THE POLITICS OF ARISTOTLE'S CRITICISM OF PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Aristotle's critical review of Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* in *Politics* 2, as well as his criticism of other constitutions in the same book, has had a mixed reception. Franz Susemihl and Robert Hicks say that Aristotle's "attack upon the polity of pure reason, as it claims to be, in Plato's *Republic* ranks among the most successful parts of the whole work,"[1] while Julia Annas describes it as "surprisingly crass and literal-minded, much below Aristotle's best."[2] In the same vein some scholars have accused Aristotle of failure to engage Plato in a fair way or even to understand Plato at all,[3] while others have defended his criticisms as largely or completely justified.[4] In this paper I will not offer a systematic interpretation of the content of Aristotle's criticism, since neither the content of the criticism nor the questions concerning its validity will be my focus. Instead I will concentrate on some of the peculiar features of Aristotle's discussions, features that could well be called polemical. These features include Aristotle's several rather sharp or ironic remarks about Socrates and his project in the *Republic*, his use of rhetorical questions, and his tendency to bring out the most extreme consequences of Socrates's theory (such as that it will destroy the *polis* and that it will lead to incestuous relationships). As I will argue, some of these polemical features result from the special character of Socrates's

[1] Susemihl and Hicks, *The Politics of Aristotle*, 32.
[2] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's* Republic, 188.
[3] Surprisingly, this view is expressed by Susemihl and Hicks, *The Politics of Aristotle*, 215. Saunders, *Aristotle: Politics I and II*, often complains that Aristotle's arguments "hardly go home" (109). Perhaps the most negative treatment of Aristotle's criticism can be found in Bornemann, "Aristoteles' Urteil über Platons politische Theorie." A largely negative, but very insightful, treatment of Aristotle's criticism of communal property (and defense of private property) can be found in Irwin, "Aristotle's Defense of Private Property," as well as in Barnes, "Aristotle and Political Liberty." For a different view, see Mayhew, "Aristotle on Property."
[4] The positive treatments of Aristotle are mostly found in more recent scholarship: Simpson, *A Philosophical Commentary*; Stalley, "Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's *Republic*"; and especially, Mayhew, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's* Republic.

theory, and some play a crucial role in Aristotle's argument in that they are consciously aimed at countering the attractive force of Socrates's image of the ideal city, which appeals to readers over and above its theoretical, purely rational credentials.

There is no doubt that there is something distinctly *peritton* (odd)[5] about the second book of Aristotle's *Politics*, especially regarding his discussion of Plato's views in chapters 2–6. The book begins with what appears to be the standard way in which Aristotle introduces critical examinations of the theories or opinions of his predecessors.[6] He tells us that as a part of the study of the best political community (*politikē koinōnia*), one must also examine (*episkepsasthai*) other constitutions (*politeiai*) to discover what, if anything, is correct and useful about them. In particular one has to look at constitutions that have already received some approval and are thought to be well designed (*kalōs echein*). These involve both constitutions that are already in use in states thought to have good laws and those that, although not in actual use, were proposed in theory. Aristotle then discusses four theoretical constitutions (Plato's in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, Phaleas's of Chalcedon, and Hippodamus's of Miletus) along with three actual constitutions (Spartan, Cretan, and Carthaginian).

The first odd feature of the discussion comes at the end of this introduction. It features what Aquinas calls an apology (*excusatio*)[7] for the critical examination. Aristotle tells us that we must review other constitutions not only in order to find out what is correct and useful about them but

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[5] The adjective *peritton* (odd) occurs four times in *Pol.* 2. First, at *Pol.* 2.3, 1261b29, it is mentioned by Aristotle as one example of words that are ambiguous and "give rise to contentious [*eristikoi*] arguments." Here *peritton* has the value-neutral meaning of "odd" (as, in "odd numbers"). This is clear from its juxtaposition with "even" (*artion*). Second, at 1265a11, Aristotle uses it to describe Socratic dialogues, this time in the positive sense of "extraordinary." Third, at 1267b24, it is used (in comparative) to describe Hippodamus's lifestyle (*bios*), now in its negative meaning of "excessive" or "extreme." Last, at 1272b25, it is used to describe (positively) the way in which Carthaginians govern themselves as being extraordinary in comparison to others. The inherent ambiguity of the word enables Aristotle to use it for expressing both admiration and contempt. These are also the two attitudes that commentators tend to take toward *Pol.* 2.

[6] The introduction is understood as the first part of Aristotle's standard dialectical procedure by a number of interpreters, including Susemihl and Hicks, *The Politics of Aristotle,* ad loc.; Stalley, "Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's *Republic*," 183; or Mráz, "Die Kritik an Platons *Politeia* im II. Buch von Aristoteles' *Politik*," 80.

[7] This is Aquinas's comment: "*Deinde cum dicit adhuc autem quaerere etc., excusat propriam intentionem; et dicit quod non oportet alicui videri quod hoc ipsum quod est quaerere aliquid aliud in ordinationibus civitatum, praeter ea quae ab aliis dicta sunt, procedat ex hoc quod ipse (velit) sophizare, id est suam sapientiam ostentare: sed ideo interserit hanc artem, quia ea quae ab aliis dicta sunt, in multis videntur non bene se habere*" (T. Aquinas, *Sententia Libri Politicorum*, lib. 2 l. 1 n. 3).

