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# HEROES AND DEMIGODS: ARISTOTLE'S HYPOTHETICAL "DEFENSE" OF TRUE NOBLES

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## Introduction

That Aristotle's discussion of slavery is problematic may be the most widely held opinion about any topic in his corpus.<sup>1</sup> The commentary taking every form, almost all regard it as unfortunate: even if he seeks to articulate a system of slavery that is justifiable *qua* nature, the argument is riddled with difficulties – and any defense of slavery is *ipso facto* absurd. In contrast, scholars have shown little preoccupation with its inverse: Aristotle's account of nobility.<sup>2</sup> This is remarkable, as his most concentrated examination of nobles, viz., the fragments of his dialogue *On Noble Birth* (Περὶ εὐγενείας), proceeds along the same lines as that seen with his examinations of slavery: to discern what would be required for the institution to name something true or natural, as opposed to its equivocal employment in actual practice. As they proceed, the fragments outline criteria for true nobility which inversely mirror those specified by Aristotle regarding natural slavery, and which sound just as odd. In fact, true nobility creates even greater difficulties than natural slavery for those who would subsume them along with regular folks under a single unified kind "human".

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. FINLEY 1980; SCHOFIELD 1981; SMITH 1983; LEAR 1988; BRUNT 1993; WILLIAMS 1993; GARVER 1994; DEPEW 1995; ANNAS 1996; GARNSEY 1996; BENTLEY 1999; GOODEY 1999; HARVEY 2001; KAMTEKAR 2002; KRAUT 2002; DESLAURIERS 2003; FRANK 2004; SIMPSON 2006; LOCKWOOD 2007; HEATH 2008; KARBOWSKI 2012; KARBOWSKI 2013; FRANK 2015; KAMTEKAR 2016; PELLEGRIN 2017; LOCKWOOD 2019; LOCKWOOD 2021; HARWOOD 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. FRITSCHKE 1997; DE VIDO 2010-2011; SEGGIARO 2016; MESQUITA 2020.

What follows is a close examination of true nobility in *On Noble Birth*, as taking the fragments seriously illuminates our understanding of Aristotle's overall corpus. Building on recent scholarship recognizing the similarity between true nobles and the *παμβασιλεύς* of the *Politics*,<sup>3</sup> we argue that true nobles also constitute an unappreciated inversion of Aristotle's natural slaves. Concurring with those who contend that Aristotle's argument for natural slaves is most consistent if read as an empty set – even a careful critique of slavery<sup>4</sup> – we argue that true nobles likewise make the most sense if read as a hypothetical investigation into that which would be required for the institution to name something true (as opposed to the arbitrary, equivocal practices of his time). This reading of *On Noble Birth* shores up such scholarship on the *Politics* and vice versa: interpreting a notoriously vexing argument as in fact a subtle critique of socio-economic practices becomes more plausible if one finds Aristotle doing it on multiple occasions. We conclude with a new explanation for why both descriptions are so confounding. Traditionally, scholars explain natural slaves via *ad hominem*: in this case, Aristotle is beholden to contemporary prejudices. This may also explain the oddness of true nobles. Alternatively, we suggest that both are most consistently read via *ad absurdum*: natural slaves and true nobles are hypotheses about empty sets. For if the incoherence of Aristotle's notorious natural slaves is inversely mirrored in his neglected true nobles, then the cause is presumably the same. Either these uncharacteristic problems are “evidence of the mind-smashing force of cultural bias”<sup>5</sup> or the problems themselves point to something deeper: “Insofar as domestic institutions ought to be strictly natural, such a defense is also an attack.”<sup>6</sup>

Our argument is broken into three sections, each with two subsections. First, we introduce Aristotle's dialogues, with specific attention to the fragments from *On Noble Birth*. Given readers are likely less familiar with Aristotle's exoterica than his esoterica, we begin with some brief comments on how scholars approach them, noting both the limitations and benefits of taking them seriously. Then we provide an exhaustive look at the specific fragments in question, showing the interlocutors as drawing increasingly tight circles around that which constitutes true nobility as opposed to nobility by convention, and culminating in the remarkable conclusion that true nobility requires the sempiternal existence

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<sup>3</sup> MESQUITA 2020.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., AMBLER 1987; NICHOLS 1992; MCGRADE 1996; FRANK 2005; TROTT 2019; HARWOOD 2022.

<sup>5</sup> DOBBS 1994, 71.

<sup>6</sup> AMBLER 1987, 400.

of a supernatural ἀρχηγός. In the second section, we return to Aristotle's esoterica, comparing the fragments with his references to noble birth throughout his corpus. We begin by briefly elucidating Aristotle's conception of hereditary and dispositive traits, in part to confront a recent (if anachronistic) trend among scholars to read him as articulating something like race-thinking, and in part to orient our discussion of the peculiar heritability of true nobility. The majority of this section, however, is devoted to describing the only other instances in the esoterica wherein one can find similarly superhuman qualities: Aristotle's παμβασιλεύς and "God-among-humans" (θεὸν ἐν ἀνθρώποις). In the third section, we descend into the fray concerning Aristotle's natural slaves. We begin by giving an overview of this notorious corner of his corpus, articulating all those characteristics of natural slaves which have vexed scholars for centuries. We then set natural slaves alongside their true noble counterparts, illustrating how they both represent inverse mirror images of each other and preclude inclusion in the natural kind "human" *vis-à-vis* every relevant aspect of their ostensible humanity. We conclude by not only agreeing with a small but growing body of scholarship which argues that natural slaves are so monstrously subhuman as to constitute a null set *ex hypothesi*, but also by arguing that such an interpretation is made all the more likely when one takes the fragments of *On Noble Birth*, with their equally monstrous superhuman true nobles, seriously.

## 1. Aristotle's Dialogues and *On Noble Birth*

### 1.1 On Reading the Fragments

Ancient sources tell us that Aristotle wrote more dialogues than treatises.<sup>7</sup> Much of the latter were lecture notes intended for assistance in instruction, whereas the former were meticulously cultivated for popular consumption. Unfortunately, his dialogues – often called the exoterica – have been lost; what survives exists only in extremely fragmented form. This creates a dilemma for utilizing the fragments. On the one hand, given the dialogues were intended for general readers, they likely resembled other ancient Greek philosophical dialogues in form.<sup>8</sup> Further, most assume they were written earlier in his career and reflected Plato's

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. D. L. V,22-27.

<sup>8</sup> For skepticism regarding the assumption that Aristotle's dialogues bore strong resemblance to Plato's, cf. MOORE 2020.

influence on the younger Aristotle.<sup>9</sup> One, therefore, has grounds to presume they proceeded elliptically, simultaneously enacting philosophical investigation and argumentation rather than presenting formal arguments or progressing like a treatise. Moreover, we lack almost all context or information regarding speakers or setting. All this makes definitive claims based on the fragments potentially as fraught as if one had only a few paragraphs of Alcibiades' rant from the *Symposium* and claimed something definitive about "Plato's Concept of Love".

On the other hand, rigorous examination of the fragments can help illuminate Aristotle's thought and contribute to our understanding of his extant works – often called the esoterica. Therefore, scholars should view the fragments as "tools of interpretation which we can use to shed light on Aristotle's extant work – and of course the extant works, in their turn, to shed light on the views of the fragments"; in those cases where "the extant Aristotle is sloppy or makes assumptions incomprehensible to the modern reader, the fragments can fill the gap."<sup>10</sup> With these caveats in place, we now turn to the dialogue *On Noble Birth*.<sup>11</sup>

## 1.2 The Fragments of Περὶ εὐγενείας

The fragments of *On Noble Birth* that survive are singular in a few ways. First, unlike some other fragments, their authenticity has never seriously been doubted: Περὶ εὐγενείας is included in all ancient lists of Aristotle's works.<sup>12</sup> Second, the surviving fragments are more extensive than those of any other dialogue, totaling three full pages of text.<sup>13</sup> Third, based on ancient commentators we can postulate that the extant fragments contain the main arguments of the original.<sup>14</sup> Fourth, it has been conjectured that the interlocutors are Aristotle himself and one of his students, Philo.<sup>15</sup> Finally, although the fragments present a position

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<sup>9</sup> MESQUITA 2020, 202 rejects the "Jaegerian temptation of cataloguing all dialogues as early productions", claiming that the "concurrence between the *Politics* and *On Good Birth*" in subject matter argues either that they are both late compositions, or that they represent ideas maintained throughout his career.

<sup>10</sup> MESQUITA – NORIEGA-OLMOS – SHIELDS 2020, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Fragments are referred to throughout according to their designations from ROSE 1886.

<sup>12</sup> PLU. *Arist.* 27,2, comes closest, though still does not call it spurious; cf. D. L. *loc. cit.*; HESYCHIUS, no. 11; PTOLEMAEUS, no. 5.

<sup>13</sup> For recent editions with useful commentary and extended testimonia, cf. GIGON 1987, 297–299; FLASHAR – DUBIELZIG – BREITENBERGER 2002, 214–217.

<sup>14</sup> MESQUITA 2020, 209.

<sup>15</sup> LAURENTI 1987, 750–753; ZANATTA 2008, 370, no. 7.

that is certainly odd, arguably preposterous, and ultimately unsound, and although they are in some ways incommensurate with other statements found in Aristotle, they are not insurmountably different – particularly when compared both with what he says about the *παμβασιλεύς* / “God-among-humans” and inversely with his description of natural slaves.<sup>16</sup>

Superimposing the fragments onto Aristotle’s esoterica shows that they form a coherent whole. The interlocutors draw tightening concentric circles around the topic of noble birth, such that the fragments not only provide a complete argument, but also one which bears significant similarity to other portions of Aristotle’s corpus.<sup>17</sup> Taken together, they articulate what will be dubbed Aristotle’s defense of true nobility; as will be shown, nobility (just like slavery) admits of true or natural definition, as opposed to definition only by convention or actual practice.

