

Comments on Eugene Garver's "Living Well and Living Together"

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By Thornton Lockwood

Boston University

Professor Garver's "Living Well and Living Together" sheds light on one of the more confusing sections in Aristotle's *Politics*, namely the discussion of the best way of life for individuals and city in *Politics* VII.1-3. At a distance, the conclusion of Aristotle's remarks seem relatively clear: He endorses the claim that the most choice-worthy life and happiness of a city and an individual are the same. Further, the implications of such a claim for Aristotle's political philosophy also seem clear: Aristotle's view of an "internally active" city amounts to a thorough critique of expansionist imperialism. But how these two surface level views—the best way of life for a city and the critique of imperialism—fit together is less than perspicuous.

Garver's paper goes after this text through the lens of two problems. First, Aristotle apparently argues from the nature of the best way of life or happiness for an individual to the best way of life for a city. But as Aristotle himself points out in his critique of the *Republic*, such an argument seems in danger of falling into a fallacy of composition. In response to such a perceived fallacy, Garver argues that Aristotle incorporates into his argument a third thing—what is the best life for a citizen or what Garver calls "common life" (p. 5, 6, of Garver's text)—which mediates between the best

life for a separate individual and for the city. As Garver puts it at one point “the best life for the citizen will be our means for discovering those [other] two” (p. 5, Garver’s text).

The second problem which Garver raises concerns Aristotle’s apparent inference from *energeiai* to *dunamis*. Aristotle’s argument in *Politics* VII.1-3 begins from the claim that a city and individual have the same kind of happiness—namely, a sort of *energeia*—and extends to a claim about the structure which serves as the basis of that activity. The problem, according to Garver, is that “the virtues of the state cannot be *energeiai* of that part of its soul, because states don’t have souls” (p. 6, Garver’s text). The comparison between city and individual works—if it does work—only if “the psychological aspects of the virtue central to the *Ethics* become politically irrelevant” (p. 7, Garver’s text). Thus, Garver suggests that Aristotle’s comparison of city and individual comes at a cost, viz. that “Aristotle can talk about states being virtuous and happy only because of this psychological superficiality” (p. 9, Garver’s text).

Garver’s paper—which in many respects is a running commentary on *Politics* VII.1-3 (and beyond)—contains numerous other insights, including intriguing remarks about how *Politics* VII introduces the language of nature instead of the language of justice and about how the musical education of *Politics* VIII differs from the one we have been led to expect based on the account of ethical habituation in the *Ethics*. But I would like to linger over his first two problems at greater length, viz. his remarks about the common life as an intermediate between individual and city and the psychology of Aristotle’s *Politics*. With respect to the “common life”: Garver picks up on Aristotle’s repeated opposition in *Politics* VII between the best life “common” to all and separately for each individual in conjunction with two problems:

- 1) Whether the best life for an individual is the best life for the polis.
- 2) Whether the best life for an individual in isolation is the same as the best life for the person who lives with others.

Garver's argument is that whereas partisans of the life of politics and the life of contemplation want to view these two questions as necessarily conjoined—so that philosophers and politicians see a necessary opposition between their respective ways of life—Garver's Aristotle introduces a common life in which the political is not opposed to the philosophical. Within the economy of the *Politics*, I can see reasons for such an argumentative move, but I am still curious where (if at all) the sage of *Nicomachean Ethics* X fits into this common life. Garver describes “a private but practical life” and a “life that is both political and theoretical” (p. 13, Garver's text), but I wonder about the content of such a life. Admittedly, its education is musical rather than philosophical, according to *Politics* VIII; but is it a life which includes the theoretical contemplation of natural science or first philosophy—topics about which *Politics* VIII is utterly silent?

Secondly, I would like to probe what one might call Aristotle's response to the “city/soul” analogy. If I understand Garver, his claim is that Aristotle's reasoning back and forth between individual and city is premised on an abstraction from any determinate ethical psychology. Garver points out the places where Aristotle's remarks are in conflict with his critique of city/soul reasoning in Plato's *Republic*—and I would only add that at *Nicomachean Ethics* V.11 Aristotle makes clear why such a project is on shaky ground, namely because to speak of justice between parts of one's self—or even the very possibility of wronging one's self—can only be a metaphorical kind of justice (*EN*

V.11.1138b7). Justice is always interpersonal, never something within an individual person.

But although Aristotle believed that city/soul comparisons cannot be premised upon anything more than very loose analogical or metaphorical reasoning, I have often wondered if the same was true for his city/household comparisons. Famously, Aristotle's polis is not composed of individuals but households, and although the object of Aristotle's ethical analysis is an individual, such an individual is a "household animal" even more than a political animal. Further, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.10-12 provides an extended analysis of justice and friendship in households and cities based on the claim that they are structurally isomorphic. The conclusion which *Politics* VII.1-3 drives at is ultimately one premised on the possibility of a city able to pursue its "sectional" activity (1325b25-28, cf. 1325a1-6) and a well-functioning oikia provides precisely the model of heterogeneous unity of qualitatively different parts. Thus my question: Would *Politics* VII.1-3 be on firmer argumentative ground if Aristotle asked if the happiness of a household and a city were the same?