> also so as to avoid giving the impression that our search for something different from them results from a wish to show off cleverness (*sophizesthai*) at all costs rather than that we have taken up the inquiry because the currently existing constitutions are not well designed. (*Pol.* 1160b33–36)[8]

The passage suggests that the task of the examination is to provide (or make clear) the true (but perhaps not obvious) motivation behind Aristotle's attempt to construct an ideal constitution of his own and, at the same time, to forestall the (perhaps obvious) view that Aristotle just wants to show how clever he is.

One can profitably compare this passage with the opening paragraph of *Eth. Nic.* 1.6, in which Aristotle tells us that for the sake of preserving (*epi sōtēria*) the truth, it is better to destroy (*anairein*) even that which is our own (*ta oikeia*), since although one should love both friends and truth, as a philosopher one should honor the truth (*protimān tēn alētheia*) above all. In the *Eth. Nic.* passage, Aristotle presents himself as facing the following dilemma: he can pursue the truth and in the process destroy what is close to him, or he can shrink from pursuing the truth and preserve what is close to him. The dilemma stems from two honorable but, in this particular case, incompatible attachments—to truth and to friends. At the beginning of *Pol.* 2, however, Aristotle wants to dispel the suspicion that his motivation for developing his own theories, and in the process destroying those of others, is a wish to appear clever (or perhaps a wish to play clever tricks—*sophizesthai*) rather than his love of truth and beauty. In other words Aristotle does not want his reader to see him as someone who argues for argument's sake in order to profit in some way, whether in reputation or otherwise (that is, as a sophist of sorts); he wants to be seen as someone concerned with truth, who only shows other's theories incorrect incidentally, since that is what he *must* (1260b28) do if he is to find the truth.

What makes the apology (to use Aquinas's description) interesting is the discussion that follows, since being "more than unusually vivacious,"[9] it can well make Aristotle appear in

[8] All translations are mine.
[9] Saunders, *Aristotle: Politics I and II*, 113.

exactly the light that he tried to avoid.[10] In *Pol.* 2.2–6, Aristotle offers his most explicit and extended discussion of Plato's political theories in what are arguably his two most important works (*Republic* and *Laws*). But the discussion concentrates on only a couple of Plato's theses in the *Republic*, without paying much, if any, attention to their context; his discussion of the *Laws* is, by most accounts, short and superficial. Perhaps most notably, Aristotle leaves out the *Republic*'s most notorious claim that it is philosophers who should be the kings, while including a thesis that Plato does not seem to hold (namely, the communism of property). Thus even independently of whether the actual criticisms are justified or not, this strangely narrow focus can already give rise to suspicions. These suspicions are heightened even further once one (inevitably) notices that the discussion contains several sharp or ironic remarks as well as claims—offered as part of Aristotle's reasons for disagreeing with others—that can easily be seen as contradicting his own assertions elsewhere.[11] If one adds to this mix the issue of the actual validity of Aristotle's criticisms, one can certainly be left with the impression that his *excusatio* notwithstanding, Aristotle's arguments in *Pol.* 2.2–6 are motivated by more than just his attachment to and respect for truth.

In the next two sections, I will concentrate on Aristotle's aim in discussing constitutions in *Politics* 2 (section 2) and on the method he employs in the discussion (section 3). In section 4 I will argue that the aim and the methods available to him to achieve the aim necessitate a certain way of arguing that carries an emotive content (and so results in emotional responses on the part of the reader). Furthermore, I will argue that Aristotle's aim is not achievable, given the content and the appeal of Socrates's theory, by purely rational argument, so Aristotle resorts to (or consciously employs) certain polemical devices such as rhetorical questions or ironic remarks. In other words the odd, polemical features are a deliberate strategy that Aristotle feels justified in using for philosophical purposes.

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[10] Michael Davies calls the ensuing discussion "intellectual parricide." Davies, *The Politics of Aristotle*, 35.

[11] In *Pol.* 2.2, Aristotle says, "So it is clear from this that the city-state is not naturally one in the way people think, and that what has been alleged to be the greatest good [i.e., unity] in city-states destroys them, whereas the good of each thing preserves it" (1261b6-9). He adds that "a city-states does not come from people who are alike" (1261a24). In *Pol.* 7.8 he says that "a city-state is a community of similar people" (1328a35). It is possible to explain away these apparent contradictions—see, for example, Schütrumpf, *Die Analyse der Polis durch Aristoteles*, 67–75 for a perceptive and (to my mind) satisfactory discussion. Nevertheless, it remains true that at least on the face of it, some of Aristotle's statements in *Pol.* 2 appear to contradict his statements elsewhere.

II. ARISTOTLE'S AIM IN *POLITICS* 2

What is Aristotle's purpose in discussing the various constitutions, both theoretical and actual, in *Pol.* 2? Since it is often thought that the discussion is a part—in fact, the beginning—of Aristotle's dialectical procedure,[12] it might be useful to start with a brief look at what such dialectical procedure, according to Aristotle, involves. Here is his description of the purpose of an introductory survey of his predecessors' views, from *De anima* 1.2:

> When investigating the soul, it is necessary, while puzzling over the problems that we must resolve in our further advance, to also take into account the views of those of our predecessors who have made claims about it so that we may take on board the things that they said well and avoid those that they said in error. (*De an*. 403b20–2)

According to this and other passages of this sort,[13] Aristotle's review of other theories is a necessary method aimed at finding out the truth concerning a given subject (such as the nature of the soul or the causes of being). As far as this aim is concerned, the method appears eminently reasonable. It confirms that the subject matter is worthy of investigation, since other reputable thinkers thought about it too. It summarizes the results achieved so far, and in doing so enables one to avoid unnecessary work and previous mistakes, thus providing the best grounds and starting points for further investigation. It does even more since, as we learn elsewhere, it provides the problems that the new investigation needs to address:

> As in the other cases, we must set out the appearances, and first of all go through the puzzles. In this way we must prove the common beliefs about these ways of being affected—ideally, all the common beliefs, but if not all, most of them, and the most important. For if the objections are solved, and the common beliefs are left, it will be an adequate proof. (*Eth. Nic.* 7.1, 1145b4–8)

[12] See note 6 above for a list of interpretations that adopt this view.
[13] Examples include *Metaph.* 983a24–983b5; and *Soph. el.* 183b15–184a9.

