

Philosophy and Politics in Aristotle's Politics. By Curtis N. Johnson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. 208. \$100.00 (hardback). ISBN 978-1137426192.

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It is a truism that Aristotle distinguishes theoretical, practical, and productive sciences; but Aristotle's *Metaphysics* begins with a discussion of the nature of the free person and his *Nicomachean Ethics* concludes with one of his clearest statements of the nature of *theoria*, so perhaps the boundaries between those sciences in existing works are more porous. Curtis Johnson, author of *Aristotle's Theory of the State* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), in his current volume seeks to clarify the boundary between theoretical science (the 'Philosophy' of his title) and practical science (the 'Politics') in Aristotle's *Politics* in order to identify the theoretical philosophy that he believes undergirds the work and to engage some of the perennial practical problems in the text (such as the identity of what Aristotle calls 'the best constitution').

Johnson's discussion hinges upon his distinction between first-order and second-order questions or problems within the *Politics* (a distinction he also characterizes sometimes as 'prior' and 'posterior' questions, sometimes as 'political theory' and 'practical politics'), the former that he claims are addressed to a philosophical or theoretical audience, which is interested in matters political, and the latter that he claims are addressed to an audience of statesmen (*politikoi*) who seek practical guidance about legislation and the organization of actual *poleis*. First-order questions include: who is a citizen in any state, what is the meaning of a constitution (*politeia*), what are the different kinds of constitutions and what distinguishes them, or how are citizens related to their constitutions. Second-order questions include: what is the identity of polity and what is the best constitution.

The distinction between first- and second-order questions structures the book as a whole. After an introductory chapter which surveys several disagreements scholars have had about the *Politics* over the last two decades (e.g., is Aristotle a communitarian or a liberal thinker?), the first seven chapters of the book are devoted to elucidating what Johnson articulates as Aristotle's first-order teachings in the *Politics*. An initial chapter presents the case for identifying two different audiences of the work and the second chapter takes up what Johnson calls 'prior to prior questions' (29), namely those addressed in the first book of the *Politics*, in which Aristotle discusses the notion of the polis as such prior to his discussion of its differentiation into a variety of forms or constitutions. Chapters three, four, and five are devoted to analyzing what Johnson takes to be the

descriptive or evaluative analysis of first-order questions. Thus, chapter 3, drawing heavily on Aristotle's zoological works, explains Aristotle's taxonomic method in the *Politics*; chapter 4 then looks at Aristotle's descriptive taxonomies of constitutions (for instance, how democracies differ from oligarchies or how one can distinguish different kinds of democracies), and chapter 5 looks at Aristotle's moral hierarchy within that taxonomy, arguing that 'to say that two states differ is to say not simply that there are formal and material elements that distinguish them from one another. It is also to say that they belong to different places within a hierarchically arranged moral universe; if they are different, it is also true that one is morally superior, the other morally inferior' (79). Finally, chapters 6 and 7 are devoted to elucidating what Johnson takes to be Aristotle's explanatory procedure for answering first-order questions: chapter 6 applies Aristotle's causal analysis from the natural scientific works (e.g., formal, final, material, and efficient) to the *Politics* and chapter 7 focuses upon how the material cause operates in Aristotle's political science by examining the notions of office and citizenship.

The last two chapters address second-order questions: chapter 8 examines the meaning of polity in the *Politics* and chapter 9 argues that the 'best constitution' analyzed in *Politics* 7-8 is identical with the 'middle constitution' discussed in *Politics* iv 11. The ordering of chapters is purposeful in two ways. First, Johnson argues that there is a logical priority between first and second-order questions: second-order questions cannot be resolved without the resolution of first-order questions. As Johnson puts it in an earlier chapter, how 'can a *politikos* understand how to blend two deviant forms of constitution to form a "polity" unless he first understands something about the differences between democracies and oligarchies and what makes a mix between them sometimes more desirable' (26). Thus, chapters 7 and 8 address questions that cannot be answered satisfactorily in the absence of an understanding of the sort of descriptive and explanatory analyses of the first seven chapters of the book. Second, Johnson's argument that Aristotle's best regime in *Politics* 7-8 is the middle constitution depends in part on his prior claim, made in chapter 7, that polity is a mixed constitution that, although exhibiting some similarities to the middle constitution, is nonetheless taxonomically distinct (mainly on the grounds that the mixed constitution includes both wealthy and poor citizens whereas the middle constitution is based on a middle class—an argument that Johnson had made previously in his *Aristotle's Theory of the State*).

