Recapturing Civil and Political Discourse: Aristotle as a Source

Introduction

Fissures among the citizenry and deep party divisions are but two signs of the current crisis in America and American politics. There is no lack of commentary that attempts to diagnose the problem and suggest solutions, yet the divide does not lessen nor does the vitriol decrease. The stakes are too great to withdraw from the political sphere, but becoming a partisan in the fray seems futile. Seeking a means to reinvigorate debate about politics that does not have the deep divisions as the starting point is imperative.

Political commentaries fill hundreds of volumes and span more than 2,000 years, but among the most important is what some call the first manual of politics, Aristotle's *Politics* and his corresponding work, the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle's teacher Plato and his teacher Socrates make great contributions to political questions, which are just as worthy of discussion, but the fundamental concepts found in the *Politics* is a better starting point to recapture civil discourse because the topics in the *Politics* are wide ranging and provide an opportunity to start from a different vantage point. Aristotle's writings are a means to step outside of the current political rancor and serve to clarify principles that can then be applied to American politics. A brief review will serve to introduce major themes.

What is the Origin of Politics?

A discussion of Aristotle's *Politics* does not begin by reading the first lines of the book, but by reading the closing lines of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this work Aristotle discusses the formation of character and the behavior that takes place between friends, family, colleagues, and citizens. The more public organization and the political backdrop of these interactions are among the contents of the *Politics*. The announced topics at the end of the *Ethics* are typically associated with politics: constitutions, laws, and customs. By prefacing his work dedicated to politics with his work on ethics, Aristotle suggests an implicit connection between conduct, judgment of whether that behavior is deemed good or bad, and the political practices and institutions where that activity takes place. Public and private are thus intertwined.

In the opening paragraphs of the *Politics*, Aristotle defines the city as a sort of partnership that is constituted for the sake of some good. Although he distinguishes the city from the household (where private conduct takes place), the natural development of the city begins with the household, the first partnership. This first partnership is formed by a male and a female who produce children, thus forming a family; the family is constituted by nature to meet the needs of daily life. Several households form a village to meet the nondaily needs, and several villages form a city. Aristotle explains that human beings, by nature, are political and social creatures. Because human beings are naturally drawn to form political communities, these communities serve as a fulfillment or a sort of completion of one's life. The private and the public thus come together in the political community.

The city, Aristotle explains, exists by nature and for the sake of living well. He further argues that human beings are the best of animals when completed or part of this larger whole--

living in a political community--but when separated from law and justice they are the worst of all. Justice is thus introduced into politics, the political community, and into the lives of citizens. These few observations on how Aristotle sets up the *Politics* invite further reflection on the origins of politics, the connections between private lives and the governing political structure, and justice, a prominent theme in both the *Ethics* and the *Politics*.

What is Justice?

Family and friends, pleasurable pastimes, a good job or other pursuits are among the typical responses to the question, "What makes for a good life or living well?" The particular activities in a daily life contribute to a good life, but the presence of pleasure (or lack of it) is not sufficient as a measure of whether one is living well. The measure of a good life is instead the determination of whether activity is just or unjust, or good or bad. Because human beings have the capacity of speech and reason, they also have the capacity to judge actions and behavior.

Justice is the main topic in Book V of the *Ethics* and is explained in light of human activities and behavior, but Aristotle makes a more explicit political connection in the *Politics* at the beginning of the work: "but justice is a political matter; for justice is the organization of a political community, and justice decides what is just" (*Pol* I.2, all *Politics* translations by G. M. A. Grube). The last phrase, justice decides what is just, is puzzling and prompts one to ask the following questions. "What is justice?" "How does justice decide what is just?" "What makes a political community just?"

Arriving at a definition of justice necessarily involves reflecting upon virtue and whether behavior results in good and moral actions. Aristotle's assertion that justice decides what is just leads to an understanding that there is a universal concept of justice that is true for all people and can serve as a guide to determine what is just. Accepting a universal concept puts the focus on the commonality and shared characteristics of human beings and citizens. To be sure, particular differences are present, but by recognizing that justice can serve to unite, one can appreciate why Aristotle has looked to the political community as necessary for living well. It is in good political communities that justice is present and observed and it is citizens of the community who behave in ways that are identified as good and just.

Living well is not a judgment based solely upon private activities or behaviors, but includes activity in the political community. Aristotle argues that it is the presence of justice that determines in large part whether one is living well and leading a good life. A fuller discussion requires taking up Aristotle's explanations of justice and virtue in the *Ethics*, but further discussion of the *Politics* raises the questions whether any political community provides the conditions for living well or if there is one that is best.

How Best to Judge Political Communities?

Responses to the question of naming the best city or country tend to reflect direct experiences or pleasant memories. Aristotle's discussion of the best political communities and regimes takes place in two different books in the *Politics*. In Book II he looks to the writings of other philosophers (Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, Phaleas of Chalcedon, and Hippodamus of

Miletus) and to past and current political practices (the regimes of Lacedaemonia and Crete). In Book VII he introduces the discussion from the vantage point of the best or most choice worthy way of life. He explains that this is the necessary first inquiry because one cannot consider the best political community without having some agreement on the best life.

This inquiry into the best life is a reminder that the beginning of the *Politics* is not on page one of the book, but on the last pages of the *Ethics* and presupposes that the teaching of that book will be applied to the *Politics*. Through his inquiry into the best life and the best city, Aristotle is again showing the connection between the private and the public or political. While some may look to possessions that make life enjoyable or convenient as a measure of a good or even best life, Aristotle looks to character to identify what makes for the best life. Again, the word virtue is at the heart of the discussion. Whether speaking generally of a virtuous character or identifying specific virtues such as courage, moderation, justice, and prudence, these practices or behaviors have a direct correlation to the quality of one's life.