> These then are the sorts of puzzles that arise. We must undermine some of these claims, and leave others intact; for the solution of the puzzle is the discovery [of what we are seeking]. (*Eth. Nic.* 7.2, 1146b6–8)

As these passages suggest, by identifying the puzzles (*aporiai*), as they arise among various competing theories, we obtain both good motivation for a new investigation (since there is clearly no universally accepted theory about the matter) and a starting point of the investigation. When we solve the *aporiai*, we discover what (if anything) was true in the views we examined, and we arrive at a satisfactory new solution. In this way Aristotle can claim to both build upon the work of others and advance (or even complete) an investigation of his own.[14]

The beginning of *Pol.* 2 looks like the first step in a procedure of this sort, but Aristotle does not raise any puzzles (*aporiai*) in the sense in which they figure in his lists of such puzzles as we find them, for example, in *Eth. Nic.* 7.1–2, *De an*. 1.2–5, or *Ph*. 1.3–9. That is, Aristotle does not concentrate on collecting contradictory statements about various political problems that he would then try to resolve in order to arrive at a new solution. Instead we find Aristotle immediately raising problems or difficulties *for* the theories or constitutions he reviews—most famously, for Plato's theories in the *Republic* (1264b24–5) and the *Laws*.[15] Unlike the *aporiai* in the dialectical procedure, these difficulties are not something to be resolved later on—they are treated as decisive objections to the theories discussed.[16] If anything, Aristotle's procedure is more reminiscent of the way in which he raises objections to Socrates's denial of *akrasia* in *Eth. Nic.* 7.3 (by drawing distinctions between various ways of knowing but not using knowledge) than it is of his collecting *aporiai* concerning *akrasia* in *Eth. Nic.* 7.1–2.

To see what Aristotle is up to, it might be useful to attend to the well-known (and to most commentators, puzzling) feature of Aristotle's discussion—namely, its very narrow focus on one

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[14] Perhaps the best known summary (and, at the same time, appraisal) of this method comes from a famous passage in the *Soph. el.* 183b15–184a9.

[15] These would be equivalent to the kind of problems (such as how many basic principles of being or motion there are, whether soul is moved or unmoved, or whether the uncontrolled person acts knowingly or not) in those other works.

[16] The distinction between *aporiai* as problems (i.e., objections) and *aporiai* as puzzles can be best seen at *Pol.* 2.8, 1268b23–31, where Aristotle mentions the *aporia* (puzzle) concerning whether or not it is good for states to change their ancestral laws. This is a puzzle because there are different views or theories about it. The *aporiai* concerning the views of Socrates raised in *Pol.* 2.2–6 are, however, problems or objections that undermine Socrates's theory, not *aporiai* that arise from there being alternative views to his views.

particular topic: the nature of political community or association (*koinōnia*). Some commentators have concluded that this narrow focus is in fact an expression of Aristotle's ignorance of, or only superficial acquaintance with, the *Republic*. Others have argued that the narrow focus is natural insofar as a city-state (*polis*) is a type of *koinōnia*, and since *koinōnia* means something like "having in common," one must inquire into what the citizens of a *polis* (as opposed to a family or a household) should have in common or share.[17]

But this second line of thought cannot be correct. First, the question about how much the citizens should share is in fact answered very quickly. Aristotle starts by listing three options: citizens can either share all things, or none, or some but not others (1260b37–9). The second option is excluded immediately (since a city-state must at least have a territory that the citizens share). The first option is refuted by the end of *Pol.* 2.5, since only Plato suggested a theory along such extreme lines (*Pol.* 2.7, 1266a34–6). The third option is thus established even before views other than Plato's are on the table, and it is already defended in *Pol.* 2.5, 1263a30–b14 (namely, that possession should be private, but use should be common). Second, the interpretation becomes much less plausible once one looks at the details of the discussion of other constitutions. Aristotle discusses not only the sharing of property but also the divisions of citizens into groups, the arrangements for who becomes a judge, the system of awarding honors, or the place of leisure in the city (the list could go on). In other words as one goes further into book 2, it becomes much less plausible to think that the topic of "what citizens ought to share"[18] is really at the center of Aristotle's discussion, even if it is clearly a part of that discussion.

But, I argue, there is an alternative and much better interpretation.[19] The clue is given by Aristotle at the end of his discussion of the community of wives and children in *Pol.* 2.5. At 1262a40, Aristotle remarks that although, as he has just argued, the sharing of wives and children will prove disadvantageous to the city-state, it could be said to be more useful for farmers (that is, for Plato's lowest class) than for the Guardians. This is because the community of wives and children leads to less affection or friendship (*philia*) among citizens and so, it is implied, it would

[17] This line of thought is taken, with some differences, by Mayhew, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's* Republic, 20; Simpson, *A Philosophical Commentary*, 73; and Stalley, "Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's *Republic*,"183.
[18] Mayhew, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's* Republic, 21.
[19] My interpretation to some extent follows and is heavily influenced by two articles: Cooper, "Political Animals and Civic Friendship," and Irwin, "Aristotle's Defense of Private Property."

