

Aristotle's *Politics* on Greeks and non-Greeks¹

Forthcoming in *Review of Politics*

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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

¹ I am grateful to audiences at the Université de Montréal, the Institut d'études scientifiques de Cargèse, and the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy for feedback on earlier versions of this article, especially from Laetitia Monteils-Laeng, Mor Segev, Pierre Pellegrin, David Lefebvre, Monte Johnson, Catherine Dalimier, Erica Holberg, John Thorpe, Andrew Payne, and J.J. Mulhern. I am especially grateful for the constructive criticism of three anonymous referees from the *Review of Politics* and its editor, Dr. Abbey.

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 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 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 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

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.

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.

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.

distinct groups, scholars in antiquity usually based group characteristics on climate or geography.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 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.

[Full paper forthcoming in *Review of Politics*.]

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.

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).