The first fragment begins with one of the interlocutors stating the issue succinctly: “With regard to noble birth, I am wholly at an impasse as to whom one should call nobly born” (Frag. 91 R3, II,2).<sup>18</sup> The main speaker takes over:

Your being at a loss is quite reasonable, for among the many – and even more so among the wise – there is division and obscurity about what is being said, especially concerning its potential manifestation (*δυνάμεως*).<sup>19</sup> This includes whether it is among honored and excellent things or, as Lycophron the Sophist wrote, whether it is altogether empty. For, comparing it with other good things, he says, the nobility of noble birth is unclear, and the reverence accorded it is from speech – the preference for it coming from opinion (*πρὸς δόξαν*) – whereas in truth (*κατὰ δ’ ἀλήθειαν*) the lowly born are no different from the nobly born.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The few references to nobility and noble birth are scattered throughout Aristotle’s esoterica. How they relate to the present paper depends on whether he is discussing nobility by convention (e.g., *EN* I,9 1099b3–7; *Rhet.* II,15 1390b16–35, *pace* 1390b23), true nobility (e.g., *EN* V,9 1136b22; *Rhet.* I,5 1360b18–31, II,15 1390b23), or ambiguously/both (e.g., *MM* II,8 1207b19–1208a4; *EE* VIII,2 1248b8–1249a16; *Pol.* III,13 1283a36–37).

<sup>17</sup> I.e., moving from examination of how things are named equivocally (*ὁμώνυμα λέγεται*) to univocally (*συνώνυμα λέγεται*); cf. *Cat.* I 1a1–15, VII 6a36–8b24; also APOSTLE 1980, 76–81; for Aristotle’s political naturalism, cf. MILLER 1989; SONG 2012; MIGUENS 2017; DUKE 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Ὅλως δὲ περὶ εὐγενείας ἐγὼ ἀπορῶ, τίνας χρὴ καλεῖν τοὺς εὐγενεῖς.

<sup>19</sup> Δύναμις is found frequently in Aristotle and is often rendered “capacity”. Given what follows, it is useful to remember that it has multiple senses: “capability of existing or acting”, “potential, as opp. to actual (*ἐνέργεια, ἐντελέχεια*)”, and “productive power” are equally valid (LIDDELL – SCOTT – JONES 1996, 452).

<sup>20</sup> Εἰκοτὼς γ’, ἔφην, τοῦτο σὺ διαπορῶν· καὶ γὰρ παρὰ τῶν πολλῶν καὶ μᾶλλον παρὰ τῶν

Therefore, although the reader lacks any knowledge about the speakers or the context of their conversation, the fragment is clear about what is under interrogation: is nobility based on convention or does it name something true?

This equivalence, viz., from Lycophron's summarized position that noble birth is based on opinion to our saying it is based on convention, is due to the explicit use of πρὸς δόξαν and κατὰ δ' ἀλήθειαν. Opinion concerns that which may be otherwise (*Met.* VII,15 1039b33-1040a3) and reputation – even “good repute” (εὐδοξία) on which all agree (*Rhet.* I,5 1361a25-27; cf. *Pol.* IV,5 1293b13-14) – is based on the general assent of others. Therefore, the speakers are questioning whether nobility is like repute (and thus a topic for rhetoric; *Top.* I,10-11 104a3-104b18), or whether it has a definition (and thus a topic for dialectic or demonstration; *Top.* I,5 101b38-102a17, I,14 105b10-38). This distinction is a vital one in Aristotle; in the present context it determines whether nobility is a societal convention based on the community's continued persuasion as to opinions regarding who should be called “noble” as opposed to it being a societal convention which is derived “from true and first things” (ἐξ ἀληθῶν καὶ πρώτων) which are themselves “self-evident” (δι' αὐτῶν) regarding who is “noble” (*Top.* I,1 100a18-101a4; cf. *APr.* I,1 24a28-b3, II,16 65a36-38; *APo.* I,2 72a5-14; *DA.* III,3 428a19-24).

In the second fragment, the interlocutors elaborate on this difference of opinion among the wise:

Just as there is division regarding what is a good height, so too is there division as to who must be called nobly born. For some customarily think that those who are to be called nobly born are they who come from good ancestors. Thus, as with Socrates: for on account of the virtue (ἀρετήν) of Aristides, his daughter (i.e., Myrto, Socrates' second spouse) is also fittingly born (γενναίαν εἶναι).<sup>21</sup> Simonides, when asked to distinguish who is nobly born, said those wealthy from ancient times.<sup>22</sup>

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σοφῶν τὰ μὲν ἀμφισβητεῖται τὰ δ' οὐ λέγεται σαφῶς, εὐθὺς τὰ περὶ τῆς δυνάμεως. Λέγω δὲ τοῦτο, πότερον τῶν τιμίων ἐστὶ καὶ σπουδαίων ἢ, καθάπερ Λυκόφρων ὁ σοφιστὴς ἔγραψε, κενόν τι πάμπαν. Ἐκεῖνος γὰρ ἀντιπαραβάλλον ἑτέροις ἀγαθοῖς αὐτὴν εὐγενείας μὲν οὐν φησὶν ἀφανὲς τὸ κάλλος, ἐν λόγῳ δὲ τὸ σεμνόν, ὡς πρὸς δόξαν οὖσαν τὴν αἴρεσιν αὐτῆς, κατὰ δ' ἀλήθειαν οὐθὲν διαφέροντας τοὺς ἀγενεῖς τῶν εὐγενῶν (*Frag.* 91 R3, II,3-11).

<sup>21</sup> On Socrates' relationship with Myrto, cf. WOODBURY 1973.

<sup>22</sup> Ἀμφισβητεῖται δὲ καθάπερ καὶ περὶ τοῦ πληκτικόν ἀγαθόν ἐστὶ, ὅτω καὶ δεῖ καλεῖν εὐγενεῖς. Οἱ μὲν γὰρ τοὺς ἐξ ἀγαθῶν γονέων εἶναι νομίζουσι, καθάπερ καὶ Σωκράτης διὰ γὰρ τὴν Ἀριστείδου ἀρετὴν καὶ τὴν θυγατέρα αὐτοῦ γενναίαν εἶναι. Σιμωνίδην δὲ φασὶ διερωτώμενον τίνες εὐγενεῖς, τοὺς ἐκ πάλαι πλουσίων φάναι (*Frag.* 92 R3, 1-5).

Turning to Theognis, who finds this ridiculous, they spend some time considering his counterpoint: isn't it obvious that a person who is wealthy now is better off than one whose ancestors were wealthy? From his ostensibly reasonable position, they interpolate a similarity between wealth and goodness: isn't it obvious that one has more in common with their immediate ancestors rather than their ancient ones, and therefore one would rather be good rather than have ancient ancestors who were good?

Nevertheless, the narrator dismisses Theognis along with the rest, opting instead to consider what is being called "noble" in the attribution "noble birth".

Since we see noble birth in none of these, must one look somewhere else? The "noble" (τὸ εὖ) indicates, perhaps,<sup>23</sup> something praiseworthy and excellent, of the same sort as a "noble face" (εὐπρόσωπον) and a "noble eye" (εὐόφθαλμον). For, according to this manner of speaking, "noble" indicates something good and beautiful. For doesn't "noble face" mean having the virtue (ἔχον ἀρετήν) of a face, and "noble eye" having the virtue of an eye? But this is the excellence of family (γένος), and that family which is common is not excellent. Thus, it is evident that the excellence being named is based on having the virtue proper to the thing.<sup>24</sup>

The fragment ends with their<sup>25</sup> first affirmative statement: "It is clear, then, that noble birth is virtue of family."<sup>26</sup>

The crux of the argument lies in the fourth and final fragment,<sup>27</sup> with the discussion of the ἀρχηγός or "originator". Summarizing their investigation up to this point, the narrator emphasizes that they have yet to define noble birth

<sup>23</sup> "Perhaps" should not be misconstrued as indicating tentativeness: δήπου typically expresses irony in philosophical dialogue. Cf. DENNISTON 1934, 267-268.

<sup>24</sup> Ἄρ' οὖν οὐκ ἐπεὶ ἐν μηδετέρῳ τούτων ὀρώμεν τὴν εὐγένειαν, σκεπτέον ἄλλον τρόπον; Τὸ εὖ σημαίνει τι δήπου τῶν ἐπαινετῶν καὶ σπουδαίων, οἷον τὸ εὐπρόσωπον καὶ τὸ εὐόφθαλμον. ἀγαθὸν γὰρ τι ἢ καλὸν σημαίνει κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν λόγον. Οὐκοῦν εὐπρόσωπον μὲν ἔστι τὸ ἔχον ἀρετὴν προσώπου, εὐόφθαλμον δὲ τὸ ὀφθαλμοῦ ἀρετὴν; Ἀλλὰ μὴν ἔστι γένος τὸ μὲν σπουδαῖον, τὸ δὲ φαῦλον ἀλλ' οὐ σπουδαῖον. Σπουδαῖον δὲ γέ φαμεν ἕκαστον κατὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ ἀρετὴν εἶναι, ὥστε καὶ γένος σπουδαῖον ὡσαντως (Frag. 93 R3, 23-33).

<sup>25</sup> Given the precedent of significant female characters in ancient dialogues (most notably Diotima from Plato's *Symposium*), and for reasons to be discussed shortly, it seems prudent - if arguably anachronistic - to refer to the interlocutors using non-gender-specific pronouns.