make the farmers less attached to their families and more obedient to the Guardians. This alleged advantage notwithstanding, Aristotle goes on to say that

> the results of a law of this sort are necessarily the opposite of those that come about from correctly laid down laws and [so also] of the reason why Socrates thought that it is necessary to arrange things concerning wives and children in this way. For we think that *philia*[20] is the greatest of goods for the city-states (for in this way they are least prone to factions). And Socrates praises most of all the unity of the city-state, which (as it seems he says as well)[21] is an *ergon* of *philia*. (1262b4–11)

In this passage Aristotle both praises Socrates for recognizing that a city-state is sustained by *philia* but also blames him for thinking that this is to be achieved, or at least achieved in the best possible way, by extending the kind of *philia* found among family members to the relationships between citizens. Rather, as he tries to demonstrate, the kind of laws Socrates proposes will have the opposite effect and will lead to the lack of *philia* among citizens and, ultimately, to the destruction of the city-state (1261a22–3 and 61b7–9).

This could suggest that Aristotle is trying to find out what holds political communities together and distinguishes them from, on the one hand, families and households (in which the bonds relate to natural feelings) (1262a40–b24) and, on the other hand, mere alliances (in which there are no bonds among the members over and above their specific, agreed-upon goal) (1261b23–7). Consequently, Aristotle's focus in discussing the various constitutions is quite narrow and concentrates largely on the mechanisms and safeguards they have (at least, in his view) for creating the required social cohesion for and within the city-state. If this is his goal, he does not need to investigate the various competing constitutions in their entirety. Rather, he

[20] One could translate *philia* here as friendship. But there is a certain ambiguity in the term that plays a role in Aristotle's argument against Socrates that the translation can obscure. In particular Aristotle objects to Socrates that the kind of *philia* present within families (or perhaps even in close circles of friends) is not the kind of *philia* that holds political communities together. For example, the former but not the latter carries a certain kind of emotional attachment and is a matter of feeling. It thus seems to me best to leave *philia* untranslated, since the Greek word, unlike English "friendship," covers both cases.

[21] The thought is expressed in the (dubious) dialogue *Clitophon* that "the peculiar product [*idion ergon*] of justice, one which is not the product of anything else, is to produce friendship [*philia*] in the cities" (409d).

would only need to concentrate on particular constitutional provisions that either foster or impede the political cohesion of the city-state.

That this is in fact Aristotle's focus is apparent from a number of passages. The focus is present throughout his discussion of Socrates's theory in the *Republic*. The *Republic* is of particular interest to Aristotle, since it is *explicitly* aimed at achieving unity in the state (1263b29–64a1, 1264b5–15); it therefore offers a theory about what holds political communities together. The focus also becomes apparent at crucial points in his discussion of Phaleas's theory (1266a38, 66b38, and 67a38–41) when Aristotle evaluates the worth of his theory in relation to keeping the state from forming factions. It is a major source of his criticism of Hippodamus, since Hippodamus's theory, Aristotle argues, fails to instill *philia* (1268a14–29). It pervades his discussion of the Spartan constitution, which he thinks is badly arranged, since it makes the city-state weak and unstable (1270a11–34). Finally, although both Crete and Carthage had achieved political cohesion and stability, Aristotle makes it clear that while some of their constitutional provisions deserve credit, the main reasons for the political stability in these two states are extraneous to the constitutions: location, in the case of Crete (1272b1–23), and luck, in the case of Carthage (1272b29–32 and 73b18).

From this point of view, then, we should not think of Aristotle's criticism of Plato's *Republic* (and the *Laws*) in *Pol.* 2 as failing (or succeeding) in its supposed intent of discussing constitutional proposals, since that is not Aristotle's intention at all. In fact from this point of view, it makes perfect sense that he has little or nothing to say about whether any of the constitutions he discusses are just or efficient. Aristotle's focus is on what he takes to be proposals about how to achieve unity in the state, which he interprets as aimed at political cohesion that would ground and account for the existence and successful perseverance of a political community.

III. Aristotle's method in *Politics* 2

If my suggestion is correct, it has implications for our understanding of Aristotle's procedure in *Pol.* 2. Aristotle is interested in actual constitutions (Spartan, Cretan, and Carthaginian), since they apparently manage to preserve political communities, and there should be something that they do correctly. However, he wants to know whether they do so because of mere luck or

whether they truly manage to incorporate some features that in fact promote political cohesion. This involves looking at the goals or intentions of those constitutions (asking whether they are correct) and at the arrangements they have for achieving them (asking whether they are in fact effective). And this is precisely what Aristotle does:

> Concerning the constitutions of the Lacedaemonians and the Cretans, and in fact concerning virtually all other constitutions, there are two questions (*skepseis*). First, whether there is anything in them that is fine or not fine in comparison to the best system. Second, whether there is anything in them that is contrary to the fundamental assumption and character of the constitution, as it was intended by its founders. (1269a29–34)

The first question in the passage—whether there is something fine or well done in them—concerns the goal or fundamental assumption of the constitution, such as aiming at endurance and bravery in the case of Sparta (1269b20 and 35). The second question concerns the means—such as the provisions (or lack thereof) made for men and women in order to achieve them. Aristotle follows this program quite meticulously. For example, he shows how the Spartan constitution ends up fostering self-indulgence and the rule of women, even while its official aim is self-control and the rule of male super-soldier virtues (1269b20–70a34). He then shows that the goal itself is not correct (1271b6–11).[22]

