

DRAFT (JULY 2021): FORTHCOMING IN BRYN MAWR CLASSICAL REVIEW

Pierre Pellegrin, Anthony Preus (trans.), *Endangered excellence: on the political philosophy of Aristotle*. SUNY series in Ancient Greek Philosophy. Albany: State University of New York, 2020. Pp. 432. ISBN 9781438479576. \$95.00.

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[Preview](#)

Pierre Pellegrin has devoted his scholarly life to the understanding of Aristotle the political philosopher, Aristotle the life-scientist, and—perhaps most importantly—Aristotle the analyst of life-science who is also a political philosopher. Like D. M. Balme, Allan Gotthelf, and James Lennox—Pellegrin is one of the foremost scholars who has sought to understand Aristotle’s biological writings in a philosophically and philologically sophisticated fashion. Pellegrin is also one of the foremost scholars who has sought to understand the intersection between Aristotle’s biological studies and his other works, especially the ethical/political writings, like current scholars such as Sophia Connell, Mariska Leunissen, and Adriel M. Trott. The volume under-review, Anthony Preus’ translation of Pellegrin’s *L'Excellence menacée: Sur la philosophie politique d'Aristote* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017, [reviewed by J.J. Mulhern for BMCR](#)) is especially welcome because it brings together in one volume—ably rendered into English by Preus—analytical threads that Pellegrin has pursued in a number of independent essays on topics such as natural teleology and the *Politics*, slavery, the composition of the *Politics*, the nature of political friendship, and the structure and diversity of Aristotelian constitutions.

In general, *Endangered Excellence* is organized to follow the discussions in Aristotle’s *Politics*. After opening (and closing) “bookends” (i.e., an introduction and conclusion) that frame Pellegrin’s study within the context of Foucauldian reflections on continuities and discontinuities in the history of science and in classical studies more generally, the book’s first chapter examines the context and background information necessary for understanding Aristotle’s *Politics* (such as Aristotle’s historical and epistemological context, his view of the relationship between ethics and politics, or the audience that he presupposes for his works in practical philosophy). Chapters 2 and 3 examine aspects of *Politics* Book 1 (Aristotle’s account of the naturalness of the polis, slavery, and the household), while Chapter 4 examines aspects of *Politics* Book 3 (Aristotle’s account of citizenship, constitutional taxonomy, and partisan disagreement about justice). Chapters 5-7 explore *Politics* Books 4-6 (the so-called “realist books,” the characterization of which Pellegrin rightly contests), and Chapter 8 examines Aristotle’s remarks about the material conditions of the “best constitution,” namely those articulated in *Politics* 7-8.¹

¹ Pellegrin affirms the traditional ordering of the books within the *Politics* as exhibiting the following “Aristotelian logic”: Book 1 affirms the specificity of political power (or rule) through its juxtaposition with non-political power (namely, that of the household, especially in the case of the master). Book 3 posits political (or polis-related) definitions of a citizen, constitutions, and their differentiation, especially between correct and deviant forms. Books 4-6 provide a political

Thus, although *Endangered Excellence* generally follows the structure of the *Politics*, I find in it a deeper organization into three parts (to be clear, my superimposition rather than something that Pellegrin explicitly states). Part I (chapters 1-3) articulates an account about the relationship between ethics, politics, and natural teleology that explains the presuppositions of and relationships between the claims that the polis exists by nature and that man is a political animal by nature, who finds his completion or well-being (when he does) within a polis. Part II (chapters 4-5) provides a sort of pivot that illustrates Aristotle's complex interweaving of "normative" and "realist" accounts of politics—namely, accounts of how the constitution of a polis can ideally improve its citizens and accounts of how any polis (correct or deviant) can perpetuate and stabilize its constitutional structure. Part III (chapters 6-8) explores politics from the perspective of the "good legislator, that is the true statesman" (*Pol.* 4.1.1288b27; quoted at 271, 281), terms I will explicate below. Thus, Pellegrin—while following the structure of the *Politics*—offers a reflection on the goal of the polis, the ways in which that goal is practical and normative, and how that goal should inform the specific audience of the *Politics*, namely those individuals looking to stabilize, preserve, and improve the constitutions of their political communities. In the remaining space of my review, let me selectively highlight (alas) only some of the thought-raising and compelling observations Pellegrin makes about Aristotle's *Politics*.

Chapter 2 ("A Biological Politics") examines in detail Aristotle's claims that the polis exists by nature and that man is a political animal by nature. Although Pellegrin devotes substantial energy to illustrating precisely how Aristotle's natural teleology (and one of its central principles that "nature does nothing in vain" [*Pol.* 1.2.1253a10, cf. 1252b2]) works, he is also concerned with refuting the claim that Aristotle articulates a doctrine similar to sociobiology, namely one that claims that "ethical and social values [are] nothing more than adaptive values that operate in disguise" (68; cf. 93). According to Pellegrin, sociobiology gets the Aristotelian explanatory order backwards. Contrary to sociobiology, Aristotle denies that humans are social only in order to promote their own advantage; rather, according to Pellegrin, Aristotle believes that

By nature, man has a political tendency, that is a tendency to lead, if nothing prevents...the life of a citizen. This life of a citizen is, in fact, advantageous for a person, notably in that it alone can assure him complete happiness. It therefore conforms to the Aristotelian conception of teleological Nature that this Nature gives people adequate means for realizing this natural tendency. This means is the city. That is enough to assure the naturalness of the city. Thus it is man, in that he confronts the project of becoming happy, who demands the city, just as fish, because they confront the task of surviving in water, call for natural means of moving easily in this medium, namely, fins. (91)

analysis of power "in all its forms," but always with an eye towards the goal of establishing an excellent constitution (*contra* those who claim they are one-sided "realist" or Machiavellian books). Finally, Pellegrin claims that books 7-8 provide a "pre-political" or "non-political" account of the "matter" (i.e., location, population, fortifications) of an excellent constitution, but an account that is equally relevant to legislators improving any constitution (370-371).

