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# **Economics as a Force of Nature in Aristotle's *Politics*: An Antireductionist View**

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## THE PROBLEM OF ECONOMICS IN POLITICS

As Richard Mulgan emphasizes, "Aristotle believes the political conflicts of his day are principally due to a clash between two economic groups, the rich and the poor, who support two different types of constitution (oligarchy and democracy) with different political principles (wealth and freedom)" (64). Yes. According to Aristotle, the rich regularly hold oligarchic positions, the poor democratic positions, and their factions despise each other. The extreme result of their contest is a degradation of politics to a fight for power littered with sloganized rationalizations. It is tempting to psychoanalyze these justifications away cynically or skeptically, claiming that politics is really about power or that economics completely determines one's political views. The economic influence on political opinions threatens the reasonableness of politics and inspires economic reductionist theories of it. To confidently reject such reductions, we need a better explanation of the economic influence in politics. Aristotle offers one.

But Mulgan implies that Aristotle's analysis is stuck in his time, in his culture, in his economic and political context. Aristotle presents economic bias and difference as sub-political, permanent features of human politics. The *Politics* is not just an historical text, but something that speaks to our students directly by making claims about human nature and the way we tend to form political opinions. It also forces us to appreciate a profound political need: civic virtue must address economic differences wisely to safeguard a healthy politics and our good life together.

### THE FORCE OF ECONOMICS IN POLITICS

Since economic difference wreaks havoc on politics, perhaps we should just level property. Leveling could be done only by the expropriation typical of extreme democracies, and Aristotle condemns it as unjust and destructive of the city. Moreover, it would not eliminate factional conflict.

For the property of the citizens to be equal, then, is indeed an advantage with a view to avoiding factional conflict between them, but by no means a great one. ... For the nature of desire is without limit, and it is with a view to satisfying this that the many live. (69: II.7.1267a)

For Aristotle, economics is not the essentially responsible factor behind the factional split between the wealthy and the poor: the more fundamental cause is their characters, judgments about what they deserve, and desires for what they imagine they can get. Aristotle remarks, “one ought to level desires sooner than property” (68: II.7.1266b) and recommends moral education as more important than adjusting the distribution of property. But if character matters more than money, how should we read Aristotle’s economically focused analysis of regimes and factions?

A man’s opinions, not his economic identity, determines whether he advocates a certain regime. Wealth and poverty are sub-political features of factioners, seemingly incidental to their political characters and to the nature of their regimes. Yet wealth and poverty are the psychological motors behind oligarchic and democratic constitutions because they powerfully contribute to a man’s character and thus his opinions about justice and the common good.

One’s view of the *telos* of human life is, according to Aristotle, the primary determinant of one’s political principles, and extreme economic conditions of one’s upbringing strongly distort one’s view of the good life. The rich tend to identify wealth as the good life, and thus the city’s *telos*, and so espouse oligarchic “justice” and policies to maintain their wealth and privilege. The poor tend to identify living as one pleases as the good life, and so see freedom as the city’s *telos*, and thus espouse democratic “justice” and policies such as redistribution that help each more easily and equally live as he pleases.

So for Aristotle the defining principles of oligarchy and democracy are the views of justice espoused—equality for the poor and superiority for the rich—and their views are partially correct: “The cause of this is that the judgment concerns themselves, and most people are bad judges concerning their own things” (97: III.9.1280a). Aristotle points out that people’s political principles tend to be influenced by their economic situations, simply because one’s self-interest in a policy skews the appearance of its justice.

But more deeply, living the rich or poor life distorts one’s emotional habits, one’s understanding of the good human life, and ultimately one’s views of justice and the common good. The practical reason of the rich and the poor is governed by emotional undercurrents (arrogance and contempt, envy and malice) that distort their relationships with whoever appears as their opposite in possessions. One result is that they view the city not as a partnership but as a contest. Another is that they are incapable of properly ruling or being ruled. As Aristotle points out, many extreme condi-

tions have this effect, though wealth and poverty are the most politically significant. When it comes to the goods of fortune, the very lucky "tend to become arrogant and base on a grand scale," while the very unlucky become "malicious and base in petty ways." Even "from the time they are children at home," such people can neither rule nor be ruled well, humanely, maturely. "So the ones do not know how to rule but only to be ruled, and then only in a fashion of rule of a master, and the others do not know how to be ruled by any sort of rule, but only to rule in the fashion of rule of a master. What comes into being, then, is a city not of free persons but of slaves and masters, the ones consumed by envy, the others by contempt" (134: IV.11.1295b).