Johnson presents several very strong arguments that deserve the scrutiny of Aristotle scholars, perhaps especially the discussion of taxonomic methodology in chapters 3 and 4. Scholars like Mariska Leunissen, Karen Nielsen, and Devin Henry have rejuvenated the question of how Aristotle's zoological and practical sciences fit together, although my sense is that the issue of zoological and constitutional taxonomy has received insufficient attention since the foundational work of Pierre Pellegrin. Johnson's application of Aristotle's schema of causal explanation in the *Politics* also offers interesting contrasts with Gene Garver's invoca-

tion of the four causes in the *Politics*. Johnson's articulation of the first and second-order distinction between kinds of questions in the *Politics* provides a powerful solution to the perennial problem of understanding the unity of the *Politics* as a whole—one that is in dialogue with other scholars, such as Thomas Pangle, who has sought to unlock some of the puzzles of the *Politics* by appealing to multiple audiences.

And yet, a first question I have about Johnson's volume is the nature of its audience. He identifies his own dual addressees, both students 'relatively new to Aristotle' and more 'seasoned scholars who have devoted time and thought to sorting through the difficulties the text presents' (2). As noted in my overview, the introduction functions a bit like an aporetic survey of contemporary debates about Aristotle's *Politics*: Is the work unified? How does it relate to contemporary debates, and so forth. Rather oddly to my mind, though, is that although Johnson provides an able survey of disagreements, definitely appropriate to an introductory audience, he largely refrains from taking his own stand on the various questions (something that more seasoned scholars would expect). In a similar vein: Johnson's *Aristotle's Theory of the State* advanced a number of positions that scholars have debated since (for instance, his claim that the middle constitution cannot be identified with polity). Although the current volume is clearly indebted to positions already presented in his earlier book (and internal notes clearly identify the debt of the current volume on the earlier one), it was less clear how Johnson responds to criticisms of his earlier volume. If he has reworked his position in light of criticisms, seasoned scholars would be interested in knowing (and of course ditto if he has decided not to rework his position). Although the scholarship is generally current—with references to works published in the last five years—it is somewhat selective. For instance, Johnson claims that Aristotle embraces a sort of naturalism according to which he ranks all constitutions in a moral hierarchy. It is hard not to hear echoes here of Miller's *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), and yet Johnson never engages the work or explains how his own position differs from or complements Miller's.

The moral naturalism that Johnson ascribes to Aristotle also seems, in places, to underestimate the perspective that the *politikos* brings to the study of constitutions. For instance, in chapter 4 ('Evaluating the Goodness of Regimes') Johnson identifies five normative factors that he claims Aristotle uses in evaluating the moral hierarchy of constitutions (for instance, whether the constitution exercises rule of law or its ruling class possesses virtue). But Johnson largely dismisses constitutional stability as only a 'pragmatic consideration'; he writes that 'the true measure of goodness is not taken on the pulse of public opinion or discovered in the constitutional mechanisms of stability. It is, rather, discovered in the natural ordering of essential parts in an ethical hierarchy of essential being' (97; in fairness to Johnson, he does suggest that constitutional stability might be a function of rule of law, 86). There is a perennial tug of war amongst Aristotle scholars between those, for instance, like Schütrumpf, who look only through the

eyes of the *politikos* and those, like Miller, who look only through the eyes of the moral philosopher. Both positions have their textual supports, although I find Johnson falling too thoroughly in the ‘moral philosopher’ camp than seems to me supportable.

Finally, I had a concern about Johnson’s thesis about the two audiences of the *Politics*. The naturalism that he locates in the work—for instances, its taxonomic organization according to the parts of constitutions and the evaluative framework of Aristotle’s theory of causes—unavoidably seems a bit of a reconstruction. It is a very able reconstruction, I think especially in the case of taxonomies of constitutions and the importance Aristotle finds in analyzing *politeiai* according to their parts, yet it is a reconstruction nonetheless, namely, a position that Aristotle does not explicitly invoke or identify himself. Aristotle does of course invoke a method of analysis of parts in *Politics* i 2 (i.e., the claim that the polis is the outgrowth of the household and the village), but that seems to be a very different method than he uses in the empirical books. Ditto for the explanatory theory of causes: I found very persuasive the claim, for instance, that Aristotle’s analysis of the *horoi* or *hypotheses* of constitutions is a sort of analysis by formal cause (105-106). But why does Aristotle never explicitly invoke his theory of four causes in the *Politics*? Is its absence of rhetorical significance (as I think someone like Pangle would argue)? Or does it belie the whole notion that the *Politics* is self-consciously addressed to two audiences? No doubt, a natural philosopher familiar with Aristotle’s theory of causes or his taxonomic organization of genera and species will find fascinating instances of those first-order explanatory mechanisms in the *Politics*; but it certainly is striking that on the surface of the text, those explanatory mechanisms are not flagged as such, and the practical, action-guiding perspective of the *politikos* seems to predominate. That Johnson claims that the *politikos* and his second-order questions is logically dependent upon the political theorist and his first-order questions only makes the status of this non-*politikos* political theorist, whom Aristotle never explicitly identifies, all the more mysterious.

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