Aristotle’s *Politics* on Greeks and non-Greeks[[1]](#footnote-1)

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ABSTRACT: Scholars of race in antiquity commonly claim that Aristotle holds proto-racist views about βάρβαροι or non-Greeks. But a careful examination of Aristotle’s remarks in his *Politics* about slavery, non-Greek political institutions, and Greek and non-Greek natural qualities calls into question such claims. No doubt, Aristotle held views at odds with modern liberalism, such as defenses of gender subordination and the exploitation of slave and non-slave labor. But claims that Aristotle holds proto-racist views are regularly but erroneously asserted without careful consideration of relevant textual evidence. My article argues that Aristotle neither categorically distinguishes Greeks and non-Greeks nor does he endorse the claim that Greeks are categorically superior to non-Greeks. Indeed, Aristotle regularly draws upon non-Greek political institutions in his own formulation of the best constitution and he praises the non-Greek constitution of Carthage as superior to that of Greek constitutions such as Sparta and Crete.

KEY-WORDS: Aristotle, *Politics*, Carthage, barbarian, slavery, racism

In the last few decades, scholars have laudably re-examined the beliefs of canonical figures in the history of political thought concerning the subject of race. Figures such as Plato, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill have been re-evaluated, both positively and negatively, in light of their views about race and racism.[[2]](#footnote-2) Less laudable, though, is the often repeated claim that Aristotle viewed all βάρβαροι or non-Greeks as inherently inferior to Greeks and thus were “slaves by nature” on racial grounds.[[3]](#footnote-3) Two recent studies of race in antiquity take such a view as needing no further argument: for instance, Denise Eileen McCoskey asserts that Aristotle “proposed that barbarians, as opposed to Greeks, were inherently servile” and Erik Jensen claims that Aristotle “defined all barbarians as natural slaves fit to be ruled over by Greeks.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Such comments imply that Aristotle believes both that Greeks and non-Greeks are categorically distinct and that Greeks are categorically superior to non-Greeks. Characterizing those claims in terms of race is complicated: although modern notions of race are based on purported laws of hereditary descent and biologically distinct groups, scholars in antiquity usually based group characteristics on climate or geography.[[5]](#footnote-5) Nonetheless, many modern scholars follow Benjamin Isaac and claim that Aristotle’s views can be characterized as “proto-racist” on the grounds that “climate and geography rather than genetics are said to determine group characteristics.”[[6]](#footnote-6) My article will follow Isaac’s locution and examine whether Aristotle held “proto-racist” views, namely categorical claims about groups within humankind and their inherent inferiority or superiority.

At the core of Isaac’s account of proto-racism is the claim that “individuality is ignored…Large groups of peoples, indeed entire nations, are believed to have common characteristics determined by factors outside themselves, which are, by implication, unchangeable” (74). Mariska Leunissen and Malcolm Heath present the most exegetically sophisticated version of this view in the case of Aristotle’s writing. Although both correctly assert that Aristotle espouses an environmental rather than a biological account of group characteristics, Heath implies that non-Greeks who are not natural slaves would be an exception to a general rule and Leunissen claims that the only hope for a young non-Greek male to avoid becoming a natural slave is to change his address and undergo a lot of extra ethical conditioning.[[7]](#footnote-7) But Aristotle’s theory of the slave by nature actually is a doctrine about individual rather than group characteristics; whatever its faults, Aristotle’s theory of the slave by nature has no basis in a theory of group traits. The views of Leunissen and Heath also conflict with the variability Aristotle ascribes to the differences between Greeks and non-Greeks and the praise he offers of non-Greek political institutions, especially the constitution of Carthage, which *The Politics* praises as superior to the Greek constitutions of Sparta and Crete.