Aristotle discussed masterly rule when he described the relationships within the household, the original economic unit. As pre-political, genetic parts of the city, households and villages remain in the city, and the relationships forged there continue to have force in the city's life. The sub-political economic dealings between rich and poor people shape them as political actors, because their characters take on an emotional impetus that plays out politically. The city informed by a good and just constitution is the fulfillment of these human groups, but material is not always fully governed by its form. This is so especially when forming the material requires discernment and decision, as it does in human action. That the rich and the poor are the primary factional parts of the city indicates that, according to Aristotle, the politics of most cities fails to achieve a truly political level because the usual regime-forming actors are dominated by sub-political styles of rule.

There are certainly among the poor and rich those who are not vicious in their political views, who may not fully believe the exclusivist slogans of their factions. Like the more or less incontinent man whose emotions can overthrow his better judgment, the poor and the rich can be radicalized into acting as Aristotle's stereotypes of democrats and oligarchs. The emotions that especially bias their vision of justice are, for the rich, contempt, arrogance, and fear of the many, and for the poor, envy, malice, and fear of the rich. Furthermore, as one faction is aroused (we call this, exciting the base), these emotions are more evoked in the other, such that factions reciprocally reinforce each other's emotional vulnerabilities. Given the snowballing effect of factional hatred and fear in a city, we can understand how the situation Aristotle describes could arise in which the factioners openly pronounce their hatred and vow to fight, scatter, and destroy each other.

One's economic situation does not directly or necessarily determine one's view of justice: it just happens that being embedded in certain *extreme* economic situations distorts one's views. Aristotle claims both the virtuous and those in the economic middle escape having their perceptions of justice twisted by economic extremes. The virtuous are too few to have much of an effect on factions in a city (154: V.4.1304b), but the middle can be a quantitatively significant group and are more open to virtue than are the rich or the poor.

The middle is free of the economic extremes that most powerfully distort one's understanding of the good human life, the common good, and justice; just as importantly, they are not pulled into the political polarization because they neither plot against, nor are plotted against by, economic enemies. The middle avoids the emotions that badly bias oligarchs' and democrats' opinions about justice—this avoid-

ance and the fact that the middle can be friends with both the wealthy and the poor explain their ability to ground a good regime by allowing it to overcome the distrust that destroys friendship. The middle does not have exhaustive or philosophical knowledge of justice. They are not even on the whole virtuous. Their perception of justice may be distorted by other personal malformed dispositions, but it is undistorted by the economic extremes that especially undermine political friendship. This gives them a vital role to play in Aristotle's good regimes. Only a city with a strong middling element is capable of avoiding the destructive domination of factions.

#### ECONOMICS AND THE BODY POLITIC: PERSONAL, ANIMAL, OR VEGETABLE?

Aristotle says that he will investigate the city by looking at its parts. The city is a complex thing, having many parts and many types of parts. In Book I, the analytic method focuses Aristotle's attention on the *genetic* parts of the city—he is interesting in displaying what the city is by showing “how things develop naturally from the beginning” (35; I.2.1252a). He then discusses the household, its members, the types of rule found within it, and its natural outgrowth, the village. From the union of villages, a city arises, and in it, these genetic parts are surpassed by the community capable of providing not just for continued life of the race but for a good human life. The many households and villages are not the rungs on a ladder thrown away when transcended; they constitute the embryonic material that remains in the city as a sub-political bodily substrate. Aristotle begins Book III by again saying that we must investigate the city by investigating its parts. Here he is focused on the persons who, through deliberations and decisions based on their various convictions about justice and the common good, shape the agglomeration of families and villages *politically*. From Book III's formal focus, the citizens are the primary parts, because a citizen is someone who shares in the regime.

In Books IV and V, Aristotle presents the rich and poor as the crucial parts of the city. But what kind of part? The rich and poor seem to be both genetic and formal. They are regime-forming caucuses of would-be rulers, determining the city's form when they gain power and articulate views of justice and the common good to validate their actions; yet they are groups, associated with clusters of households, distinguished by the pre-political differences of wealth and poverty and motivated by sub-political emotions and desires.