In the case of an actual, already existing state, there are two distinct things to consider: first, whether the mechanisms it implements to achieve the overall goal of its constitution are in fact achieving it, and second, whether the constitutional provisions (the goal plus the mechanisms) are in fact responsible for the cohesion and stability of the constitution or whether something else, extraneous to the constitution, is the cause. As I have already indicated,

[22] In an unpublished manuscript, Thornton Lockwood ("Judging Constitutions: Aristotle's Critique of Plato's *Republic* and Sparta") identifies four distinct criteria on the basis of which Aristotle evaluates constitutions: the "actual practice" criterion, which involves comparison of a proposed constitution to actual practices; the external criterion, which involves comparison of a given constitution to the best possible constitution; the internal criterion, which concerns consistency between the constitutional goal and the means implemented to achieve it; and the "fundamental principle" criterion, which concerns the correctness of the constitutional goal. In my interpretation the criteria are really two—what Lockwood calls the "fundamental principle" criterion and the internal criterion. The other two criteria are some of the ways in which these two criteria are made to bear on a given constitution, depending on whether it is a theoretical construct ("actual practice" criterion) or a constitution already in practice (external criterion).

Aristotle's criticism of the constitutions of Crete, Sparta, and Carthage picks up precisely these points.

In the case of theoretical constitutions, Aristotle would have to start from the undeniable fact that there are existing political communities or city-states (even if they are not well run). That means that a theoretical constitution, such as proposed by Plato or Phaleas, must satisfy two requirements. First, it must preserve the possibility of political community. Second, it must do better at preserving and maintaining political cohesion than constitutions already existing and put into practice. And in fact when we turn to Aristotle's criticism of Plato's theories, we find him addressing precisely these two questions. He begins by asking which is better: the present practice (that is, one already succeeding in maintaining political communities) or the arrangements in the *Republic* (1261a9). And he goes on to argue that not only are the *Republic*'s arrangements not better but they in fact destroy political community (for example, 1261a22–3).[23]

A correct interpretation of Aristotle's aim in *Politics* 2 can thus shed considerable light on the way in which his discussion proceeds. But what method can Aristotle employ to find out whether a merely theoretical constitution, such as that of Plato, manages to establish and preserve political community, and if so, by virtue of which features? Unless the constitution's arrangements are somehow obviously inconsistent, Aristotle cannot proceed simply by attacking the constitution's basic assumptions. This is because its correctness would ultimately show only in the success or failure of the constitution to establish a political community.[24] But short of actually founding a community on the basis of the particular principles embodied in a given constitution, such test is not accessible. Aristotle, however, has at his disposal a method or

[23] It is sometimes thought that *Politics* 2 does not discuss the issue of political stability (Garver, *Aristotle's* Politics*: Living Well and Living Together*, 65). This view seems to me mistaken not only in view of Aristotle's explicit focus on it in the case of the constitutions of Sparta (1271a41–b6), Crete (1272b1–23), and Carthage (1272b29–32 and 73b18) but also in view of his criticism of Plato (which only concentrates on the question of unity), Hippodamus, and Phaleas. One must bear in mind that Aristotle is not really interested in criticism of the theories for its own sake but in finding out what he can take away from them as correct for building the right kind of constitution. So Phaleas's idea of equality as preventing factions (1267a37–38) is highlighted, as is Hippodamus's failure to prevent factions (1268a14–29). But in both cases Aristotle immediately goes on to more general discussion of the usefulness of a given provision, given human nature, for political cohesion and the rule of law (1267a38–b9 for Phaleas and 1268b31–69a24 for Hippodamus).

[24] Of course, Aristotle could attack the assumptions on other, for example moral, grounds. But that would not help him to discover whether the constitution manages to establish political cohesion, which is what he is interested in.

criterion that is particularly useful in this case—namely, testing the theory in relation to or on the basis of 'facts' (*erga*).[25] It will be useful to look at this method in a bit more detail.

In *Eth. Nic.* 2.2, Aristotle tells us that the purpose of his present endeavor (*pragmateia*) (that is, of the investigations in the *Eth. Nic.* and the *Politics*) is unlike that in his other studies in which he aims at theoretical knowledge. The current purpose is to "become good" (1103b27), and that means that one has to examine how one is to act (1103b29–39). This focus has a direct consequence for what Aristotle sees, in the practical context, as the criterion of truth:

> For arguments (*logoi*) about matters of actions and feelings are less persuasive (*pistoi*) than facts (*erga*). Thus, when they come into conflict with what accords with perception (*aisthēsis*), they are regarded with contempt, and they also destroy (*prosanairein*) the truth. (*Eth. Nic.* 10.1, 1172a34–b1)

According to this passage, when it comes to actions and feelings, facts (*erga*) carry more weight than arguments (*logoi*), so their conflict (if and when it occurs) is always resolved in favor of facts. As an example Aristotle points out that if somebody says that pleasure is bad but is then seen seeking pleasure, people will think that despite his arguments and claims to the contrary, he *in fact* regards pleasure as something to pursue. This is because they will conclude, on the basis of his observed behavior, that he acted like this not only on the particular occasion that they saw him but all the time, being guided by a principle that pleasure is good even while he does not acknowledge the principle publicly (1172b1–4).

It is important to keep in mind that Aristotle does not merely mean that some people (like "the many") are more likely to judge according to *erga* rather than arguments; he also means that if they were better educated, they would go with the Socratic "wherever the argument blows" (*hopēi an ho logos hōsper pneuma pherēi*) (*Rep.* 394d). Aristotle is committed to the view that there are certain facts that constrain even rational arguments:

[25] *Erga* can, of course, mean deeds or things one does. But in the relevant contexts under discussion, the meaning is more akin to 'facts', although not necessarily facts in the sense of states of affairs. I will explain this as I go along. For a discussion, see Kraut, "Aristotle on Method and Moral Education," 274n4.