Scholars who ascribe proto-racist views to Aristotle also neglect the work of scholars who have called into question the “porousness” of his distinction between Greeks and non-Greeks. Most prominently, Julia Ward, Jill Frank and Mary Dietz have argued that Aristotle, a Macedonian by birth who bridges aspects of Greek and non-Greek identity, rejects such categorical distinctions in his accounts of non-Greeks.[[8]](#footnote-8) Numerous Aristotle scholars have also raised questions about the extent to which his account of the slave by nature in the first Book of the *Politics* undermines 4th century conventional slavery in Greek city states like Athens, which in practice predominantly enslaved non-Greeks.[[9]](#footnote-9) Nonetheless, many scholars who write about Aristotle’s *Politics* have neglected his account of environmental group effects.[[10]](#footnote-10) The reading of Aristotle as proto-racist is misguided but understandable because many of Aristotle’s defenders, such as Frank and Dietz, fail to acknowledge adequately the environmental factors emphasized by Leunissen, even if Leunissen herself ultimately exaggerates the effect of these factors.[[11]](#footnote-11)

My article argues that a careful examination of Aristotle’s discussions of slavery, autocratic government, non-Greek natural characteristics, and non-Greek political institutions undermines the claim that Aristotle held proto-racist views.[[12]](#footnote-12) What emerges from my article is a much more nuanced view of Aristotle’s distinction between Greeks and non-Greeks, as it is articulated throughout all discussions of the distinction in the *Politics*.[[13]](#footnote-13) On the one hand, Aristotle explicitly characterizes some (but not all) Greek and non-Greek societies as slavish or politically “primitive.” On the other hand, Aristotle also characterizes the political institutions of some (but not all) non-Greek societies, especially those of Carthage, as superlatively good. But such a nuanced view is incompatible with the claim that Aristotle holds proto-racist views about all Greeks and non-Greeks.

In order to refute the claim that Aristotle holds proto-racist views about all Greeks and non-Greeks, my article first examines those passages that scholars have identified that allegedly ground such a distinction. Thus, in the first part of my article I examine *Politics* 1.2.1252a30-b9, where Aristotle claims that non-Greeks lack a naturally ruling element. In the second part of my article, I examine *Politics* 3.14.1285a16-27, where Aristotle discusses “non-Greek kingship” and claims that some non-Greeks are more slavish than Greeks. In the third part of my article, I examine *Politics* 7.7.1327b20-33, where Aristotle discusses the natural characteristics of Greeks, Asians, and Europeans. Together, the first three parts of my article undermine the claim that Aristotle embraces a clear, categorical distinction between Greeks and non-Greeks. In the fourth and final part of my article, I examine Aristotle’s praise of non-Greek political institutions, especially those of 4th century Carthage. Such praise seems difficult to reconcile with the claim that Aristotle embraces any sort of proto-racism.

