

# FRIENDSHIP AND THE COMMON GOOD IN ARISTOTLE

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**Abstract:** For theorists of political liberalism, individual rights take priority over the good. Communitarians hold, however, that a society focused exclusively on individual rights will be made up of atomistic selves who cannot sustain any commitment to the common good. Aristotle's discussions of friendship and the common good can contribute to the conversation concerning the *polis* and its ends. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* emphasizes *homonoia*, but his *Politics* envisions "political friendship" more as a space for agonistic struggle. Aristotle knows about the destructive effects of *pleonexia*, and he describes several community-building virtues that are opposed to it: justice, temperance, and liberality. Aristotle also claims that the genre of tragedy can inform a commitment to work for the common good.

**Keywords:** Aristotle, friendship, common good, justice

## ARISTOTLE'S CLAIM ABOUT THE "NATURALNESS" OF THE POLIS

Aristotle claims that the *polis* emerges in a very natural way. Implied in this claim is that the *polis* has a nature (φύσις), a function (ἔργον), and an end (τέλος). He offers a teleological sketch of its development in *Politics* 1252-1253.<sup>1</sup> At the most basic level, a man and a woman are drawn together by nature to form a household, and it is natural for them to care in turn for their children, who also have a stake in the future of the household. House, wife, and ox -- all three are needed for family life, says Hesiod.

Families need food, shelter, and protection from hostile attack, and seeing that the household has difficulty meeting these needs on its own, what could be more natural than several households banding together to form a village? A number of villages come together to form

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Ambler (1985), "Aristotle's Understanding of the Naturalness of the City," *Review of Politics* 47.2: 163-185. C.D.C.Reeve (2009), "The Naturalness of the Polis in Aristotle," in *A Companion to Aristotle*, ed. by Georgios Anagnostopoulos, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 512-525.

a *polis* for the practical purposes associated with self-sufficiency (αὐτάρκεια), but more especially, for the sake of higher values such as justice and the noble deeds that they can do for each other (*Politics* 1280b7-1281a4).<sup>2</sup> As Homer says in *The Iliad*, to be tribeless, lawless, hearthless – that would not be a properly human life (1253a4).

So, Aristotle provides us with a picture of a *polis* growing toward an end, but where is that growth to stop? Recalling that oak trees typically do not grow much higher than a hundred feet, we can ask: Does the *polis* also have an optimum size, one based on its τέλος? Rather than answer this question with a fixed number of people or a set number of acres, Aristotle offers criteria by which the health of a city can be judged. There is a lower limit of size that must be reached: the city must have enough people to defend itself, and an adequate number of productive workers to be self-sufficient.

There is also an upper limit beyond which a city should not grow in size. If there are too many people, the city will be unable to educate its citizens in virtue, and that failure will have serious consequences (1280b10-12; *NE* 1179b). In a city that is too large, anonymity also becomes a liability. When seeking to fill public offices on the basis of merit, citizen-voters need to know something about those for whom they are voting. When weighing questions of justice in the courts, citizen-jurors need to be acquainted with the character of those involved in the case. Without that background of personal familiarity, courts will fail to reach just decisions, and in elections, the better candidate will not win out over the worse (1326b13-19). So, there is something of a natural *limit* for a city, and if it should grow to become an empire instead, its functions (ἐργοί) - agriculture/food, defense/safety, education in virtue, the diffusion of technology, and the administration of justice – become overextended and tend to deteriorate (1328b5-22).<sup>3</sup>

Aristotle's account of what is "natural" in politics is very different from that of Thucydides. In *The History of the Peloponnesian*

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<sup>2</sup> Clifford Angell Bates (2003), "Aristotle and Aeschylus on the Rise of the Polis: The Necessity of Justice in Human Life," *Polis: The Journal of the Society for Greek Political Thought* 20: 43-61. Subsequent citations with numbers only will refer to Stephen Everson's translation of Aristotle's *Politics* (1996), Cambridge University Press. The abbreviation *NE* will refer to George Kennedy's translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (2007), Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Coby (1988), "Aristotle's Three Cities and the Problem of Faction," *The Journal of Politics* 50.4: 896-919.

