

Cities and unity



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“ Is there any greater evil we can mention for a city than that which tears it apart and makes it many instead of one? Or any greater good than that which binds it together and makes it one?...And when all the citizens rejoice and are pained by the same successes and failures, doesn't this sharing of pleasures and pains bind the city together?” (Republic 5. 462b)Plato thus declares the need to establish unity, so crucial to sustaining virtue in his “ Just City”. Interestingly, this modern and seemingly indisputably beneficial concept of unity is harshly criticized by Plato's greatest pupil, Aristotle. According to Plato, the guardians of the Just City must seek complete unity in order to prevent corruption and rule well. To achieve this goal, the wives and children of the guardians must be treated no differently. Children must grow up not knowing their parents, nor parents their children. Instead of having a simple family, all children will call men of a certain age “ father”, women of a certain age “ mother”, and children of the same age “ brother” or “ sister”, thus enhancing the joys a single nuclear family by providing a multitude of relatives. This way, Plato argues, the joy of familial bonds will be multiplied immensely. The citizens will treat each other as kinsmen and share in each others' experiences: “ Whenever anything good or bad happens to a single one of its citizens, such a city above all others will say that the affected part is its own and will share in the pleasure of pain as a whole” (Republic 5. 462e.). To further the establishment of unity, Plato also proposes the use of eugenic breeding among the guardians: “ the best men must have sex with the best women as frequently as possible” (Republic 5. 459e) in order to ensure wise rulers and eliminate nepotism. The other important change that must be instituted to create unity is the abolition of private property amongst the guardians. Earlier in The Republic, even before this proposal,

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Plato states that the guardians must guard against “ Both wealth and poverty. The former makes for luxury, idleness, and revolution; the latter for slavishness, bad work, and revolution as well” (4. 422a). If all property and possessions are held in common, the guardians will be free of concerns regarding wealth acquisition and other mundane issues: “ the pettiest of the evils the guardians would therefore escape: The poor man’s flattery of the rich, the perplexities and sufferings involved in bringing up children and in making the money necessary to feed the household, getting into debt...All of the various troubles men endure in these matters are obvious, ignoble, and not worth discussing” (Republic 5. 465c). The guardians will also avoid dissension among themselves “ by not calling the same thing ‘ mine’” (Republic 5. 464d). Instead, the rulers will be able to devote themselves entirely to ruling well, and to the good of the state. Complete commonality in property, children, and wives, therefore, is necessary to ensure complete unity, which in turn ensures a perfect, virtuous city. Aristotle, in Book II of Politics, attacks almost every point made by Plato regarding unity and common ownership. First, Aristotle asserts that the nature of a city prevents it from experiencing natural unity. The essence of a city is in plurality: “ Not only is the city composed of a number of people: it is also composed of different kinds of people, for a city cannot be composed of those who are like one another” (Politics 2. 2. 1261a22). The very attempt to unify the city, according to Aristotle, will destroy the city: “ it is obvious that a city which goes on becoming more and more of a unit, will eventually cease to be a city at all...it will first become a household instead of a city, and then an individual instead of a household” (Politics 2. 2. 1260a10). In addition, a viable city must be self-sufficient, a condition that requires a level of

diversity which Aristotle argues is not present in a city with a high degree of unity. Another interesting point that Aristotle makes is the distinction between the concepts of “ all collectively” and “ each separately.” When people call something “ mine” and “ not mine” simultaneously (adhering to Plato’s view of a unified city), according to Aristotle, it ceases to be either. Common ownership provides that many people can call something “ mine”, but they do so collectively, not separately. As a result, when people cannot say that something is “ mine and mine only,” they tend to care less about it because their ownership is only fractional, “ determined by the total number of citizens” (Politics, 2. 3. 1262a1): “ What is common to the greatest number gets the least amount of care...People are more prone to neglect their duty when they think that another is attending to it” (Politics, 2. 3. 1261b32). Aristotle then reasons that children will be neglected as a result: “ each citizen will have a thousand sons... any son whatever will be equally the son of any father whatever...all will equally neglect them” (Politics, 2. 3. 1261b32). Aristotle also criticizes the dilution of affection and friendship that would result from common ownership of women and children. Whereas Plato argues that a son would show the same amount of affection for each of his thousand fathers, Aristotle maintains that in reality, these relations will only be nominal, and will completely lose their meaning. A sort of “ watery friendship” will ensue: “ Just as a little sweet wine, mixed with a great deal of water, produces a tasteless mixture, so family feeling is diluted and tasteless... there is so little reason for a father treating his sons as sons, or a son treating his father as a father” (Politics 2. 4. 1262a40), because people only tend to care for what is their own. The lack of any real family ties will also result in an increase in crimes against relatives and incest, because