> The truth in practical matters (*en tois praktikois*) is judged (*krinetai*) from the facts (*tōn ergōn*) and the way of life (*tou biou*). For these are authoritative [in practical matters]. We have to examine, then, what has been said in the light of the facts and the way of life, and if it harmonizes with the facts, we must accept it, but if it conflicts, we must suppose it to be [mere] words. (*Eth. Nic.* 10.8, 1179a18–22)

According to this passage it is clearly possible to present coherent, persuasive arguments that can nevertheless still be rejected by appeal to (perceptible) facts. This implies that Aristotle thinks that there are some facts that are unassailable by arguments, and these facts can serve (in a practical context) as the criterion of truth.[26]

But what are the facts (*erga*) that Aristotle has in mind? It will be best to look at a few examples of Aristotle explicitly appealing to facts (as opposed to words or arguments) in order to support his claims. In *Pol.* 7.1, Aristotle tells us that from facts (*erga*) we can find persuasive evidence about the kind of life that is most choice-worthy, insofar as we can *see* that virtues are not acquired or preserved by means of external goods. Rather, we see that (1) the external goods are acquired and preserved by means of one's being virtuous, and (2) that a happy life belongs more often to people who are virtuous and moderate in acquisition of external goods than to those who focus on them exclusively (1323a39–b5). In *Pol.* 7.4, he tells us that it is evident from 'facts' that an overly populated state cannot be well governed (1326a25–7 and 1326b9–25), since it precludes those who are supposed to make decisions from knowing all the relevant parties equally well. This leads them to make at best uninformed and at worst prejudiced and unjust judgments. And in *Pol.* 8.5, he tells us that it is evident from 'facts' that rhythms and melodies contain likenesses of virtues and vices, since we can see that listening to music changes our soul (1340a17–21). Finally, as we have seen in the passage from *Eth. Nic.* 10.1 quoted above, he contrasts facts—or rather principles derived from observing one's behavior—with arguments about what that principle should be.

From these examples it seems clear that Aristotle has in mind, at least in his ethical works, psychological or sociological truths derived from observation of actual human behavior. For Aristotle, then, if an ethical or political theory is to be both logically valid and useful in promoting actual human good, it needs to take into proper account various relevant psychological or sociological facts about human beings. If a theory fails to do so—that is, if it

[26] Here I agree with Kraut, "Aristotle on Method and Moral Education," 273–77.

comes into conflict with such facts—it is, in his view, reduced to mere words, no matter how coherent and persuasive it appears on its own. By coming into conflict with facts, arguments and theories lose their relevance, since they do not refer to anything that can be based in human experience and so have no bearing on what the issue really is—how are we, real human beings, to act or organize our lives if we are to become good.[27]

By applying this method to Plato's *Republic* (or other ideal constitutions), Aristotle tries to determine whether Plato's proposals preserve or even improve political communities (as well as whether they achieve what they explicitly set out to achieve), given certain facts about human psychology. This methodology is in full display in *Pol.* 2.3–5, and we can now look at some of the arguments in more detail.[28]

IV. Aristotle's criticism of Plato's *Republic*

In *Pol.* 2.3–4, Aristotle looks at Plato's proposal (*Rep.* 462c–466d) that the Guardians must use the words "mine" and "not mine" in relation to the same things, especially in relation to their wives and children. To achieve this Socrates argues that the Guardians are to be kept in ignorance of who their relatives are. The intended result is that they will end up regarding each other as being related, as one family. In other words they will all treat each other as sisters, brothers, fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters. The apparent purpose of this proposal is, of course, to extend the strong feelings that go along with the kind of *philia* that holds families together to the whole city-state, while simultaneously abolishing the kind of familial blood ties that normally hold within families, since they pull people's allegiances away from the state and toward only a select few. Aristotle takes this proposal (along with communal property) to be aimed at establishing ideal political cohesion in the city, and he proceeds to examine whether it in fact does that. His argument against the proposal has three aspects. First, he argues that the

[27] Here Aristotle's famous passage from *Ph.* 2 is especially relevant: "That there is nature, it would be ridiculous to try to show. For it is obvious that there are many things of the sort [just described]. To show what is obvious through what is obscure is a mark of inability to judge what is known through itself and what is not known through itself. And that it is possible to be in such a state since someone blind from birth might still reason about colors. For such people an argument must be about words only, with nothing [to correspond] to thought" (193a2–9).

[28] As I have indicated, my focus will be on the formal, polemical features of Aristotle's discussion rather than on the actual content and validity of his arguments. The discussion that follows is thus not in any way an attempt at a systematic interpretation of Aristotle's criticism of Plato. In particular I have almost nothing to say about Aristotle's arguments concerning communal property.

theory is psychologically impossible and that it would not be possible to even establish a community in the manner and of the type that Socrates talks about (1261a10–13). Second, even if it were possible to do so, the community would in fact be anything but the kind of political and socially cohesive unit it was intended by Socrates to be (1261a20–22). Finally, he argues that the assumption that led Socrates to postulate the theory in the first place was wrong (1263b29–41).