War, what is “natural” is for men to be motivated by fear.<sup>4</sup> When we read about The Plague in Athens, The Civil Strife in Corcyra, The Melian Dialogue, and the debacle of The Sicilian Expedition, we find them either already in the grip of fear, or failing to anticipate the danger that is lurking just over the horizon. In Aristotle, however, *social trust* may not have not abolished fear altogether, but it has certainly displaced it, moving fear away from center stage. What is “natural” in Aristotle’s vision of politics has more to do with families taking care of their children, the moral significance of friendship, and the role of the virtues in shaping the life of the *polis*.<sup>5</sup>

In at least one way, however, we might wish that Aristotle had said much, *much* less. Aristotle’s sketch of the city’s “naturalness” assumes that some people are naturally slaves, while others are naturally masters. He says that women, too, are by nature unfit to be active participants in the deliberations of the city. Others are to be excluded, as well: farm workers, craftsmen, shopkeepers and foreigners. By Aristotle’s account, then, a “natural” household (οἶκος) is built on the belief that some people can be owned as tools, used in an instrumental way, and subjected to various forms of exclusion without any of that counting as an injustice.<sup>6</sup> However, if all these people are to be excluded from political participation, how then can we be speaking of a common good?

We might also ask: If the city truly is natural through and through, why is there any need at all for political action or debate? Aristotle praises the one who first founded the city. Whoever that person was, he was a great benefactor (1253a30-31). The lawgiver, too, is said to be a craftsman who forms the city by means of a constitution (1273b32-33). However, it is not altogether clear why a natural city that grows organically would have need of “benefactors” or “craftsmen.”<sup>7</sup> If the city is natural the way a garden is, it might need nothing more than a guard to keep predators out at night, which is to say, it might run best if we just left it alone.

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<sup>4</sup> William Desmond (2006), “Lessons of Fear: A Reading of Thucydides,” *Classical Philology* 101: 259-279.

<sup>5</sup> Daryl Tress (1997), “Aristotle’s Child: Development through *Genesis*, *Oikos*, and *Polis*,” *Ancient Philosophy* 17: 63-84.

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Heath (2008), “Aristotle on Natural Slavery,” *Phronesis* 53.3: 243-270.

<sup>7</sup> David Keyt (1991), “Three Basic Theorems in Aristotle’s Politics,” in *A Companion to Aristotle’s Politics*, ed. by David Keyt and Fred Miller, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 118-141.

Could it be, though, that Aristotle understands the city to be natural in its *origin*, but shaped by the art of politics in some other way, say, *in the ends it chooses to pursue*? This formulation – “the ends it chooses to pursue” – calls for further examination. Aristotle uses an example from horsemanship to shed light on the broader question concerning means and ends. The bridle-maker practices his craft, for whom? For the sake of the rider. The rider uses it to guide his horse. Why? Because he is part of a cavalry that seeks to defend the *polis*. The soldier rides into battle under the leadership of a general. Above the general in this hierarchy is a statesman or a king, one who guides the *polis* in matters of war and peace. So the bridle-maker and all the others we have mentioned contribute to a higher end: the deliberations concerning the welfare of the *polis*, in which the military option represents one choice among others to be considered by statesmen (*NE* 1094a1).<sup>8</sup>

Can we carry this reflection a step further and ask about the ultimate end of the *polis*? According to Aristotle, an ultimate end would be (a) an end desired for itself, (b) an end not desired for the sake of any other end that might be proposed, and (c) everything else that is desired, is desired *for the sake of* this one end (*NE*, 1094a18-22; 1097a30-b6).<sup>9</sup> Is there a single good that fulfills and satisfies all these lesser ends? In Book X, chapters 6-8 of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle himself concludes – somewhat abruptly – that it is *θεωρία*, or contemplation. But how convincing is his proposal? Why settle on contemplation as the ultimate end for life in the *polis*? To take just one alternative, one considered by Aristotle himself, a more compelling case might be made for a life in which contemplation and *action* are combined (1325b15-17).