parents do not know who their children are. Regarding property, Aristotle believes that Plato's idea of unity and common ownership is actually harmful to the community. Aristotle declares that the problems that Plato attributes to private property are in actuality caused by flaws in human nature.

Aristotle affirms that common property will cause much dispute, because people may not be able to work well together and will fight over the same property. On the contrary, if everyone owns private property, there will be less room for discontent because people will tend to take care of their own possessions: "When everyone has his own separate sphere of interest, there will not be the same ground for quarrels" (Politics 2. 5. 1263a21). Aristotle then argues that private property will allow for "moral goodness" in that people will share their own property with friends for common use, according to the Pythagorean proverb: "Friends' goods are goods in common." This way, private property actually allows for generosity and virtue. People will also derive greater joy from private property: "to think of a thing as your own makes an inexpressible difference, so far as pleasure is concerned" (Politics 2. 5. 1263a40). In criticizing Plato, Aristotle attacks both the means through which to establish unity and the goal of unity itself. First, Aristotle believes that Plato's proposals will not achieve unity. He questions the link between commonality and unity by arguing that Plato's attempt to enforce commonality – sharing wives and children and abolishing private property – will actually cause disunity. People will have weakened feelings towards each other and will fight over property. Aristotle then questions the link between unity and virtue. In the Platonic model, by eliminating private property, people have nothing to be generous or greedy about, so therefore, according to Aristotle, they cannot be considered either virtuous or selfish. As

presented in The Nicomachean Ethics, to be virtuous one must make a conscious choice between the moral and the immoral path. Only private property allows for this choice. Aristotle attacks the object of unity by arguing that the city, once unified to the extreme, will cease to be a city at all. It will resemble instead a household or an individual, in that it will be more unified and less self-sufficient. Aristotle's main points all point towards two major reasons why a city should not aim towards Plato's goal: unity is both against the nature of a city and against the nature of man. Unity, then, cannot be the "supreme good of a city," as Plato contends, because the "'good' of each thing is what preserves it in being" (Politics, 2. 3. 1261b6). While Aristotle provides a convincing argument against unity, at times he appears to treat Plato's contentions too harshly. Quite often, Aristotle appears to take Plato's statements too literally. Plato never says, for example, that the city should be so unified as to become an individual, but instead argues for unified interests and purposes. In addition, Plato's Just City is merely a metaphor, intended to encourage the individual to search for justice: "Perhaps, then, there is more justice in that larger thing, and it will be easier to learn what it is. So...let's first find out what sort of thing justice is in a city and afterwards look for it in the individual" (Republic 2. 369a). He states himself that his city probably cannot exist in practice. Aristotle also seems to purposely misread Plato, and often takes his concepts out of context. For one, Plato's proposed sharing of wives, children, and property is meant only for the guardians of the city, in order to ensure that they will rule well: "This then, is how the guardians of your city have their wives and children in common" (Republic 5. 461e). Aristotle's arguments, however, are based upon the enforcement of unity throughout the entire city. Only then

would the city cease to be self-sufficient. In Plato's model, however, there are three distinct classes of people, and the lowest class, the workers, farmers, and artisans, are still required to specialize in a craft in accordance with the tenet "one man, one art" to ensure that the city is self-sufficient. Despite their differing views on the merits of unity, both Plato and Aristotle agree that the spirit of friendship, or *philia*, helps hold the city together "because it is the best safeguard against the danger of factional disputes" (Politics, 2. 4. 1262a40). Friendship, then, "is the chief good of cities," and can be defined as mutual affection between people. However, Plato believes that unity results from friendship, while Aristotle maintains that unity dissolves friendship.