<sup>26</sup> Δῆλον ἄρ', ἔφη, ὅτι ἐστὶν ἡ εὐγένεια ἀρετὴ γένους (Frag. 92 R3, 34).

<sup>27</sup> None of the original text of the third fragment (Frag. 93 R3) survives, and antiquity tells us that it focuses on Socrates' relationship with Myrto. Therefore, like *On Wealth*, we believe it does not contribute significantly to this project.



(Frag. 94 R3, II,2-5). Euripides is invoked as claiming noble birth has nothing to do with the past and everything to do with the present (Frag. 94 R3, II,5-8). The narrator rejects this as well, stating what they believe is correct: “Those who give preference to [the γένος possessing] virtue from the beginning<sup>28</sup> seek correctly” (Frag. 94 R3, II,8-9).<sup>29</sup> The speaker then asserts that the *sine qua non* of noble birth is the beginning or origin of the γένος, which they call the ἀρχηγός.

Now this kind of thing occurs when an excellent origin springs up in/intervenes in (ἐγγένηται) a family. For an origin of this kind has the productive power to produce many fully like itself. This is the work of an origin: to make a multitude of others like itself. When, then, some individual of this kind springs up in/intervenes in (ἐγγένηται) the family, and has such excellence that their progeny possess the full goodness of that one, it is necessary that the family be excellent [...] Therefore, rather than the wealthy or the good, it is well said that the “nobly born” should be those who come from ancient abundance or ancient goodness. For this way of speaking seeks the truth: the origin matters above all else. And surely not even those from good ancestors are always nobly born, but only as many as happen to have originators (ἀρχηγοί) for their ancestors are. Thus, when a man is himself good, but he does not have this particular productive power from nature such as to bring into the world a multitude fully like himself, the origin does not have this particular productive power [lacuna in the original] [...] virtue of family, and those are nobly born if they are from such a family - not if their father was “nobly born”, but if the originator (ἀρχηγός) of the family (was).<sup>30</sup> For not on account of the father does he himself beget a good man, but because he was from this particular kind of family.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ἀρχαίαν ἀρετήν is often rendered “ancient virtue” (Ross 1955) or “ancient excellence” (BARNES 1984), but “virtue from the beginning” is equally possible and meshes better with the rest of the fragments’ argument.

<sup>29</sup> Ἄλλ’ ὀρθῶς ζητοῦσιν οἱ τὴν ἀρχαίαν ἀρετὴν προτιθέντες.

<sup>30</sup> Brachylogy occurs in the original. More on this later.

<sup>31</sup> Συμβαίνει δὲ τὸ τοιοῦτον, ὅταν ἐγγένηται ἀρχὴ σπουδαία ἐν τῷ γένει. Ἡ γὰρ ἀρχὴ τοιαύτη ἔχει τὴν δύναμιν, πολλὰ παρασκευάζειν οἷα περ αὐτή. Τοῦτο γὰρ ἔστιν ἀρχῆς ἔργον, ποιῆσαι οἷον αὐτὴ ἕτερα πολλά. Ὡταν οὖν ἐγγένηται τοιοῦτος εἷς τις ἐν τῷ γένει καὶ οὕτω σπουδαῖος ὥστ’ ἔχειν τὸ ἀπ’ ἐκείνου ἀγαθὸν πολλὰς γενεάς, τοῦτο σπουδαῖον ἀνάγκη εἶναι τὸ γένος [...] ὥστ’ εὐλόγως οὐκ οἱ πλούσιοι οὐδ’ οἱ ἀγαθοί, ἀλλ’ οἱ ἐκ πάλαι πλουσίων ἢ ἐκ πάλαι ἀγαθῶν εὐγενεῖς εἶεν ἄν. Ζητεῖ γὰρ ὁ λόγος τάληθῆ. Ἀρχὴ γὰρ ἄνωθεν πάντων. Οὐ μὴν ἀλλ’ οὐδ’ οἱ ἐκ προγόνων ἀγαθῶν εὐγενεῖς πάντως, ἀλλ’ ὅσοις τυγχάνουσιν ἀρχηγοὶ τῶν προγόνων ὄντες. Ὡταν μὲν οὖν αὐτὸς ἀγαθὸς [ἦ], μὴ ἔχη δὲ τοιαύτην δύναμιν τῆς φύσεως ὡς τίκτειν πολλοὺς ὁμοίους, οὐκ ἔχει ἀρχὴν [...] τοιαύτην δύναμιν, ἐν τούτοις ἀρχὴ τοῦ γένους, καὶ εὐγενεῖς οἱ ἀπὸ τούτου τοῦ γένους ὄντες, οὐκ ἔαν ὁ πατὴρ εὐγενὴς ἦ, ἀλλ’ ἔαν ὁ ἀρχηγὸς τοῦ γένους. οὐ γὰρ δι’ αὐτὸν ὁ πατὴρ ἐγέννησεν ἀγαθόν, ἀλλ’ ὅτι ἐκ τοιοῦτου γένους ἦν (Frag. 94 R3, II,11-34).

This requires unpacking, as it is potentially revolutionary. By stating that the ἀρχηγός is the necessary origin which predetermines the nobility of a family, the speaker not only precludes the claims of those who are of recent wealth and excellence, but also those from ancient noble stock. For, by emphasizing the supernatural ability of the ἀρχηγός to pass their preeminent excellence to all their progeny, if any individual within a so-called "noble" family exhibits less than preeminent excellence, then this appears to threaten the entire family's current and prior claims to nobility. Put another way, noble birth is proven experientially every generation by the shared superlative excellence of every member of the bloodline. This belies the claims of the interlocutors' Greek contemporaries, both those who attempt to shore up their "noble birth" by tracing their ancestry back to Golden Age heroes, and any noble family which has a single blood-relation who is less than exemplary. Properly so-called, "noble birth" names the (re)production, *in toto*, of preeminent excellence in and for each subsequent generation; anything less demonstrates that the family has called itself "noble" equivocally.<sup>32</sup>

Taken as a whole, the progression is quintessentially Aristotelian. When setting out to examine something in the esoterica, Aristotle most often begins by acknowledging that the thing in question is subject to both common usage and significant debate. He then describes how the thing in question is said by the "many" and the "wise", and at times investigates the relevant terms via etymology and examples to see if either offers additional assistance. Only after proceeding in this dialectical fashion, discarding that which is unhelpful and building upon that which is useful, does he inquire into the nature of the thing in itself and – upon concluding that it does have a proper definition – remark on the specific ways it is said, both equivocally and truly.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Aristotle is aware that excellence of stock degenerates in animals (*GA* IV,3 767a36–769b31; *HA* I,1 486a1–487a2) and this may be related to hereditary monarchies (*Pol.* III,15 1286b22–27) and the progeny of historically exceptional persons (*Rhet.* II,15 1390b21–31). MESQUITA 2020 concludes from this that we should not overstate the case when reading *On Noble Birth*, imagining Aristotle saying, "I only claimed that *archēgoi* 'beget many like him' [...] I never said they were meant to be eternal" (p. 217). In other words, he agrees: the fragments declare that progeny who do not share the preeminent excellence of the ἀρχηγός indicate that the line was never "truly" noble; thus, the argument articulated therein requires us to attribute a position to Aristotle so preposterous as to necessitate Mesquita defending him from it. Nevertheless, given the numerous additional characteristics which are described as both constitutive of true nobility and which also differ from other natural kinds, we take the text at its word regarding the eternal fecundity of the ἀρχηγός.

<sup>33</sup> SACHS 2012, vii–x.

## 2. Equivocal and True Nobility in the Esoterica

### 2.1 On Hereditary and Dispositive Traits

Though true to Aristotelian form, there are several problems with the arguments presented by the dialogue. The first, most obvious issue is that this account of noble birth looks like a conspicuously constructed hypothesis concerning hereditary and dispositive traits. The second is the interlocutors' insistence that true nobility involves innate virtue. The former seems both bizarre and wildly anachronistic, whereas the latter flies in the face of Aristotle's ethico-political works, which are virtually adamant that virtue is not born but made via habit – with the possible exceptions of the *παμβασιλεύς* or “God-among-humans”. Addressing these problems requires turning to Aristotle's esoterica.

Regarding the first issue, Aristotle clearly has a rudimentary understanding of heredity. Selective breeding having been recognized since the dawn of animal husbandry, Aristotle articulates his understanding of inherited traits in *GA* IV,3 767a36–769b10 and IV,4 770a35–772b12.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, a brief look at that text confirms not only that Aristotle's conception of heritable traits falls widely short of that articulated by modern biology, but also that his description of noble birth disagrees with his own conception of inherited traits seen therein.

Several scholars have recently imported a dispositive conception of bodies and bloodlines into Aristotle, even going so far as to claim that Aristotle is guilty of something like racism.<sup>35</sup> This is untenable: while attaching significance to bodies and bloodlines is ubiquitous across cultures since ancient times, amplifying this significance to the level of socio-economic predestination via legal codes is an epistemological leap inconceivable prior to the modern invention of race.<sup>36</sup> Even if, *arguendo*, one grants Aristotle the theoretical tools – e.g., a basic sense of heritable traits, a theory of natural kinds – to conceive of something like “race”, a perusal of his corpus shows him failing to get there.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. FALCON – LEFEBVRE 2018, i.

<sup>35</sup> E.g., FRITSCHE 2019, 73–75; MCCOSKEY 2012, 54, 56. DOBBS 1994, 92 remarks that Aristotle's natural slave “has appeared even to his sympathetic readers as a racist tar-baby”, though he is quick to point out that he considers this a misconception; for thorough refutations, cf. LOCKWOOD 2021; HARWOOD 2023.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. TAYLOR 2003, 18, 22; HARWOOD 2022, 106–111.