Another kind of interpretation argues for “inclusivism”, or the view that the final good is a *composite* that includes not just the one good called “contemplation”, but many other virtues that the moral agent puts into action.<sup>10</sup> One of the strongest considerations in favor of

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<sup>8</sup> Susan Sauve Meyer (2001), “Living for the Sake of an Ultimate End,” in *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Jon Miller, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 47-65.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Kraut (1989), *Aristotle on the Human Good*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 197, 204.

<sup>10</sup> W.F.R. Hardie (1965), “The Final Good in Aristotle’s Ethics,” *Philosophy* 40: 277-295. John Ackrill (1980), “Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. by Amelie Rorty, Berkeley: University of California Press, 15-33.

the inclusive interpretation is that the virtues are often said to be unified and interconnected (“the inseparability thesis”), so much so that the appearance of just one by itself is somewhat suspect.

A different kind of critique, though, one even more radical than the inclusivism of Hardie and Ackrill, is what we might call a “real life objection.” It runs something like this. If a homogeneous community exists, one final good might make complete sense to the members of that *polis*. Hardie and Ackrill imagine instead a composite good as the end that guides a more pluralistic but still basically harmonious community. However, the real-life communities of our experience have within them many smaller associations – religious, civic, professional groups and all manner of special interest enclaves. Each of these smaller associations enjoys its own vision of the good, often with very little thought about other groups, sometimes with open hostility toward others. In any case, a *common* good is not on their agenda, and they are not at all likely to agree on the nature of one final end for the *polis*. As a consequence, the bridle/ horse/cavalry/general/ statesman model that at first looked so promising for describing a target at which “archers of the common good” might aim, now begins to look much more problematic (*NE* 1094a23-24). At least for the moment, then, we might be inclined to suspend this line of inquiry, and turn to other resources in Aristotle that might help us think about the nature of the common good.

#### THE COMMON GOOD AND THREE VIRTUES: JUSTICE, TEMPERANCE, LIBERALITY

Justice is one of the fundamental values that brings households together to form the *polis*. It will help the next part of our inquiry if we can begin with a more formal definition of justice (δικαιοσύνη), and there is a sturdy one found in Plato’s *Republic*. “Justice is giving to every person that which is due him.” We find four dimensions of justice in Aristotle’s political thinking: (1) compensatory justice, (2) contractual justice, (3) retributive/punitive justice, and (4) distributive justice. A few words are in order, now, about how each of them helps us think about “what is due” to others.

In Book V of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes situations in which a judge must decide whether someone has been harmed by another. If the judge finds that something has been “taken”

from a victim, the offender can be ordered to make *just compensation* for that loss.<sup>11</sup>

*Contractual* justice is based on a formal voluntary promise that obligates two parties in a relationship. For example: you promise to do some work on my house, and in return, I promise to pay you a certain amount of money for that work. If one of us fails to keep his promise, then the courts may order that the original terms of the contract be enforced (1321b13-18; *Rhetoric* 1376b1-20).<sup>12</sup>

A third type, *retributive/punitive* justice, has to do with the laws of the community and the way those laws discourage us from acting on our evil desires and impulses (1321b41-1322a18). So long as we remain under law, we may become the best of creatures, but apart from law, we become the worst of creatures, savage, violent, and unholy (1253a32-37). This form of justice may be the most coercive, but even so, one of the maxims of punitive justice says that penalties should seek a “mean.” They should not be too lenient, nor too harsh. The punishment should fit the crime.