At least since the 1990s, there has been a tendency in Aristotle scholarship to read the claim that the city exists by nature as an alternative to constructivists/contractarians like Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, or Rawls. Pellegrin quite rightly refocuses us away from such anachronistic contrasts and back to the doctrines of life-science that informs Aristotle's *Politics*.

Chapter 4 and 5 ("Citizen, City, Constitution," and "On the Positive Use of Deviance") include extended reflection on what Pellegrin terms "the dichotomy...between normative and realist politics" (171). Pellegrin flagged the issue in the first chapter by noting that in the *Politics* there are a

whole group of passages that reveal simultaneously [Aristotle's] ability to analyze political situations and to offer advice for those situations with a pragmatism that is sometimes frankly Machiavellian. But on the other hand, the entire politics of Aristotle, like that of Plato, rests on the distinction between correct and deviant regimes. (49)

Pellegrin's general view is that attempts to characterize parts of the *Politics* as either normative or realist is ultimately a false dichotomy—and his discussion of Aristotle's definition of the citizen, as one who "has the ability to participate in deliberative or judicial power" (*Pol.* 3.1.1275b18, cited at 177) illustrates the point well. On the one hand, "citizenship is the culmination of humanness, because a human being has not fully developed his concept until he is a citizen" (174). In other words, since sharing in the life of a city is the means by which a human achieves his end, a definition of what it means to share in that life—namely, to deliberate collectively about what that city should do and serve on law courts that inspect the magistrates who execute those decisions—is an inherently normative concept. But on the other hand, "Aristotle's answer [to the question of the status of those who do not deserve to be citizens] is clear and direct: just as a person who performs as a magistrate is a magistrate, no matter how he obtained this function, one who participates in deliberative and judicial power, no matter how, including fraudulently, is a citizen" (174). In other words, although Aristotle's definition of a citizen derives from democratic Athens (whose process of identifying citizenship as the product of both paternal and maternal citizens, as per Pericles' citizenship law of 451 BCE, Aristotle mocks with the help of none other than Gorgias, the Sophist [*Pol.* 3.2.1275b22-33; cited at 180]), that democracy is a deviant constitution does not invalidate its notion of citizenship. Rather, the problem with the Athenian (or democratic) definition concerns *who* it allows to be a citizen rather than *what* it is that a citizen does. Pellegrin concludes that "by asking about the relationship between those who are in fact citizens and those who deserve to be citizens, *Politics* 3 functions as a kind of turning point between realism and normativity" (176).

Chapter 5 ("On the Positive Use of Deviance") helps explain Aristotle's interweaving of normative and realist elements: "To put the matter briefly, deviation can be a step on the road to evil, but not necessarily" (235). A central lesson of *Politics* 3 and 4 is that there is (almost) no such thing as a sociologically "pure" or homogenous polis: every polis includes individuals who are wealthy and poor (although very rarely are there poleis in which those of moderate wealth predominate). But although the dialectical debates about distributive justice in *Politics* 3 presuppose that sociological problem, Pellegrin helps the reader see that *Politics* 4, with its extended discussions of the various forms of "mixed constitutions" (namely, constitutions that mix elements from

democratic, oligarchic, or aristocratic constitutions) provides both an explanatory and prudential account for how to stabilize existing constitutions (through good, rather than poor, forms of constitutional mixing [239-242]). Paradoxically, normatively superior—and more stable—constitutions can arise from elements of normatively inferior constitutions. In Pellegrin's word, "Polity [namely, the correct constitution in which many people share in rule] seems to us ultimately as the most political of constitutions because it mixes all the forms of regimes that are not autocratic. More than all the others, precisely because it does not have a 'pure' form, polity embodies the acceding of mixture to excellence" (266-67).

Pellegrin organizes what I think of as the third part of his book around the perspective of the "good legislator, that is the true statesman" (τὸν ἀγαθὸν νομοθέτην καὶ τὸν ὡς πολιτικόν [*Pol.* 4.1.1288b27]), including chapters designated "The Legislator" (Chapter 6) and "The Theoretical Tools of the Legislator" (Chapter 7, but which is largely a continuation of Chapter 6—see 282, 305). Such a legislator is more than a magistrate or public officer—he is literally the "placer of laws"—and such a role has a distinguished place among the ancient Greeks (whom Pellegrin suggests are "affected by *nomolatriy*" [285]). Pellegrin identifies three elements for such an individual: (1) the means that the legislator must put into operation (primarily the laws), (2) the situation in which the legislator intervenes (primarily an existing polis and its constitution rather than the establishment of a new polis), and (3) the theoretical tools of the legislator (primarily the science of constitutional diversity and sedition, in Aristotle's technical sense of *στάσις*). Although attributing such a legislator-centric perspective to Aristotle is hardly controversial, Pellegrin's account of constitutional diversity—which goes far beyond the usual six-fold taxonomy of *Politics* 3.6-7 or even 4.24—is one of the hermeneutical highlights of the book.

Endangered Excellence is the capstone of Pellegrin's scholarly career of translating and interpreting the Aristotelian corpus and the most comprehensive and detailed study of Aristotle's *Politics* since Richard Kraut's *Aristotle: Political Philosophy* (2002). It includes valuable discussions both for those whom he calls "les professionnels de l'Aristotélisme" and for non-professionals (17). Non-Francophone students of Aristotle owe the SUNY series in Ancient Greek Philosophy (once again) a significant debt for making Pellegrin's work more generally available to English-language audiences.