Aristotle begins by arguing that "all say" in "all say 'mine'" is ambiguous. Thus "all say 'the child is mine'" can be understood as "all collectively say 'the child is mine'" or "all individually say 'the child is mine.'" In the former case (collective use), Aristotle argues that it would be admirable if that were the case (that is, if all actually meant it that way), but that it is impossible that they would in fact mean it (that is, that they would have the corresponding psychological attitude), since people cannot but be aware that they cannot, as a matter of fact, all be parents. In the latter case (individual use), they would end up arguing about who is in fact the parent of a given child. They would only be able to guess, and many would lay claim to the same one. Hence, in one interpretation the theory is impossible, and in another it leads to faction rather than cohesion.

Aristotle further argues that the word "mine" exhibits a similar ambiguity. Take three sentences: (1) "this is my fellow citizen"; (2) "this is my town"; and (3) "this is my son." Although in all three cases, one uses the same word "my," one's use of it carries different semantic and emotional implications. In the first case it is an expression of belonging to a group of people. In the second case it usually expresses a relation to some object that is personal but not uniquely individual since the town "belongs" in this sense to many other people. In the third case it expresses personal and unique, individual relation to somebody. Along with these semantic variations, there are also variations of feelings. There might not be any particular feelings in (1); there might be something like an intense liking for (2); but there usually is a strong emotional attachment in (3). According to Aristotle, Socrates wants to extend the kind of attitude that goes with (3), all the way to (1), but in fact what he would achieve would be erasing feelings present in (3) and leaving only those in (1). This is because, among other things, the attitudes in (3) can only be aimed at a few people. In fact, as he goes on to remark, the emotional attachments that belong to (3) are essentially part of human nature, so people would, despite all

the arrangements, try to find their proper objects.[29] And that would lead us back to faction rather than cohesion.

What is the persuasive force of Aristotle's objections? So far he wants to argue that, given human nature, Plato's proposals in the *Republic* are in fact impossible to execute. But one may object that either Aristotle's view of human nature is not correct or that *even if* it were true, Plato's proposal would still yield, were it possible to execute it, the best kind of political community. In fact one could appeal to Plato's own words to support the latter option. At *Rep.* 471c, Glaucon famously raises the question "whether this constitution could come into existence, and in what way could it ever do so." Glaucon agrees that *if* it were to come into existence, it would be great (ibid.). But he doubts whether it is even possible. Socrates's reply is that the inquiry is equally successful whether or not it is possible to demonstrate that it is possible to found a city of that sort (*Rep.* 472e). In other words insofar as Socrates is searching for an ideal city and the nature of justice itself, his account stands independently of whether or not the city is actually possible.

Aristotle has two options at this point. He can maintain that since he has already shown that the proposals are impossible (because they do not accord with facts), the theory is really reduced to mere words and, in that sense, is false. This, of course, would not persuade somebody who does not buy Aristotle's methodology, or even somebody who accepts it but also maintains that Plato's proposals are not subject to it since they are, in the relevant sense, theoretical and not practical (as Aristotle understands them). Aristotle's next move is thus to show that even if implemented (that is, assuming that they are in fact possible), the proposals would lead to the exact opposite of Socrates's intentions.

It is at this point that the polemical features of Aristotle's discussion come to the fore. It begins in *Pol.* 2.3 with Aristotle's remark that "it is better to be someone's cousin than a son in the manner described [by Socrates]" (1262a13–4). But they are most prominently present in *Pol.* 2.4–5 where Aristotle argues that even if the constitution were possible, it would not achieve its intended results—neither by establishing the community of wives and children nor by making all property communal. First, there is Aristotle's choice of the consequences of Socrates's proposals. These are not just bad but the worst and most shocking: assaults, murders, homicides,

[29] Aristotle here famously points to countries in which such communism of wives and children is present (Libya), but people nevertheless end up guessing who is whose parent and treating those who resemble them preferentially (1262a14–24).

fights, abuses, incestuous sex, and adultery. But the features multiply as we go on. Aristotle several times (for example, 1262a32, 37, 63b37) introduces Socrates's views by saying, "it is strange that" (even "absurd"—*atopon*). He calls Socrates's overall theory "insanity" (*parakrousis*) (1263b30). He uses rhetorical, often somewhat snarky, questions to point to the deficiencies of Socrates's theory (for example, 1264a18–26 or 1264b24). And he several times repeats that Socrates did not define things properly and has filled his account with "extraneous topics" (1264b39). This series of polemical features culminates in Aristotle's famous remark that "all the Socratic dialogues possess something extraordinary (*peritton*), brilliance, originality, and searching spirit, but perhaps it is difficult to do everything well (*kalōs*)" (1265a12–4).

What are Aristotle's reasons for spicing up his discussion with these features? At least part of the reason concerns the way in which he has to argue against Socrates's thesis at this point. Theoretically, he could argue that the implementation of Socrates's proposals (assuming it were possible to implement them) would not make things better than they are in current city-states. But a move of this sort would undermine his previous criticism, since it would show that Socrates's ideal city is in fact conceivable without running into some sort of contradiction (whether theoretical or practical). But since now he grants the existence of the city, he cannot also argue that the city would be immediately destroyed (that would simply restate his previous argument). Thus he must show that Socrates's ideal city would be an unjust, horrible city to live in, to the point that it really would not be a city all. In other words it would come very close to its own destruction at least insofar as the quality, both moral and material, of life in it is concerned. Since the core of Plato's proposal is to extend familial feelings and blood relations to the whole body of citizens, showing this involves arguing that such an extension would lead to the destruction of the basic human ties rather than to their strengthening across the board. Hence, we get not only murders and adultery but murders of family members and incestuous sex.