Coming then to *distributive* justice -- distributive justice is concerned with the proper sharing of *the common good* among citizens, understood as “honor, money, or any of the good things of which there is a part for those who share in the regime” (*NE* 1130b30). This kind of sharing is likely to involve sacrifice on the part of some citizens, while benefits are bestowed on some others. Citizens have a deep-rooted sense of what is “due” to them, however, and they find it hard to accept a smaller share than what they have been expecting. If we imagine Achilles brooding in his tent, angry and resentful that Agamemnon has taken Briseis from him, then we shall be close to understanding that feeling of being denied something that one is “supposed to have.”

Temperance, or self-control, is the virtue that helps human beings set limits to their own desires. Temperance can help us accept with equanimity those sacrifices we are called upon to make for the sake of the common good. If the members of the *polis* have not developed the virtue of temperance, however, their pursuit of self-interest (πλεονεξία) can undermine the common good. Apt definitions

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<sup>11</sup> Renee Hill (2002), “Compensatory Justice: Over Time and Between Groups,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 10.4: 392-415.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Shuchman (1962), “Aristotle’s Conception of Contract,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23.2: 257-264.

of *pleonexia* include: covetousness, avarice, and “the desire to have more than others, to have more than one’s share, to have everything.”<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, Aristotle does say that there is a properly moderate way to provide for the needs of one’s household, and for this purpose he endorses such activities as shepherding, farming, hunting, and fishing (1256a19-1256b26). In addition, he says that temperance by itself does not lead to happiness. Temperance and *liberality* are both needed for the good life. Liberality is the virtue of being generous, bestowing gifts on those we choose to give to, and for that we need something more than the bare necessities of life (1265a30-38).

Accumulating more than one’s share, however, is inimical to the requirements of distributive justice.<sup>14</sup> A “gallery of rogues” from ancient Athens remembered for their *pleonexia* might include Callicles, Thrasymachus, and Alcibiades. In the *Gorgias*, Callicles does not want to accept any limit on his pursuit of pleasure. Thrasymachus tries to defend the claim that “might makes right” in Book I of *The Republic*. In *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides makes it plain that Alcibiades cares little for peace and the reign of virtue in his own *polis*—his attention is turned to enslaving and profiting from *other* cities.<sup>15</sup>

Aristotle’s *good* citizen, however, balances his self-interests and his commitment to the common good, so that neither one is eclipsed. Aristotle describes a threefold division of civic responsibilities in Athens based on age (1329a1-35). (1) Young men, those who are physically strong, serve as hoplite warriors and defend the city. (2) Middle-aged men, those who have lived longer and developed greater depths of moral virtue, are the ones best suited to political leadership and public debate. (3) The elderly help the city by serving as priests and honoring the gods. Aristotle also uses a nautical analogy to suggest how those who have various responsibilities might work together toward a common good. Sailors on a ship have different duties – some serve as pilots, some as rowers, others are designated for look-out duty. Yet each contributes to a more comprehensive good: the

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<sup>13</sup> Ryan K. Balot (2001), “Greed in Aristotle’s Political Thought,” in *Greed and Injustice in Classical Athens*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 22-33.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Smith (1999), “Aristotle on the Conditions for and Limits of the Common Good,” *American Political Science Review* 93.3: 625-636.

<sup>15</sup> Mary P. Nichols (1992), *Citizens and Statesmen: A Study of Aristotle’s Politics*, Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 146.

overall success of the ship's voyage, or "the salvation of the community"(1276b25-30).

#### CIVIC FRIENDSHIP AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE: DELIBERATIVE OR AGONISTIC?

Moreover, friendship would seem to hold cities together, and legislators would seem to be more concerned about it than about justice. For concord (ὁμόνοια) would seem to be similar to friendship, and they aim at concord among all, while they try above all to expel *stasis*, which is enmity. (NE 1155a22-26)

Human flourishing (εὐδαιμονία) is built on mutual commitments to a shared life. Aristotle envisions life in the *polis* as something that requires κοινωνία – fellowship, or partnership. We are the sort of creatures who must live together in cities, if we are to live well. A beast or a god may find fulfillment in isolation, but for human beings, a good life is one shared between a person, his family, a circle of friends, and his fellow citizens (NE 1097b).

