle conceived, a man of complete virtue (the good man) arose in the city. Aristotle gives thought to three possible courses of action that could be taken in this instance: first, this good man should be subject to ostracism and thus exiled from the city, second, this good man should be subject to the rule of others, and thirdly and in his <https://assignbuster.com/classics-of-social-and-political-thought-aristotles-politics-who-should-rule-the-city/>

opinion quite justly, the good man should be made ruler: 'such men will accordingly be the permanent kings in their cities (1284b22).' Aristotle definitively criticizes the policy of ostracism as he states that 'nobody would say that such a man ought to be banished and sent into exile (1284b22).' He also condemns the notion of subordinating the good man under any form of rule in no uncertain terms, 'but neither would any one say that he ought to be subject to others (1284b22).' Aristotle seems to be content with the justification that the good man, solely with the virtue of possessing a 'single absolute excellence (1276b16),' should rule over others in a manner similar to his notion that 'if one man is stronger than all the rest, or if a group of more than one but fewer than the many, is stronger, these should be sovereign instead of the many (1283b13).' However, several problems arise with Aristotle's assertion that the good man should be made ruler. For example, it can be questioned how Aristotle defends and justifies the rule of this good man against the very faults he claimed would ascend in his dismissal of the claim of rule of the single best man, that being the problem of the civic body being deprived of honor from holding office? A possible explanation was suggested in discussion of the claim of the single good man, but it should be noted that that suggestion was not raised by Aristotle. Furthermore, he never directs his attention to the fact that the rule of a single good man would prompt widespread discontent due to the following reasoning. The best rule is one which looks out for the well being of all. Then the good man, since he is already absolutely excellent and superior to all others in the city, would look after the interests of his subjects and not his personal interests. But is a good man just when he rules over the citizens in the manner in which they wish to be ruled, in other words, in a manner in <https://assignbuster.com/classics-of-social-and-political-thought-aristotles-politics-who-should-rule-the-city/>

which they think is in their best interest, or is he just when he rules according to what he believes is in the best interest for the citizens, in a manner not dissimilar to that of a father ruling his young son? The answer will be found in the latter because surely the good man, by virtue of being superior to all the citizens, knows what is best for them better than they do. So if the good man were to rule in this paternal manner keeping in mind that he wishes to rule justly, would there not be discontentment among the citizens, much in the same manner as a son is discontent when his father forbids him to stay up late? If the city were to be ruled by the best of men (not a single good man), would there not be less faction and more integrity of rule in the city due to the fact that the citizens would not direct their anger toward one single ruler but to many? In this regard, wouldn't the rule of the best of men be more advantageous than the rule of the single good man? It would seem from the previous reasoning that it would be so. In essence, Aristotle has a lot to answer for his belief that a good man should solely rule over the city. It seems that the good man, in accordance with Aristotle's belief, should not be exiled from the city, for the excellence of his character is something that there is a lot to be learned from. A further alternative course of action when a good man should come into being in a city would be to make him the supreme educator of the city rather than ruler (for reasons presented as being problems of his ruling have already been discussed). The justification of the good man in becoming the supreme educator can be made in the following way. Since all absolutely excellent men (good men) arrive at their excellence through the process of education, that is, they are not innately excellent, their efforts should be directed toward the emulation of their excellence in the children of the city, for they

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are the ones who know best the process of becoming excellent. In this manner of education, the children (being future citizens) will grow up to become good men and good citizens, and thus the future city will comprise of many potential rulers. The good man through education, will contribute towards the ruling of the city indirectly in such an instance, and not directly as Aristotle claims he should do.