Some of the polemical features that I have listed—namely, Aristotle's tendency to resort to the most extreme and shocking consequences—are thus to be attributed to his need to further his argument. Given the content of Socrates's proposals, and Aristotle's argumentative options, he cannot but draw the reader's (or listener's) attention to precisely those kinds of issues that have highly emotive content and are prone to raising emotional response.

But one cannot explain all the polemical features in this way, since Aristotle could have done so without resorting to some of the more *ad hominem* tactics that concern more the tone

and way in which he argues rather than the content. Can those features be explained as fulfilling some philosophically relevant role in Aristotle's argument? Here one must bear in mind that Socrates is arguing that the way we live—in terms of our attachments, priorities, and behaviors in relation to material goods or characters and, more important, in relation to our very basic human emotions tied to our own existence as members of a certain natural species—is in need of radical reform. In this sense Socrates's proposal in the *Republic* is even more radical than his well-known arguments in the *Gorgias*, which Callicles perceived as turning our lives completely upside down (481b–c). Those proposals—counter-intuitive as they seemed to Callicles—concerned the nature of what is truly good and therefore the ways in which we should value things. They concerned the primacy of character and of internal goods over material things and pleasures. The proposal in the *Republic* goes much deeper—it aims at the reversal of what one might well regard as an unalienable part of human nature.

An obvious point is that from Aristotle's point of view, Socrates gets things upside down, since it is precisely in the light of our being members of a certain natural species that we need to start thinking about how to live. But perhaps more important, the radical nature and, to Aristotle, the shocking falsity of Socrates's proposal can be easily lost, since the resulting, ideal picture that Socrates paints might persuade one simply in virtue of its promised goodness and beauty. He makes this point clear in his discussion of communal property in *Pol*. 2.5:

> Such legislation may have attractive appearance and be thought to be even humane. For whoever hears it, accepts it gladly, thinking that all will have a wondrous *philia* for all. This is especially so when somebody blames the evils currently present in constitutions on property's not being communal. . . . But none of these evils is caused by the property's not being communal, but by vice. For we see far more quarrels among those who have or use property in common than among those who have their properties separate. Nevertheless, we notice only a few quarreling as a result of what they have in common because we compare them with the many who own property privately. Further, it would be fair to mention not only how many evils people will lose by sharing property but also how many good things. The way of life [that they would lead] appears to be completely impossible. (1263b15–29)

Although the passage occurs in the particular context of discussing communal property, its message is, as Aristotle makes clear, more general. The kind of legislation that Socrates proposes

makes promises and paints beautiful images—it is literally of "fair face" (*euprosōpos*)—and these images and promises make people accept it even while the root of the people's problems lies elsewhere, and even while the promises and images are impossible. My suggestion is that Aristotle resorts to use of the various polemical features listed above precisely in order to counter this beautiful imagery of Plato's *Republic.* He does not do it to belittle or disparage Plato or because he fails to understand Plato's project, as some have surmised. If anything he emphasizes his admiration of Plato and his agreement as to what the basic issue at hand is (this is clear from 1262b4–11, quoted above). But he must do so, or so he feels, in order to bring forth and focus our attention on the deeply problematic nature, assumptions, and consequences of Plato's project, which are made hard to see by its outward attractiveness. Were the reader's attention not roused in the right way, he might well miss how radical (and false) Socrates's proposals are—simply because they paint a picture of such an attractive world.

CONCLUSION

In the paper that headlines this volume, André Laks, following Stefan Straub, lists several features of polemics. Among them we find personalization, aggressiveness, argumentation, and activation of value feelings, credibility, and direction toward a concrete, practical goal.[30] Aristotle's discussion of Plato's *Republic* and the *Laws* in *Politics* 2 (and of the other constitutions as well) does not perhaps qualify as a full-fledged polemic in this way. It is, after all, not a systematic refutation of Plato's entire project. And although Aristotle's overall tone and some remarks toward Socrates are ironic or disparaging, Aristotle does not forget to praise Plato, and he never resorts to something like direct insults.[31]

Nevertheless, Aristotle's criticism does bear some distinctly polemical features. It is to some extent personal—for, as he argues, Plato's proposals are in fact unlivable by human beings. This personal aspect is, however, not of the sort that Aristotle describes in the *Topics* at 161a22–25. There the idea is that one sometimes needs to attack the person rather than the argument

[30] See Laks in this volume, 16-30. e nb later)

[31] That Aristotle is not incapable of a more aggressive approach can be readily seen in his discussion of Melissus in the *Physics*, whom he famously describes, in comparison to Parmenides, as follows: "But Melissus's argument is the duller and presents no difficulty: if one absurdity is granted to him, he can infer the rest. That is indeed not difficult" (*Ph.* 185a10–12). Similarly, his remarks concerning Hippodamus's extreme lifestyle, ridiculous clothing, and overabundance of *philotimia* are much more directly *ad hominem* attacks than anything in his discussion of Plato.

because the person is particularly abusive. Obviously, there is no question of any abuse coming from Plato. Rather, Aristotle employs the rhetorical devices to distract the reader from the apparent attractiveness, and so to some extent the deceptiveness, of Plato's theory, which can thus persuade the reader independently of its actual (as Aristotle sees them) credentials. Finally, Aristotle's discussion is prone to activate feelings—both Aristotle's (insofar as his criticism is pervaded by passionate argumentation) and the reader's. But this is not surprising, since the topic is the way we should live and the political arrangements that we should adopt, and Plato's proposals challenge and go to the core of what we as human beings feel toward each other. In this sense Aristotle's criticism of Plato's *Republic* in *Politics* 2 is an early example of the use of rhetorical and polemical devices to achieve goals that are, strictly speaking, philosophical.

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