Some of these ties will be intense, while others will not be as strong. There are different *kinds* of friendships, depending on whether they are based on (1) pleasurable activities, (2) advantage/usefulness, or (3) virtue/good character (NE 1156).<sup>16</sup> Friendships based on good character involve care and regard for another person's projects and desires (NE 1166a1-b26). If I am a friend to someone, I hope these good things will come to pass, not for my own sake, but primarily for his. I am inclined, insofar as I am able, to help bring these things about. Reciprocity is an important dimension of friendship: "A friend is one who feels thus and excites these feelings in return (*Rhetoric* 1380b-1381a)." Time is another important element in friendship. Friends simply enjoy spending time in each other's company, sharing in each other's joys and sorrows.

Friendships based on pleasurable activities, or on "being useful to each other," are also valuable, but they are not as meaningful as character-based friendships. What do these friendships lack? Since our feelings about which activities we enjoy are always subject to change, it follows that we are likely to leave those friends behind, or be left

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<sup>16</sup> John Cooper (1980), "Aristotle on Friendship" in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. by Amelie Rorty, Berkeley: University of California Press, 301-340. Jennifer Whiting (2006), "The Nicomachean Account of *Philia*," in *The Backwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. by Richard Kraut, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 276-304.



behind by them, when the next “season” comes around (*NE* 1157a14-16). Business, too, has its own uncertainties and anxieties because of greed and competition, which tend to undercut the trust needed for friendship.<sup>17</sup> We do indeed require a measure of worldly goods for εὐδαιμονία, but friendships based on virtue are about something other than building a commercial empire or acquiring wealth (1256b13-15; 1323b7-9).

There is, as well, another very important kind of friendship, *civic* or *political* friendship. To be engaged in civic friendship means that we show an abiding concern for various forms of relationship in the *polis* – the quality of marriages and family life, the liveliness of fraternal associations, enthusiasm for religious festivals, and other community activities (1280b34-43). These are all elements of the common good. If we tried to imagine a *polis* in which *none* of these good things were possible, the question would be: who would choose to live there? On the other hand, an “abiding concern” for these goods is not always experienced at the level of intimacy. More typically, civic friendship involves appreciating these forms of interaction from a respectful distance.

Moreover, there is another side to civic or political friendship that is more agonistic. We have a common life together, not the way a herd of cattle does – by simply grazing in the same pasture; not the way a colony of bees does, by working for the hive and defending it instinctively - but by sharing in argument and thought (*NE* 1170b11-12).<sup>18</sup> Men are endowed by nature with the power to speak, and that is what makes it possible for them to deliberate about what is just and unjust (1253a7-18). In the *agon* of the city’s political life there will always be questions about the ranking of goods, along with arguments in which one side is trying to persuade others to change their minds about the order in which those goods should be ranked.<sup>19</sup>

This brings us to an important question, then, about the nature of political deliberation. Does Aristotle take political friendship to be primarily a matter of *homonoiā* (“being of one mind”) and therefore

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas J. Lewis (1978), “Acquisition and Anxiety: Aristotle’s Case against the Market,” *The Canadian Journal of Economics* 11.1: 69-90.

<sup>18</sup> David Depew (1995), “Humans and Other Political Animals in Aristotle’s *History of Animals*,” *Phronesis* 40.2, 166.

<sup>19</sup> T.H.Irwin (1996), “Ethics in the *Rhetoric* and in the *Ethics*,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Rhetoric*, ed. by Amelie Rorty, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 142-174.

closer to being a form of virtue-based friendship?<sup>20</sup> Or, given its conflictual nature, is political deliberation better understood under the aegis of friendships that are not so intimate, in which citizens deal with each other on the basis of what is mutually *advantageous* to them?