<sup>37</sup> BOXILL 2001, 24–37 provides an exhaustive perusal of this hypothetical exercise, concluding not only that it fails in Aristotle's case but also that a conception of “race” is unavailable prior to Kant.

More importantly, what Aristotle does say about heredity elsewhere is in stark contrast with what he says in *On Noble Birth*. Aristotle is quite explicit concerning the similarities which result through inheritance: "Some offspring take after their parents, some do not; some their father, some their mother [...] but these more than their earlier ancestors" (*GA* IV,3 767a36–b3).<sup>38</sup> This is unsurprising, being precisely what one expects from any careful observation of inherited traits: they become more muted as more generations occur. Yet the fragments state repeatedly that true nobles take after the ἀρχηγός – the most ancient ancestor – more profoundly and demonstrably than any more recent ancestor, contradicting Aristotle's description of heredity in the esoterica.

## 2.2 On the "God-among-humans", a.k.a. the παμβασιλεύς

The obvious place to look when comparing true nobles from *On Noble Birth* to the esoterica is the *Politics*' descriptions of the "God-among-humans" and παμβασιλεύς.<sup>39</sup> Both have been a thorn in the side of scholars, as they seem to contradict much of what Aristotle says elsewhere. Specifically, the "God-among-humans" and παμβασιλεύς somehow ignore that which is determined by nature (concerning the acquisition and maintenance of virtue) and required for justice (concerning the requirement that rule be shared) so much that they seem to exceed the bounds of what otherwise defines humans *qua* human.<sup>40</sup> What has previously been missed is that these descriptions of superhumans from the *Politics* map neatly onto the fragments from *On Noble Birth*, so much that the "God-among-humans", the παμβασιλεύς, and the ἀρχηγός may represent three descriptions of the same individual (and their progeny).

What makes the "God-among-humans" singular is Aristotle's insistence that their excellence is so absolute as to be seemingly infallible (*Pol.* III,13 1284a3–5).

<sup>38</sup> Τοῦ τὰ μὲν εἰκότα γίνεσθαι τοῖς τεκνώσασιν τὰ δὲ μὴ εἰκότα, καὶ τὰ μὲν πατρὶ τὰ δὲ μητρὶ [...] καὶ μᾶλλον αὐτοῖς ἢ τοῖς προγόνοις. Aristotle's statement that offspring share significant traits with both mother and father is another reason for using of non-gender specific pronouns in this discussion; cf. *Rhet.* I,5 1360b31.

<sup>39</sup> MESQUITA 2020, 219 argues that the "distinctly unPlatonic" biological focus of *On Noble Birth* further problematizes the traditional dating of the dialogue "back to the academic period" and to "an immature, 'fanatical Platonic' Aristotle, as it would in the Jaegerian caricatural approach".

<sup>40</sup> On the παμβασιλεύς, cf. RIESBECK 2016; BUEKENHOUT 2016; BUEKENHOUT 2018; ATACK 2020, 179–196.

Aristotle defines φρόνησις, or political capacity, as “the only virtue that is the ruler’s own” (ἡ δὲ φρόνησις ἄρχοντος ἴδιος ἀρετὴ μόνη, the excellence of the subject being true opinion, δόξα ἀληθής; *Pol.* III,4 1277b25–28). The superlative possession of this virtue is precisely what defines the “God-among-humans”. Should one arise, their possession of φρόνησις would exceed comparison not only to all others individually but also to that of the entire state combined, rendering them “no longer properly counted a part of the polis” (*Pol.* III,13 1284a5–10).<sup>41</sup> Legislation being that which “necessarily concerns equals both with respect to birth and capacity”, and justice being shared rule among equals, the “God-among-humans” is literally the exception to (the) rule because they know no equal (*Pol.* III,13 1284a11–12).<sup>42</sup> This makes the “God-among-humans” a monstrous being, as anyone who is “no part of a polis” (οὐθὲν μέρος πόλεως) is not a human properly so called, but “a beast or a god” (ἢ θηρίον ἢ θεός; *Pol.* I,2 1253a28–29).

It is important to pause here and note that Aristotle’s preoccupation with such god-like persons is not exclusive to the *Politics* and that describing them as “god-like” is no exaggeration. Indeed, Aristotle all but tells us that, rather than coming up with the term “God-among-humans” himself, he appropriates it from Homer. At the beginning of Book VII in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle examines extremes of character, in particular “brutishness” (θηριότης) and its opposite “superhuman virtue, someone heroic and divine” (*EN* VII,1 1145a15–19).<sup>43</sup> To illustrate the latter, he directly quotes Priam saying of Hector that “he seemed not as a child of mortal man, but to be that of a god” (*EN* VII,1 1145a20–23; cf. *Il.* XXIV,258–259).<sup>44</sup> Aristotle’s choice of reference here could not be more telling. First, Priam’s immediately preceding words to those Aristotle reproduces are, “Hector, who was a god among men” (*Il.* XXIV,258).<sup>45</sup> Thus, Aristotle is not hiding that he borrows the expression from Homer. Second, the context of the passage is important: the mourning leader of Troy is not simply stating that his late son’s god-like preeminence was different in kind from regular Trojans. The quote occurs in the middle of Priam’s emphasizing that Hector was incomparably superior to his heroic siblings (*Il.* XXIV,248–264).

<sup>41</sup> Οὐκέτι θετέον τούτους μέρος πόλεως.

<sup>42</sup> Ἀρετὴν ὄντες καὶ τὴν πολιτικὴν δύναμιν: ὥσπερ γὰρ θεὸν ἐν ἀνθρώποις εἰκὸς εἶναι τὸν τοιοῦτον. Ὅθεν δῆλον ὅτι καὶ τὴν νομοθεσίαν ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι περὶ τοὺς ἴσους καὶ τῷ γένει καὶ τῇ δυνάμει [...].

<sup>43</sup> Τὴν ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς ἀρετὴν, ἥρωικὴν τινα καὶ θεϊαν.

<sup>44</sup> Οὐδὲ ἐφκει ἀνδρός γε θνητοῦ πάϊς ἔμμεναι ἀλλὰ θεοῦ.

<sup>45</sup> Ἐκτορά θ', ὃς θεός ἔσκε μετ' ἀνδράσιν.

Third, although Aristotle ostensibly takes this moment to discuss both superhuman and subhuman persons, he has very little to say about the former – save that if humans can become gods due to their superlative virtue, it is no longer accurate to call this “virtue” or them “excellent”: these terms apply to humans, whereas such a person is more than human (*EN* VII,1 1145a23–26). In short, it is not hyperbole to say that a “God-among-humans” is mythic in their superiority to regular folks. Aristotle tells us that this is what he has in mind.

Returning to the *Politics*, Aristotle says that the “God-among-humans” is so radically superior to all others that it would be impossible to live with them. Considerations of human justice fail, as “there is no law on those of such a sort. For they are themselves a law” (*Pol.* III,13 1284a13–14).<sup>46</sup> There are two possible responses to such a god-like being. On the one hand, they could – or, more properly, should – be instantaneously, gleefully invested as an absolute monarch, for “it is left that all gladly obey (a God-among-humans), as it were according to nature, and that those of such a sort be kings eternally in their polis” (*Pol.* III,3 1284b32–34).<sup>47</sup> This outcome would result, however, only in a polis whose populace was composed of citizens themselves sufficiently adept with φρόνησις such as to recognize that the best man in the best regime would rule as Zeus rules the cosmos (*Pol.* VII,3 1325b28–30). On the other hand, of course, this is extremely unlikely. Therefore, Aristotle says that should a “God-among-humans” arise in anything less than the most just polis, they would be ostracized – and he even says that this terrible fate would be based on a kind of political justice (*Pol.* III,13 1284b16–17; cf. *EN* V,9 1136b15–1137a4).

One might expect Aristotle to assuage both our incredulity upon hearing of an individual plucked from the Golden Age of Heroes, and our horror that justice could entail condemning such a god-like person to a fate worse than death. Instead, he doubles-down: all his illustrations of such monstrous goodness are pulled from myth. For example, he compares the appearance of a “God-among-humans” among regular folks to Antisthenes’ fable describing a council among animals wherein hares ridiculously claim equality with lions (*Pol.* III,13 1284a16–17), and reminds us of the *Argo* stranding Heracles due to the demigod so exceeding the other Argonauts that she/they could not bear him (*Pol.* III,13 1284a24–25). Following these allusions to fables, heroes, and demigods, Aristotle adds a third potential response to the emergence of a “God-among-humans”: execution (*Pol.* V,18 1288a35–b5). Again, though such extreme actions may strike

<sup>46</sup> Κατὰ δὲ τῶν τοιούτων οὐκ ἔστι νόμος· αὐτοὶ γὰρ εἰσι νόμος.

<sup>47</sup> Λεῖπεται τοίνυν, ὅπερ ἔοικε πεφυκέναι, πείθεσθαι τῷ τοιούτῳ πάντας ἀσμένως, ὥστε βασιλέας εἶναι τοὺς τοιούτους αἰδίους ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν.

us as exceeding the strict definition of justice, he reiterates that they are justified based on the radical distance between the preeminent φρόνησις of that one and the combined φρόνησις of everyone else in anything less than the best polis.