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2. See, for instance, Rebecca LeMoine, Plato’s Caves: The Liberating Sting of Cultural Diversity (Oxford University Press, 2020); Thomas Hill and Bernard Boxill, “Kant and Race,” in *Race and Racism*, ed. B. Boxill (Oxford University Press, 2001), 448-471; and Mark Tunick, “Tolerant Imperialism: John Stuart Mill’s Defense of British Rule in India,” *Review of Politics* 68, no. 4 (2006): 586-611. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Such a view already finds its proponents in antiquity: Plutarch, in his *On the Fortune of Alexander* (I.6), reports that Aristotle counseled his student Alexander to rule Greeks in the fashion of a ruler (ἡγεμονικῶς), but non-Greeks in the fashion of a master (δεσποτικῶς). The Greek term βάρβαρος (and the cognate term βαρβαρικός) is contested both in Aristotle’s time and in our own; I will translate the term throughout my article as “non-Greek.” See further Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian. Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Erich S. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); and most recently Thomas Harrison, “Reinventing the Barbarian,” *Classical Philology* 115, no. 2 (2020): 139-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Denise Eileen McCoskey, *Race. Antiquity and its Legacy* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 24; Erik Jensen, *Barbarians in the Greek and Roman World* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2018), 69. Non-Aristotle specialists echo the view. For instance, Jonathan Wolff, in his recent *Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), claims that Aristotle believes that “non-Greeks have lower powers of deliberative rationality than Greeks, and they are more likely to be ruled by their bodily appetites. Non-Greeks are therefore not suited to the same level of freedom and should become slaves of Greeks” (228). Other scholars who claim that Aristotle categorically distinguishes Greeks and non-Greeks include Vincent Rosivach, “Enslaving ‘Barbaroi’ and the Athenian Ideology of Slavery,” *Historia* 48, no. 2 (1999): 129-157; Fulcran Teisserenc, “La question barbare: Platon ou Aristote?” *Revue de philosophie ancienne* 32, no. 1 (2014): 87-128; and Johannes Fritsche, “Aristotle’s Biological Justification of Slavery in *Politics* I,” *Rhizomata* 7, no. 1 (2019): 63-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. McCoskey, *Race*, 23-34, surveys the difficulties of ascribing a non-biological concept of race to Greek and Roman authors. Although Fritsche, “Aristotle’s Biological Justification of Slavery” ascribes to Aristotle a biological notion of race (73-75), the scholarly consensus is that such a claim is mistaken. See, for instance, Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 70-73; Julia Ward, “*Ethnos* in the *Politics*: Aristotle and Race,” in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, eds. Julia Ward and Tommy Lott (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2007), 20-23; and Mariska Leunissen, *From Natural Character to Moral Virtue in Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5 n.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 74. Although one may distinguish racialism, the doctrine that there are biologically distinct groups, and racism, the doctrine that biologically distinct groups can be evaluated as inferior and superior, I will use the terms “proto-racist” and “proto-racism” to include both claims (see further Francisco Bethencourt, *Racisms. From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014], 271-275). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Malcolm Heath, “Aristotle on Natural Slavery,” *Phronesis* 53, no. 3 (2008): 245 n. 6 and Leunissen, *From Natural* Character, 53-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ward, “*Ethnos* in the *Politics*”; Jill Frank, *A Democracy of Distinction: Aristotle on the Work of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 26-32; Mary G. Dietz, “Between Polis and Empire: Aristotle’s *Politics*,” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 283-285. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Wayne Ambler, “Aristotle on Nature and Politics: The Case of slavery,” *Political Theory* 15, no. 3 (1987): 390–410; Frank, *Democracy of Distinction*, 30-31; Dietz, “Between Polis and Empire,” 284-285; Kevin M. Cherry, “Does Aristotle Believe Greeks Should Rule Barbarians?” History of Political Thought 35, no. 4 (2014): 632-655; and D. Nah, “Aristotle as Realist Critic of Slavery,” *History of Political Thought* 39, no. 3 (2018): 399-421. Cherry, “Does Aristotle Believe,” 632-633, catalogs the views of the previous generation of Aristotle scholars on this question. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Exceptions to this claim include Ward, “*Ethnos* in the *Politics*,” 20-23; Leunissen, *From Natural Character*, 45-48; D. Lefebvre, “La puissance du *thumos* en *Politiques* VII, 7,” in *Politique d’Aristote. Famille, régimes, éducation*, eds.. Emmanuel Bermon, Valéry Laurand, and Jean Terrel (Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2011), 105-138; and Laetitia Monteils-Laeng, “Aristote croit-il au déterminisme environnemental ? Les Grecs, les esclaves et les barbares (*Pol*. VII, 7),” *Polis* 36, no. 1 (2019) : 40-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I am quite grateful to an anonymous referee for the *Review of Politics* for helping me articulate these patterns in scholarship on Aristotle’s *Politics*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Aristotle also recognizes non-Greek intellectual achievements, such as the Egyptian invention of mathematics (*Meta* 1.1.981b13-25) and Babylonian achievements in astronomy (*De Caelo* 2.12.292a7-9; cf. 1.3.270b6-10), that undermine the claim that he views non-Greeks as uniformly primitive. In several places Aristotle recommends “periegetic literature,” namely that of travelers who can attest to non-Greek customs (e.g., *Rhet* 1.4.1360a30-8, *Pol* 2.3.1262a18-21). The *Vita Menagiana* reports that Aristotle authored a single volume on νὸμιμα βαρβαρικά (Rose 18/Gigon 26). See further Mor Segev, “Aristotle on the Intellectual Achievements of Foreign Civilizations” (unpublished). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Although I arrive at conclusions similar to Cherry, “Does Aristotle Believe,” and Ward, “*Ethnos* in the *Politics*,” my article goes beyond their more localized claims. Cherry focuses primarily on Aristotle’s treatment of Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis* and Ward is ultimately concerned with Aristotle’s contrast between the terms ἔθνος and πόλις. Neither article examines in detail all of Aristotle’s references to non-Greeks in the *Politics* nor his discussion of non-Greek political institutions. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)