Those who seek a strong connection between political deliberation and virtue friendship point out that the formal unity of the *polis* may be supplied by the procedures embodied in its constitution, but its continued survival depends upon the growth of fraternal bonds between its citizens.<sup>21</sup> The best safeguard against the violence of political revolution is solidarity, a stable spirit of friendship among the members of the *polis* (1262b7-9). According to Alasdair MacIntyre, Aristotle regards political conflict as an evil that can be eliminated. “The virtues are all in harmony with each other and the harmony of individual character is reproduced in the harmony of the state.”<sup>22</sup> By Schwarzenbach’s account, too, Aristotle believes the legislator should aim at making the *polis* feel more like a family than a commercial enterprise.<sup>23</sup>

According to the agonistic model of political discussion, however, when we meet for deliberation in the public square, we are not brothers, nor are we comrades.<sup>24</sup> Aristotle is wary of proposals that have “a specious appearance of benevolence; men readily listen to them and are easily induced to believe that in some wonderful manner everybody will become everybody’s friend (1263b15-17).” Feelings of “fraternity” must not be allowed to substitute for justice. That would be a convenient way of avoiding the hard decisions that need to be made concerning the just distribution of goods and sacrifices. “We need not feel a strong commitment to our partners in deliberation, but

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<sup>20</sup> Ann Ward (2011), “Friendship and Politics in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 10.4: 443-462. Richard Klonoski (1996), “*Homonoiia* in Aristotle’s Ethics and Politics,” *History of Political Thought* 17.3: 313-325.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Schollmeier (1994), *Other Selves: Aristotle on Personal and Political Friendship*, Albany: SUNY Press, 79-96. Anthony Kronman (1979), “Aristotle’s Idea of Political Fraternity,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 24: 114-138.

<sup>22</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre (1985), *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 157.

<sup>23</sup> Sybil Schwarzenbach (1996), “On Civic Friendship,” *Ethics* 107: 97-128.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard Yack (1993), *The Problems of a Political Animal*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 110-121. Richard Mulgan (2000), “The Role of Friendship in Aristotle’s Political Theory,” in *The Challenge to Friendship in Modernity*, ed. by Preston T. King and Heather Devere, London: F.Cass, 15-32.

rather a less demanding commitment to the process of public problem-solving -that is, to politics. Attention need not be kindly, then; it can be strategic or grudging.”<sup>25</sup> What we need are the *practices* of rhetoric and listening to the other. If we have these, prior bonds of virtue-friendship are not necessary. We can still have a fruitful debate about what is just and what contributes to the common good. If we look at the typical models for discourse cited by those who prefer “strong ties” in political deliberation -families, intimate friends, and religious communities – we should notes that *their* disagreements, when they do come, can be so divisive as to invite disaster on a community (1328a16).

Still, we can hope - may it not be in vain - that agonistic discussion will yield an enriched understanding of “the other” that brings us closer to justice, rather than simply reiterating and perpetuating deep-rooted bitterness. Without a forum for such dialogue and argument, how else are strangers and enemies - and here we ought not to exclude ourselves from this openness to change - to be transformed into friends?

#### THE GOOD MAN AND SOCIAL CHANGE: WHY TALK ABOUT TRAGEDY?

As to whether the virtue by which a man is good (*agathos*) and a citizen upright (*spoudaios*) is to be regarded as different or the same... in the ideal city the upright citizen is the same as the good man, whereas in another sort of city, he is different from the good man. (*Politics* 1278b)

It would be good, now, to look more closely at the specific nature of the citizen’s obligation to the *polis*. Citizens are pledged to protect the constitution of their city (1320a15-16; 1276b28-31). They are also said to “have a share in the constitution,” meaning a share in whatever honors the city can bestow on all its citizens, but also a shared responsibility to participate in the deliberative and judicial offices of the city (1290a30-37, 1292a2-3). In light of political pluralism, however, the moral practices required under one constitution will not be identical to those called for under the constitution of another *polis*, and this diversity leads Aristotle to examine the difference between a