In his final comments which directly invoke the “God-among-humans”, Aristotle elaborates as to who he considers to be included in his descriptions. “But when at all events a whole family, or some one, happens to surpass all others with respect to their excessive virtue that they exceed the virtue of all others, then it is just that the family be king and lord of all, or that the one be king” (*Pol.* III,17 1288a15–19).<sup>48</sup> That is, “God-among-humans” may refer not only to the possibility of a single heroic individual springing up in/intervening in a polis, but also to an individual who is the originator of a bloodline of similarly, demonstrably superlative progeny. In both cases, the most just response would be to invest such god-like persons with rule; yet in both cases, this would only happen if the rest of the polis were capable of recognizing their true preeminence. In sum, Aristotle’s altogether brief comments on the “God-among-humans” are as definitive (*viz.*, there are exactly two just responses to their existence: absolute removal or absolute investiture) as they are disruptive (*viz.*, this person threatens everything else he says about justice, shared rule, the definition of citizenship, and even humanity considered as a natural kind).<sup>49</sup>

All this is strikingly similar to Aristotle’s description of the παμβασιλεύς, as the “king everywhere” is its own conundrum. The *Politics* is famously less polished than other works in Aristotle’s esoterica, and the παμβασιλεύς offers a case study of such messiness.<sup>50</sup> As mentioned before, Aristotle is unequivocal that the best form of government would be an absolute hereditary monarchy under someone who clearly would be a “king everywhere” – except when he says that such kings no longer arise these days (*Pol.* V,10 1313a3–4), or that the best form of government is one in which not men but laws rule (*Pol.* III,11 1282b1–6), or that the best form of government is one in which all citizens share rule (*Pol.* III,7 1279a38–b3; III,11 1281a39–b15). For those expecting precision, such competing claims are bound to frustrate.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Ὅταν οὖν ἢ γένος ὅλον ἢ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἓνα τινὰ συμβῆ διαφέροντα γενέσθαι κατ’ ἀρετὴν τοσοῦτον ὥσθ’ ὑπερέχειν τὴν ἐκείνου τῆς τῶν ἄλλων πάντων, τότε δίκαιον τὸ γένος εἶναι τοῦτο βασιλικὸν καὶ κύριον πάντων, καὶ βασιλεία τὸν ἓνα τοῦτον.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. FRANK 2004, 93.

<sup>50</sup> E.g., *Pol.* III ends with a lacuna in the text (scholars debating whether IV or VII should follow), and several times in VII and VIII Aristotle promises to elaborate later without doing so; cf. SACHS 2002, 211, n. 193.

<sup>51</sup> To be fair, Aristotle warns against expecting the precision found in inquiries concerning that which cannot be otherwise; compare, e.g., *Pol.* VII,8 1328a20–22 with *Met.* V,5 1015a34–b1.

On closer inspection, all of Aristotle's arguments for absolute, hereditary monarchy in this specific case are valid.<sup>52</sup> If someone arose in a polis who demonstrably possessed excellence such as to be incomparable to all others combined, then the logical response is their elevation to absolute monarch. If this preeminence were somehow demonstrably hereditary, then the logical response is the same: their progeny must continue as absolute monarchs. Justice demands that such persons rule; one can no more share rule with them than Antisthenes' hares can claim equality with lions. Their superlative judgment both includes our best interests and exceeds our ability to achieve them, so recognizing one's own fallibility entails ceding power to someone infallible. Any other response only proves that we are not listening to the rational part of our souls and are demonstrably lacking in φρόνησις. In each case, these statements are subjunctively conditional and their conclusions follow *ex hypothesi*.

At this point the similarities between the *Politics*' παμβασιλεύς and the ἀρχηγός of *On Noble Birth* should be clear, though at the time of writing only one publication has recognized this.<sup>53</sup> This is unfortunate, as they are not just similar but also mutually illuminating. It was argued above that scholarship based on the fragments is justified insofar as it provides "tools of interpretation which we can use to shed light on Aristotle's work" when "the extant Aristotle is sloppy or makes assumptions incomprehensible to the modern reader".<sup>54</sup> The παμβασιλεύς is precisely such a case, so scholars must look to the rest of Aristotle's corpus to see if he elsewhere describes similarly preeminent individuals for clarification. Upon finding such similarities in *On Noble Birth*, it has been proposed that Aristotle likely supplied additional explanation of his position on absolute hereditary monarchy via the exoterica.

This paper agrees, but goes further. Scholars have failed to recognize that the παμβασιλεύς / "God-among-humans" of the *Politics* and the ἀρχηγός from *On Noble Birth* beggar belief for the same reason: they describe individuals who push to the breaking point a unified definition of humanity. That is, even if the fragments' superhuman true nobles fill in the blanks for the *Politics*' superhuman παμβασιλεύς / "God-among-humans", taken together they fail to provide a robust account for such a monstrous, godlike nature. Put bluntly, the difference

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<sup>52</sup> NICHOLS 1992, 59–62, 74–79, finds the "God-among-humans" a rhetorical contradiction: they possess "extreme" virtue, yet *EN* II,6 1106b5–18 states that extremes are always vices. She concludes that, as Aristotle could not be unaware of such an obvious contradiction, the "God-among-humans" must be a hypothetical ideal humored by Aristotle due to its theoretical validity. This inadvertently supports the present argument.

<sup>53</sup> MESQUITA 2020.

<sup>54</sup> MESQUITA – NORIEGA-OLMOS – SHIELDS 2020, 2.



between these individuals and the average person is so dramatic as to force us to question whether they can be considered human.

Before rejecting this as absurd, it behooves us to ask again whether Aristotle's corpus contains any other similarly bizarre descriptions of monstrous persons. And, of course, it does: no part of Aristotle is so consistently regarded as "sloppy" as his monstrous natural slaves. Superimposing Aristotle's superhumans (i.e., true nobles, the ἀρχηγός, the παμβασιλεύς, and the "God-among-humans") onto what some have dubbed his "subhumans" (i.e., natural slaves) provides fecund material for (re)interpreting both, as they are profoundly similar in their extra-human characteristics.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the next section focuses on natural slaves, arguing that true nobles constitute their inverted image, so much that the fragments provide a hitherto unappreciated key for deciphering this long-debated corner of Aristotle's corpus.

### 3. Aristotle's "Natural" Slaves

#### 3.1 Another Hypothetical Account

Scholars have debated exactly how to read Aristotle's natural slaves for centuries.<sup>56</sup> Understandably, the commentary is so extensive that an exhaustive review would exceed the space available to the present project. Fortunately, it is also unnecessary. The following will summarize those issues typically noted in the scholarship, to provide a sufficient comparison for true nobles and an interpretation of both as *argumenta ad absurdum* which demonstrate, *ex hypothesi*, that actual slaves and nobles are based in arbitrary conventions rather than nature or truth.

Natural slaves differ from other humans (including actual slaves) in (1) their limited λόγος, (2) their proper ἔργον, (3) their ability to acquire ἀρετή, and – as a result of these – (a) their incapacity for complete φιλία and (b) εὐδαιμονία.<sup>57</sup> Natural slaves are referred to as differing from other humans as much as the latter differ from beasts (*Pol.* I,2 1253a10–18; I,5 1254b3–28; II,5 1263a35–40). If nature were to distinguish them somatically, they would be as demonstrably

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<sup>55</sup> E.g., GARNSEY 1996, 123; SCHOFIELD 1981, 139.

<sup>56</sup> E.g., VITORIA 1538/1991, 239–240, 250–251; LAS CASAS 1550/1992, 32–48; cf. HUXLEY 1980.

<sup>57</sup> *Pol.* I,1 1252a32; I,2 1253a10–18; I,5 1254b15–1255a2; I,5 1254b3–28; I,13 1260a10–14; II,5 1263a35–40; *DA* I,3 406b24–25; III,3 428a16–25; III,9 432a30–b2; III,10 433a10–15; III,10 433a31–b4; III,10 433b28–31; III,11 434a5–10; *EN* II,3 1112a18–1113a14; VI,5 1140a25–b6; *HA* IV,8–9 534b29–536b24; cf. SACHS 2012, 5, n. 50; LOCKWOOD 2007.

different from other humans (including, presumably, actual slaves) as these others are from gods – but unfortunately nature does not (*Pol.* I,5 1254b34–37). Their indistinguishable physical appearance would lead common sense to assume that they are members of the same natural kind, yet Aristotle tells us this is insufficient for definitively determining something's definition.<sup>58</sup>

Should anyone take Aristotle's criteria seriously and attempt to implement his natural system, it would be impossible to supply the number of slaves assumed necessary for the economic status quo of the polis.<sup>59</sup> Some claim that Aristotle characterizes all barbarians as slaves by nature (*Pol.* I,2 1252b8–9). But the characterization is not even his (he is quoting EUR. *LA* 1400), and anyway it results in an obvious circular trap: what supposedly makes barbarians natural slaves is removed once they are removed from a barbarian polis.<sup>60</sup> Aristotle's odd comment that their acquisition is akin to hunting (*Pol.* I,7 1255b37–9) has long been recognized as insufficient.<sup>61</sup> Hereditary slavery is a non-starter (the practice being both exorbitantly expensive and socially frowned upon).<sup>62</sup> Indeed, in spite of Aristotle's frequent assertions that "human begets human" (ἄνθρωπος γὰρ ἄνθρωπον γεννᾷ, *Met.* XII,3 1070a28) and that "one human is not more 'human' than another" (οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ἕτερος ἐτέρου μᾶλλον ἄνθρωπος, *Cat.* V 3b39–4a1), his descriptions of natural slaves are so markedly different from everything else he says about humans that it is not only unclear who they are and whence they come, but also whether they could even be considered human.<sup>63</sup>

This brief overview demonstrates why so many find Aristotle's "defense" of natural slaves "inconsistent and incoherent",<sup>64</sup> "peculiar and strained", even "a disaster".<sup>65</sup> Simply put, natural slaves "are not fully human" according to Aristotle's own criteria.<sup>66</sup> As a result, the consensus has been that the whole affair is uncharacteristically, insurmountably muddled, even "evidence of the mind-

<sup>58</sup> One might object that Aristotle says ἡ ἄρα μορφή φύσις (*Phys.* II,1 193b17). Yet μορφή in this case does not simply mean "physical appearance". More to the point, he reminds us frequently that things are defined according to work and capacity (e.g., πάντα δὲ τῷ ἔργῳ ὄρισται καὶ τῇ δυνάμει, *Pol.* I,2 1253a23); cf. BALME 1980; SHIELDS 1993.