The constitution is supposed to be the form of the city analogous to the soul of an animal. Repeatedly Aristotle uses this analogy. Animals differ according to the arrangement of their parts, which determines how they seek sustenance, which determines their ways of life. Analogously, the many parts of the city yield different constitutions when arranged differently, seeking different goods as the end of the city, and the constitution “is the way of life of a city” (133; IV.11.1295a40). What an interesting animal the city is that by decision gives itself its soul and its way of life! Animal bodies are gradually informed, their parts made and arranged by nature operating on the embryonic material through the species-form of the father. Not so the city.

Seemingly, the better analogy for the city would be to the human person, whose

nature requires a non-naturally growing complement, virtue. Virtue is natural, since it perfects us (*Physics* VII.3.246a-b), but it is not *native*. It doesn't develop non-deliberately by the workings of nature. Our emotional dispositions must be established by action, and must be worked upon by reason to become virtuous. A mass of villages may merely grow, but a regime involves reason. For a city to reach a good constitution, its parts must be subsumed into the whole, arranged justly, and ordered to the common good, just as the morally virtuous man establishes his character by taming and harnessing his desires in the activities of his good life.

But in explaining the city, Aristotle prefers the analogy to the body of brutes. Perhaps this is because in arranging its parts, this strange animal usually does not do so well, but puts its stomach-driven imagination in charge.

Various bodies of animals require hunting different food, and "differences in sustenance have made the ways of life of animals differ" (44: I.8.1256a). Likewise, seeking happiness defines the constitution and the city's way of life. "For it is through hunting for this [happiness] in a different manner and by means of different things that [groups of] individuals create ways of life and regimes that differ" (209: VII.8.1328a-b). The ultimate task of politics is to do this well, shaping the goals, rules, and habits of the people to allow and encourage the citizens to live good human lives. Because the good human life is not defined by material goods, politics at its core is not about economics. Economics appears in the *Politics* primarily as a sub-political reality that as a psychological force over regime-builders and trouble-makers is responsible for their *deformation* of the city.

After the *Politics*' study of factions, another biological analogy suggests itself. In *On the Soul*, Aristotle critiques Empedocles's reductionist theory of plant life. "Empedocles has not spoken well" in stating that "growth happens to plants when they take root downward because earth moves that way by nature, and when they spread upward because fire moves that way." He asks of Empedocles, "what is it that holds the fire and earth together when they move in opposite directions?" Were fire and earth not potential parts but fully active in the plant's body, they would continually go up and down, pulling the plant asunder. "For they will be torn apart if there is not something that prevents it, and if there is, this is the soul, and it is responsible for the growing and the feeding." In order to be parts of the stable unity of the plant, fire and earth must be combined into organs by the form, which limits and harnesses the elemental motion. "For the growth of fire goes on without limit, as long as there is something burnable, but all things put together by nature have a limit and proportion of size and growth, and this belongs to the soul" (*On the Soul* 92-93: II.4.415b33-416a18). The city as ruled by factions resembles Empedocles' plant, since the rich and the poor are material parts unwilling to be limited by a proper constitution. Imagining the goods they contribute to the city, wealth and freedom, to be the point of the city rather than instruments for the city's good life, they do not recognize limits on these goods or on their titles to rule. Like fire, desire is without limit. When they are radicalized and fully get their way, these groups tear the city asunder. The rich ruling most oligarchically or the poor most democratically is a tyranny and practically not a constitution at all—the whole can be held together only by violence.

The rich and poor are the primary factional parts of the city. Understanding the

significance of this fact requires recognizing them as both material genetic parts and formal end-determining parts. Though antireductionist, Aristotle's account of economics in politics still requires us to recognize sub-political economic forces as a powerful political fact, and warns us that Empedocles' plant describes us at our worst.

Relative wealth and poverty are permanent features of human life, but it is exorbitant wealth and real poverty and an empty gap in between that give rise to profound factional conflict. Aristotle's responses to the economic causes of faction are recommendations aimed at moderating wealth and poverty, limiting the power of the rich and poor to abuse each other, and cultivating the economic middle.

To solve the threat of factions to a city, it is not enough to attend only to their ideological mistakes. Just as factionalism results largely from bad economic arrangements, political friendship has material prerequisites. Good regimes must be built on and foster a healthy body, a material substrate that allows the rich and poor to recognize one another as political friends.

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