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<sup>25</sup> Susan Bickford (1996), “Beyond Friendship: Aristotle on Conflict, Deliberation, and Attention,” *The Journal of Politics* 58.2: 398-421. James Wilson (2011), “Deliberation, Democracy, and the Rule of Reason in Aristotle’s Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 105.2: 259-274.

good citizen and a good man. A *citizen* is deemed courageous in light of some law (νομος) known to the city. A good *man*, however, discerns what is courageous by the light of reason (λογος). Just as fire burns the same way in Persia as in Athens, natural justice is unwritten and is the same everywhere, and that is what guides a good man (*NE*, 1134b18-1135a5).

We can anticipate, then, that there will be conflicts between man-made law and the higher, unwritten law. Aristotle sees in Sophocles' *Antigone* a paradigmatic example of this conflict (*Rhetoric* 1373b1-14).<sup>26</sup> In the wake of an attempted coup, Creon, King of Thebes, has decreed that no traitor will receive a proper burial. Antigone believes that an older, deeper law compels her to bury her brother, Polyneices, no matter what other law he has violated.

CREON

And yet you dared to break those very laws?

ANTIGONE

Yes. Zeus did not announce those laws...

And Justice living with the gods below  
sent no such laws for men.

I did not think anything which you proclaimed strong enough to let a mortal override the gods and their unwritten and unchanging laws. They're not just for today or yesterday, but exist forever, and no one knows where they first appeared...

An upright citizen obeys the laws of the *polis*.<sup>27</sup> A good person is guided by moral virtue. These two sources of obligation may often overlap, but they will not always be identical.<sup>28</sup>

This distinction, between an upright citizen who obeys the laws of the city and the good man who is guided by an unwritten law, raises the question of working for political change. For the most part, Aristotle is not enthusiastic about attempts to reform the laws of the *polis*. "For the habit of lightly changing the laws is an evil... the citizen will not gain so much by making the change as he will lose by the habit of disobedience...For the law has no power to command

<sup>26</sup> Gabriela Ramow (2008), "Aristotle, Antigone, and Natural Justice," *History of Political Thought* 29.4: 585-600.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Simpson (1990), "Making the Citizens Good: Aristotle's City and Its Contemporary Relevance," *The Philosophical Forum* 22.2: 149-166.

<sup>28</sup> David Keyt (2007), "The Good Man and the Upright Citizen in Aristotle's Ethics and Politics," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 24.2: 220-240.

obedience except that of habit, which can only be given by time, so that a readiness to change from old to new laws enfeebles the power of the law (1269a12-25).”

Aristotle does know of a few people, however, who have burned with zeal for justice, leaders whose anger led them to strike a blow against an unjust order (1310b1-1313a16). To be sure, the connection between rhetoric and justice can be unstable. Democracies can be stirred up and led to unjust actions by demagogues, and the evil desires of tyrants often find confirmation in flattery (1292a2-30). In *Rhetoric* 2.8, however, Aristotle says that the emotion of pity can lead us to merciful deeds, because it is “a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, deadly or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon (*Rhetoric* 1385b).”

The genre of tragedy is especially relevant to Aristotle’s discussion of pity and compassion.<sup>29</sup> When we are confronted with the suffering of a character in drama – Antigone, Oedipus, Iphigenia – we are better able to recognize our kinship with real human beings who suffer. And if we can make that leap from recognizing tragedy on the stage to recognizing the presence of suffering in the *polis*, will we not be less likely to seek political domination over others, and more likely to seek justice *with* them and *for* them?<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Barbara Koziak (2000), *Retrieving Political Emotion: Thumos, Aristotle, and Gender*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 132-150.

<sup>30</sup> Marlene Sokolon (2006), *Political Emotions: Aristotle and the Symphony of Reason and Emotion*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 164-178.

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