<sup>59</sup> HARWOOD 2022, 118–119.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. LOCKWOOD 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. AMBLER 1987.

<sup>62</sup> More importantly, attributing an understanding of hereditary, dispositive traits to Aristotle would return us to the pre-modern racial-thinking anachronism already discussed.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *Phys.* II,1 193b8; II,2 194b13; II,7 198a26; III,2 202a11; WARD 2008.

<sup>64</sup> DOBBS 1994, 71.

<sup>65</sup> WILLIAMS 1993, 118, 115.

<sup>66</sup> ARNHART 1987, 54.

smashing force of cultural bias".<sup>67</sup> Yet these ostensible problems disappear if, rather than assuming the existence of natural slaves, one reads Aristotle as hypothesizing what would be necessary for natural slaves to exist. Thus, recently some commentators have argued that Aristotle's criteria for natural slaves are so damning as to constitute an empty set, a subtle recognition that slavery's actual practice is problematic, and even a subversive *argumentum ad absurdum* which exposes all slavery as *ipso facto* unjust.<sup>68</sup>

### 3.2 Comparing Natural Slaves with True nobles

If natural slaves flummox us due to their subhumanity, true nobles invert the problem due to their superhumanity. Superimposing the arguments from *On Noble Birth* onto the discussion, one can see this unappreciated inverse similarity:

1. A natural slave's limited λόγος is so irreversible that it compels their being ruled, thus defying the strict definition of just, shared rule.<sup>69</sup> Though Aristotle does not mention λόγος vis-à-vis true nobles, their preternatural excellence implies that their possession of λόγος is likewise so preternatural as to compel their ruling, thus defying the strict definition of just, shared rule.<sup>70</sup>
2. A natural slave's difference in ἔργον turns it into "living tool (which) seems to have very little that is human about it".<sup>71</sup> A true noble's preternatural excellence and fecundity turn it into an indefatigably effective being which seems to have very little that is human about it.
3. The natural slave's inherent incapacity for ἀρετή precludes it from potentialities constitutive of humans *qua* human, condemning them to be incapable of (a) complete φιλία with non-natural slaves (i.e., the distance between them makes complete φιλία impossible) or (b) achieving εὐδαιμονία (i.e., humanity's τέλος is inaccessible if a person's ἀρετή is irreparably dependent).<sup>72</sup>

<sup>67</sup> DOBBS 1994, 71. Cf. SIMPSON 2006 for an alternative account which regards natural slaves consistent.

<sup>68</sup> Respectively: AMBLER 1987; FRANK 2005; PANGLE 2013; TROTT 2019; HARWOOD 2022.

<sup>69</sup> HEATH 2008.

<sup>70</sup> While political justice involves both natural and conventional aspects (which themselves vary), and is based on Aristotle's overall discussion of justice in *EN* V,7 (LOCKWOOD 2005–2006), Aristotle defines it as that which is due among equals and thus as entailing shared rule; cf. *NE* V,6–7 1134b1–35; V,11 1138b5–18; *Pol.* II,2 1261a22–32; III,4 1277b13–16; III,9 1280a11–13; III,12 1282b16–17; also, SACHS 2012, 259–260; FRANK 2004, 93.

<sup>71</sup> GARNSEY 1996, 123; cf. DEVECKA 2013.

<sup>72</sup> Aristotle mentions the possibility of φιλία between slave and master. Yet given the natural slave's preclusion from ἀρετή (save in a limited and vicarious way through participation in

The true noble's inherent possession of ἀρετή guarantees it the potentialities constitutive of humans *qua* human, predestining them to be incapable of (a) complete φιλία with non-true nobles (i.e., the distance between them makes complete φιλία impossible) or (b) failing to achieve happiness (i.e., humanity's τέλος is unavoidable if a person's ἀρετή is total).<sup>73</sup>

True nobles and natural slaves are inverse mirror-images of each other, extremes which either vastly exceed or woefully fall short of what otherwise defines humanity. Their differences from regular humans are so extreme that one must question whether Aristotle's criteria preclude them from inclusion in the same kind, or whether he believes that such "natural/true" kinds exist.

Indeed, in the only passage in Aristotle's corpus wherein he directly compares all five groups – natural and actual slaves, true and conventional nobles, and everyone else – he all but encourages these suspicions. At *Pol.* I,5–6 1255a1–b3, Aristotle packs a tremendous amount of significance into a deceptively brief bit of text, calling out the conventional separation of the two groups (actual slaves and actual nobles), highlighting the essential differences which separate the other three kinds (natural slaves, true nobles, and regular folks), and emphasizing the misconception of mistaking the most high-born for the most low-born. Thus, we will spend some time unpacking this passage.

Noting that some maintain a strict separation between slaves, nobles, and everyone else, Aristotle interprets this as an implicit recognition of the difference between regular folks and "the natural slave of which we spoke at the beginning", as opposed to the difference between actual slaves and freepersons.<sup>74</sup> Then, unexpectedly, he creates a parallelism between this implicit recognition of the differences between natural slaves and actual slaves with the differences between true nobles and conventional nobles: "the same principle applies to nobility [...] there are two kinds of nobly-born [...] one absolute, the other relative" (*Pol.* I,6 1255a29–35).<sup>75</sup> Thus, he reminds us of the radical distance between actual slaves (who are called such equivocally) and natural slaves (whom

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that of their master) and their being defined as only a part of their master, they are incapable of complete friendship with either their master or another natural slave; cf. LOCKWOOD 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. *EN* VIII,7 1158b29–1159a12.

<sup>74</sup> Καίτοι ὅταν τοῦτο λέγωσιν, οὐθὲν ἄλλο ζητοῦσιν ἢ τὸ φύσει δοῦλον ὅπερ ἐξ ἀρχῆς εἴπομεν.

<sup>75</sup> Τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ τρόπον καὶ περὶ εὐγενείας [...] ὡς ὃν τι τὸ μὲν ἀπλῶς εὐγενὲς [...] τὸ δ' οὐκ ἀπλῶς.

he likens more to beasts than humans) by equating it with the equally radical distance between conventional nobles (who are called such equivocally) and true nobles (whom he likens more to gods than humans). Regular folks are separated out as different from both natural slaves and true nobles, whereas actual slaves and conventional nobles are no different from regular folks save in their (mis)fortune of being equivocally regarded as different. And, to solidify both the distance between truly different groups and the way in which human convention conflates true difference, he provides his most potent example of all: Helen of Troy being a slave.

Aristotle's invocation of Helen is thick with significance which would have been unmistakable for his contemporaries; ensuring that this is not lost on today's reader requires some exposition. First, as mentioned above, whenever Aristotle provides examples of such superlative individuals, he invariably avails of myths and fables. Helen is this and more: regardless of whether Aristotle's Athenian audience considered *The Iliad* history or mythology (or both), all would be aware of just how impossibly Other Helen was. She was not just the offspring of any god, but the king of the gods: Zeus. Traditions vary regarding whether her mother was Leda (a Spartan queen), or Nemesis (a terrifying goddess).<sup>76</sup> We misunderstand her as being superlatively attractive, whereas the ancients knew her to be literally terrifying. In her first appearance in *The Iliad*, the Trojan elders comment among themselves that she lays waste to civilizations by her very presence, men literally losing their minds and flinging themselves toward ruin, as she is as horrifying to look upon as a deathless goddess (*Il.* III,156-160). The word Homer uses is αἰνός (the poetic form for δεινός), and although not exclusively reserved for the horror felt in the presence of monsters and gods, it is a favorite description of the dread mortals and gods alike feel before Zeus.<sup>77</sup> This is an argument based in tradition rather than hyperbole based in rhetoric: just as Zeus could threaten chaos but instead maintains the cosmic order and ensures justice due to his horrifying power, so too Helen could threaten chaos but instead leads to the creation of human order due to her horrifying beauty.<sup>78</sup> In short, Helen is not just another example of unachievable god-like status.

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<sup>76</sup> BURKERT 1985, 185.

<sup>77</sup> LIDDELL - SCOTT - JONES 1996, 40, 374.

<sup>78</sup> Being the catalyst for the Oath of Tyndareus - the first νόμος binding mortal kings to one another - and "What holds democracy together is the Oath", LYCURG. *Or. in Leocr.* 79; cf. BURKERT 1985, 248-254.

She tops the list of most capital-O Others from which Aristotle can choose to illustrate his point.<sup>79</sup>

Second, the quote Aristotle chooses to invoke Helen could not be more appropriate. In this quote from Theodectes' lost tragedy *Helen* we hear the eponymous demigod expressing, simultaneously, that her lineage makes her "the most nobly-born" and yet some would dare treat her as the most lowly-born: "On both sides the issue of divine roots / Who would deign address me as servant?" (*Pol.* I,6 1255a37–38).<sup>80</sup> This stresses both just how august one should understand Aristotle's true nobles to be (read: on the level of Helen), and just how unjust actual slavery can be (read: on the level of calling a demigod a servant). The quote thus brilliantly illuminates his arguments that true nobles and natural slaves are persons categorically different from conventional nobles, actual slaves, and everybody else, and it is only through unjust convention and ignorant opinion that these categories are erroneously allocated.

Aristotle solidifies the significance of this passage as he brings it to a close. After reiterating that all this is an attempt to give an overview of the difference of opinion on such matters, he underlines the all-important distinction between what people say and what is. In the same breath, he remarks that people think "just as from human springs human and from beast springs beast, so also from a good man a good man", only to qualify immediately that "in fact, nature often wills to make this so, yet is not able" (*Pol.* I,6 1255b1–3).<sup>81</sup>

Rich as this passage may be, it brings to the fore a pair of paradoxes found at the heart of Aristotle's description of true nobles. When placed alongside the fragments from *On Noble Birth*, the passage also illustrates that these paradoxes bear uncanny similarity to perennial difficulties found at the heart of Aristotle's description of natural slaves. By referencing a demigod who is "on both sides the issue of divine roots", his invocation of Helen both echoes his description of the ἀρχηγός and reiterates the unresolved question of how true nobles could arise. And by attributing complete virtue to true nobles as their birthright while failing to provide an example of what this looks like – viz., though his mythical examples are superhuman, they hardly could be said to possess complete virtue in the Aristotelian sense – he underscores (rather than elides) the threat that hereditary virtue poses for his ethical theory overall. Thus, we will unpack

<sup>79</sup> Cf. BURKERT 1985, 203, 205.

<sup>80</sup> Θείων δ' ἀπ' ἀμφοῖν ἔκγονον ῥιζωμάτων / τίς ἂν προσεῖπεν ἀξιώσειν λάτριν.

<sup>81</sup> Ὡσπερ ἐξ ἀνθρώπου ἄνθρωπον καὶ ἐκ θηρίων γίνεσθαι θηρίον, οὕτω καὶ ἐξ ἀγαθῶν ἀγαθόν· ἡ δὲ φύσις βούλεται μὲν τοῦτο ποιεῖν πολλάκις, οὐ μέντοι δύναται.

these two paradoxes, finding that they are ultimately unresolvable and that they mirror problems long recognized in Aristotle's account of natural slavery.

By repeatedly availing of mythic tales to illustrate superhuman greatness, the *Politics* reminds us that the fragments repeatedly say that the superhuman ἀρχηγός is the *sine qua non* distinguishing true nobility from regular folks. Helen's being "the most nobly-born" is not hyperbolic but literal, as she comes from the highest ἀρχηγοί – if any parent could claim to be an ἀρχηγός, it would be a god (*Pol.* I,6 1255a26). Nevertheless, the origin of true nobles is only complicated by this observation. Specifically, there is no way to reconcile the origination of the ἀρχηγός itself. First, they present a paradoxical issue of heredity which is more daunting than the aforementioned quandary regarding whence natural slaves come to be. As stated above, what makes true nobles so distinct is their combination of preternatural ἀρετή (i.e., their preeminent excellence) and indefatigable δύναμις (i.e., their guaranteed preeminently excellent progeny). Both exceed that which defines humans *qua* human, and both require an ἀρχηγός as ancestor. That is, no one can claim noble birth lest all current and prior members of their γένος likewise can claim noble birth, going back to the ἀρχηγός. But the ἀρχηγός cannot themselves claim noble birth. If the definition of "noble birth" requires that the nobly born are themselves offspring of the nobly born, this either leads to infinite regress (noble birth extends back *ad infinitum*, so there cannot be an ἀρχηγός) or contradiction (the ἀρχηγός cannot claim "noble birth", so noble birth can never begin). Therefore, it is unclear how true nobles come to be – just like natural slaves.

Clues may be found in the pun contained in ἐγγένηται and the conspicuous use of brachylogy in the fourth fragment. Although both are common in ancient Greek, Aristotle may be using them here to indicate the logical problem created by the ἀρχηγός.<sup>82</sup> Regarding the first: since the ἀρχηγός cannot be "born into" a non-noble γένος, they must "intervene in" or "spring up in" a non-noble γένος. Of course, this points out rather than solves a problem which is not trivial. The sudden emergence of such a categorical greater arising from such a categorical lesser is anathema to Aristotelian biology.<sup>83</sup> Regarding the second: Aristotle's use of brachylogy comes closest to naming the problem concerning the origination of the ἀρχηγός outright, though the speaker immediately retreats from it. Read literally, it states, "Those are nobly born if they are from such a family – not if

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<sup>82</sup> Cf. SMYTH 1956, 674–677 (§§ 3017–3018).

<sup>83</sup> Cf. FRITSCHÉ 1997, 189, n. 21.

their father was 'nobly born,' but if the ἀρχηγός of the γένος." Brachylogy tells us to complete the sentence by ending with "was", even with "was nobly born". But the refusal of the speaker to state this directly makes brachylogy in this case all-too-conspicuous: the speaker cannot say that the ἀρχηγός "was nobly born", because the ἀρχηγός cannot be "nobly born". Indeed, this may even provide an additional reason for Aristotle's always availing to god-spawned heroes when providing examples of such superhuman persons. It may be that the only way one can avoid the logic problem presented by the ἀρχηγός is to postulate that true noble families are sired by the gods.<sup>84</sup> Or, if such tales are not to be believed – let alone to be the foundation of important socio-political structures – then these logical inconsistencies found at the heart of the texts' arguments may indicate that all this is purely hypothetical. So much for the origin of the ἀρχηγός: it appears to be unresolved, and unresolvable.

As for the second paradox regarding virtue, it is arguably even more irreconcilable. If true nobility is proven experientially by the shared preeminent excellence of every member of the γένος, then ἀρετή is their birthright. This guaranteed possession of virtue is practically unique in Aristotle's corpus and thereby presses one to inquire which virtue is indicated. It seems impossible that it is moral virtue. Aristotle's ethical works are almost unanimous that moral virtue is only possible via specific conditions (e.g., habituation over time through repeated virtuous acts, etc.), and although subject to chance (e.g., being born destitute or experiencing profound misfortunes can preclude or forestall its development), it is nonsensical to assume its possession from birth.<sup>85</sup> It seems similarly impossible that it is political virtue. Aristotle's political works are almost unanimous that political virtue is only possible via specific conditions (e.g., shared rule in a proper household and polis, etc.), and although subject to chance (e.g., being

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<sup>84</sup> FRITSCHÉ 1997, 188–189, interprets the ἀρχηγός as representing the ἀρχή within each noble which guarantees their excellence: "[T]he different families become the different biological species and the more universal genera which then can be treated in syllogistic logic [...] The species precisely never *incipit*. For, whenever it begins anew, it has already begun without the originary moment of inception (though, of course, the originator begins in a mythological time which need not coincide with any empirical time)." Rather than solving the problem, this replaces it with two more: complicating our understanding of the work ἀρχή does in Aristotle's corpus and fragmenting our conception of Aristotle's definition of "different biological species".

<sup>85</sup> The most explicit statements occur at *EN* II,1 1103a17–b5 and II,5 1106a2–10; cf. GRCIC 2019 for why this cannot be explained via divine or natural good luck (εὐτυχία) à la *EE* VIII,2 1246b37–1248b7.



born a barbarian or experiencing profound misfortunes can preclude or forestall its development), it is likewise nonsensical to assume its possession from birth.<sup>86</sup> But if it is neither moral nor political, what virtue is intended?

The answer is found in the caveat “almost”. Aristotle’s ethico-political works are almost adamant against preternatural claims regarding ethical and political virtue – save in the monstrous cases of the subhuman natural slave and the superhuman *παμβασιλεύς* / “God-among-humans”. The latter possesses moral and political virtue infallibly, whereas the former lacks moral and political virtue irremediably. The true noble’s possession of these virtues confuses because it inversely mirrors that debated for centuries regarding the natural slave’s preclusion from these virtues.<sup>87</sup> The confusion arises because what Aristotle says about these specific individuals seems so different in kind from what he says about all other humans. The solution may be that true nobles and natural slaves are not real members of the same kind as humans, but rather hypothetical investigations into that which would be required for either institution to be true/natural (rather than equivocal / by convention). Remove the assumption that all three groups need be classified under the same natural kind, and their monstrous qualities – i.e., true nobles’ exceeding and natural slaves’ falling short of the rest of humanity – cease to be a problem.

Unlike the case with natural slaves, the fragments are mostly silent regarding the true noble’s *ἔργον* and *λόγος* – save for the odd claim that the *ἔργον* of an *ἀρχή* is “to make a multitude like itself”. Nevertheless, given their universal possession of *ἀρετή*, one may speculate both that all true nobles possess seemingly infallible *λόγος* and thereby can perform the *ἔργον* proper to their *γένος*. Again, if one assumes they are real members of the natural kind human, then this sounds absurd – and one must correct or reject Aristotle’s descriptions. Yet if one wishes to take the fragments seriously, then they describe true nobles as so different from the rest of humanity as to appear hypothetical – inversely mirroring the precedent of Aristotle’s hypothetical natural slaves.

In fact, noble birth is astonishingly more capable of manifestation and preservation than the essential traits of other kinds – be it natural slaves, humans *qua* human, or any natural kind. Aristotle says that every natural kind is subject to nature’s caprice, as individuals are subject to material conditions arising from

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<sup>86</sup> E.g., *Pol.* I,6 1255b1–5; VII,1 1323b27–29.

<sup>87</sup> Natural slaves lacking access to virtue has been considered sufficient to render the argument for their existence unsound, be it moral (even if they can approach it vicariously through their masters; cf. LOCKWOOD 2007) or political (*tout court*; cf. TROTT 2019, 175–192).

congenital (dis)advantages and subsequent (mis)fortune.<sup>88</sup> By contrast, true nobles need not strive to cultivate ἀρετή or achieve their τέλος – unlike every other natural kind, they are preternaturally ἐντελής, “complete”.<sup>89</sup> Striking as this sounds, it again inversely mirrors natural slaves: they cannot strive to cultivate ἀρετή (save vicariously, though this is fraught with confusion) or achieve their τέλος – unlike every other natural kind, they are irreversibly ἀτελής, “incomplete”.<sup>90</sup>

Finally, attempting to read Aristotle's descriptions as prescriptions is as impracticable for true nobility as it is for natural slavery. No Athenian noble family could withstand the scrutiny entailed by the fragments, as any family member's falling short of supernatural excellence would dissolve every family member's claim to nobility. Again, this inversely mirrors natural slaves: virtually every actual slave would need to be manumitted if Athens were to implement Aristotle's natural version. If taking Aristotle's natural slaves seriously threatens to unravel “the more fundamental political question of the naturalness of the polis, and hence of

<sup>88</sup> E.g., *EN* I,8–9 1099b2–1100a9. At *EN* I,8 1099b3–7, Aristotle describes noble birth as an external good similar to wealth, political influence, attractiveness, etc. This is an example of noble birth by convention: given it is one of a list of conventional goods (rather than natural or true), given their possession is subject to fortune (rather than preternatural), and given they are described as either conditions of achieving εὐδαιμονία or instrumental goods (whereas true nobility seems to require ones accomplishment of their τέλος), Aristotle cannot intend true nobility here; cf. LEUNISSEN 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Or ἐντελέχεια, yet even this “three-ring circus” of a neologism coined by Aristotle contains the requirement that everything is a better or worse example of its own kind only “by the continuing effort of holding on in that condition” whereby it is always already working toward its τέλος (SACHS 2002, 203); true nobles break this requirement by always already being ἐντελής.

<sup>90</sup> GARVER 1994, 175; cf. LOCKWOOD 2007. LEUNISSEN 2017 argues forcefully and convincingly that Aristotle's ethico-political works cannot fully be understood in isolation from his biological and metaphysical works. In particular, she emphasizes that character is fundamentally a result of material conditions rather than being embedded in the formal being of the thing (“not once does [Aristotle] explain character in terms of the definition of an animal”, p. xxii). Thus, it is nonsensical to discuss humans' – or non-humans' – character outside of considering the external factors which affect such moral luck in the creation of character; these environmental factors include both physical conditions (e.g., temperature is causally related to temperament) and socio-political ones (e.g., being educated in a certain way, being able to participate in a particular kind of polis), as the latter “completes human beings in a way that cannot be achieved by nature alone, but that also cannot be achieved by going against human nature” (LEUNISSEN 2017, xxiv–xxv; cf. *Pol.* VII,17, 1336b40–1337a3; *EE* VII,2, 1237a2–3). LEUNISSEN 2017 thus supports our paper, as natural slaves and true nobles are the exceptions which prove the rule: their diametrically-opposed characters are inviolable by definition, rendering them immune to the (dis)favorable external, environmental factors which otherwise continuously determine all others.

practical life overall”,<sup>91</sup> then Aristotle’s true nobles pose no less of an existential threat to Athenian νόμοι and self-understanding. The operative word here is “if”. Alternatively, if one reads Aristotle’s descriptions as hypothetical investigations into what would be required to make unjust, arbitrary, and equivocal customs into just, natural, and true ones, then the explicit threat to Athenian life melts alongside the difficulties found in both accounts – though their status as implicit critiques of unjust, arbitrary, equivocal νόμοι remains intact, even inevitable.

### Conclusion

Although hitherto mostly ignored by scholars, interpretations of *On Noble Birth* will likely follow the same two approaches as prior interpretations of Aristotle’s natural slaves.<sup>92</sup> On the one hand, there is the longstanding tradition that, when it comes to slavery, Aristotle’s otherwise keen mind is incapable of overcoming his times. Recognizing the actual institution of slavery as random and unjust, he attempts to construct a just, natural alternative. Even granting him the enormous grace required to see this as well-intended (if woefully naïve and subsequently appropriated by racists), he neither could discover a practicable alternative nor could he uncouple its ostensible necessity for the polis.<sup>93</sup> This interpretive lens is easily applied to the fragments of *On Noble Birth*. Recognizing the actual institution of nobility as random and equivocal, he attempts to construct a true, natural alternative. Even if defending nobility strikes us as less insidious than defending slavery (insofar as it does not echo the global catastrophe of white supremacy), it still props up an arbitrary social, economic, and political structure which unjustly stratifies society up to the present. As with slavery, he neither could discover a practicable, true alternative nor could he uncouple its ostensible necessity for the polis. In short, the oddities found within both accounts are explained via *ad hominem*: natural slaves and true nobles are “incoherent”, and the whole thing is correctly “catalogued as evidence of the mind-smashing force of cultural bias”.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> GARVER 1994, 175.

<sup>92</sup> This division is for convenience; as stated above, the commentary on natural slaves is vast, including some who argue its overall coherence, e.g., SIMPSON 2006.

<sup>93</sup> For white supremacists’ – particularly in the United States – appropriation of Aristotle in defense of racist-projects, cf. WISH 1949; WIESEN 1976; for why this fails, cf. BOXILL 2001; TAYLOR 2003; LOCKWOOD 2021; HARWOOD 2023.

<sup>94</sup> DOBBS 1994, 71.

On the other hand, some interpret the very incoherence of natural slavery as evidence that Aristotle is arguing against its practice; *mutatis mutandis*, the same interpretation can be applied to true nobility. If the subhumanity of natural slaves belies any argument for actual slavery, then the superhumanity of true nobles belies any argument for actual nobility. Natural slaves are so “incoherent” that “we are forced to wonder whether Aristotle is teasing us a bit”.<sup>95</sup>

By detailing that which would be required to make these socio-political structures just, it is the character of Aristotle’s defense of natural slavery to defend an institution that is scarcely similar to actual slavery; insofar as political and domestic institutions ought to be strictly natural, such a defense is also an attack.<sup>96</sup>

One could easily replace “natural slavery” here with “true nobility”. Indeed, if either interpretation has credibility, then it supports the other: reading Aristotle as penning a hypothetical alternative to an actual institution which fails so spectacularly that it belies said institution is much more believable if one finds him doing it repeatedly. By arguing that slavery is only just if it entails enslavement of demonstrably subhuman individuals, his indictment of actual slavery is unavoidable. By arguing that nobility is only true if it entails ennoblement of demonstrably superhuman individuals, his indictment of actual nobility is likewise unavoidable. Rather than being the victim of contemporary prejudices, Aristotle may be critiquing them.

Faced with these options, we side *a fortiori* with the latter. And, at the risk of reintroducing *ad hominem* considerations after having just exorcised them, they fit with what we know of Aristotle’s life. What else should one expect of a metic, who has strong Macedonian ties and lives in Athens during a time of extreme anti-Macedonian sentiment, who has a history of flouting social conventions – including his marriage to Pythia (who was from a family of former slaves), his subsequent relationship with Herpyllis (who was either his slave-*cum*-concubine or his slave-*cum*-wife), and culminating in his unabashed deification of his late friend Hermias (the barbarian-slave-*cum*-king, who was the subject of Aristotle’s only known poetic paean) which resulted in his indictment and flight from Athens?<sup>97</sup> What else would one expect of someone with this history

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<sup>95</sup> AMBLER 1987, 397.

<sup>96</sup> AMBLER 1987, 400.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. NATALI – HUTCHINSON 2013, 37, 60–64; HARWOOD 2022, 107–108, 111, n. 42, 117, n. 80; HARWOOD 2023.

who recognizes the arbitrariness and injustice of long-standing Athenian traditions? Prudence would demand that he organize any written critique of such traditions in a manner that allows for plausible deniability; e.g., by penning ostensible “defenses” of these institutions, which – by hypothesizing a natural or true alternative that results in an empty set – thereby illustrate the arbitrary injustice and equivocal nature of their actual practice. Such a reading of Aristotle’s problematic “defense” of natural slaves has only recently received much attention, partially due to it attributing rhetorical subtlety to Aristotle’s writing – a position shunned by many scholars today, though encouraged by antiquity.<sup>98</sup> Taking the fragments from *On Noble Birth* seriously renders this reading much more plausible.

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<sup>98</sup> Cicero remarks that if Plato’s prose is silver, Aristotle’s is a river of gold; CIC. *Ac.* II,38,119 = *Luc.* 119 (cf. PLUT. *Cic.* 24,3).

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## Summary

Although the commentary on Aristotle's problematic discussion of slavery is vast, his discussion of nobility receives little attention. The fragments of his dialogue *On Noble Birth* constitute his most extensive examination of nobility, and while their similarity to the *παμβασιλεύς* of the *Politics* has recently been recognized, their relevance to natural slavery has hitherto gone unnoticed. Yet by declaring that true nobles – particularly the god-like *ἀρχηγός* – preternaturally possess superhuman characteristics, Aristotle precludes their easy inclusion in the kind “human” in a manner inversely mirroring the preternatural subhumanity of natural slaves. Building on recent scholarship which argues that Aristotle's “defense” of natural slaves is better understood as an indictment, *On Noble Birth* becomes most coherent if read as a hypothetical investigation into what would be required for “nobility” to name something true rather than equivocal, with the conclusion that “true nobility” is an empty set.

Keywords: Aristotle's dialogues; Aristotle's fragments; Aristotle's politics; *On Noble Birth*; *Peri eugeneias*

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