Aristotle argues that this same measure of character can be applied to the city as well. It may seem odd to think of a city as happy or acting nobly, much like an individual person, but Aristotle does not think so and makes the assertion that "the best way of life both separately for each individual and in common for cities is that accompanied by virtue" (*Pol* 1323b40). The connection to virtue offers guidance in determining what is best and keeps one from mistakenly assuming that the best is the wealthiest, the most powerful, or a subjective response based solely upon one's experiences. These factors may be considered, but they are not the final judgment. Determining whether a city is virtuous may include consideration of the presence of such things as a system of justice that supports a fair trial, political participation open to the citizens, the ability to provide for one's family, or whether the city or country respects the boundaries of its neighbors.

Another similar feature between the citizen and the political community has to do with ruling, either ruling oneself or ruling others. Political communities, cities, states, and nations, have rulers, mayors, governors, and presidents. Again, the reference to virtue can help to clarify the connection between the private life and the political community. The answer to how one becomes virtuous begins with making good choices and ruling oneself. Aristotle develops this theory in the *Ethics*, explaining that children are ruled by parents or teachers who guide their behavior toward good choices and virtue. As one matures, reason and deliberation guide choices toward virtuous conduct. Political rulers must necessarily make choices on behalf of the citizenry. They must rule them and their political leadership becomes an integral component of determining whether a political regime is bad, good, or the best. While Aristotle has much more to say on the features of the best political regime, some further reflections on political rule are warranted.

Political Rule

Who rules is among the most important topics in a discussion about politics. Whether a queen or a tyrant, a president or a legislative leader, rulers are distinguished by how they gain power and hold their positions of authority and whether they act in the best interests of their citizens or advance their own interests. Aristotle takes up these concerns in the middle books of

the *Politics*, but first he distinguishes between rule in the household and rule in a political community.

The foundations of the political community are rooted in the household as Aristotle explains at the beginning of the *Politics*, but he argues against the idea that household rule and political rule are similar. Both are partnerships and exist because of the natural tendencies of human beings--we naturally come together to form these partnerships--but the household aims to meet the needs of daily life and the city or political community aims to provide the conditions for the citizens to live well (I.2). Justice was the focus in the earlier discussion of the idea of living well; who rules provides another perspective on this topic.

There are two parts to the discussion of political rule. Speaking of the ruler is only half of the equation. The other half is the ruled or those who submit to the ruler. While this may seem to be a straightforward discussion, whether one is a citizen or a subject or among the free or oppressed, some of Aristotle's most controversial writings in the *Politics* are in this discussion of ruling others when the topic of slavery is introduced. The distinction that Aristotle makes is between the slave by nature, someone who does not belong to himself, and the slave by law, someone who is among the people conquered in war (*Pol* I.4, 6). Both have a master, but for different reasons. The former needs a master because he is unable to lead a life that is independent and self-sufficient, the latter is on the losing side of a battle and is therefore ruled by others.

One's first reaction to these various distinctions is to ask why bring up the topic of slavery in a book about politics. Those who lose their freedom because of a defeat in war is plausible as a political topic. Taking prisoners or confining them because of the danger that they represent to others is a practice that dates back to the beginning of conflicts between men. The slave by nature is not as easy to grasp unless one recalls that the beginning of the *Politics* is in the *Ethics*, a work that focuses on character and behavior. This explains why Aristotle introduces this idea.

The moral virtues, Aristotle argues, are likened to a mean between the excess and deficiency of vices. The virtue of courage, for example, is between the excess of rashness and deficiency of cowardice; the virtue of moderation is between the excess of licentiousness and the deficiency of insensibility. Children are guided toward the mean by parents or elders and as they get older they develop the capacity to aim for the mean by deliberating and making judgments. A slave by nature or one who cannot regulate his behavior and avoid the extremes must be in the care of a master or someone who can exercise judgement on his behalf. While many may take exception to the description "slave by nature," one can certainly identify those who make poor decisions or exhibit behaviors that endanger others. They are therefore in the care of others who make decisions on their behalf; their lack of freedom is due to the fact that they cannot rule themselves.

What does this have to do with political rule? The distinction between master and political ruler is made clear: the master rules the slave, but the political ruler rules free and equal persons (*Pol* I.7). Aristotle thus highlights the character of the citizens, the free and equal persons, by distinguishing them from "slaves by nature" or those who are incapable of ruling

themselves. He also points to something very important about political rule and that is the character of the citizenry is as important as that of the ruler. Political communities are formed for the sake of living well, but this is dependent upon the presence of law and justice as well as the good character of citizens and rulers alike. These communities are likened to a political partnership, a partnership that has many participants including men, women, and children. Aristotle concludes Book I with a call to educate all inhabitants of the political community, including women and children, and clarifies the relationship between the household and the city. "For since the household as a whole is a part of the city, and these things of the household, and one should look at the virtue of the part in relation to the virtue of the whole, both children and women must necessarily be educated looking to the regime, at least if it makes any difference with a view to the city's being excellent that both its children and its women are excellent." (*Pol* I.13).

These reflections on political rule bring to light that the discussion is not confined to a ruler or persons vested with authority to legislate on behalf of others, but is instead a far more comprehensive conception that involves citizens and rulers alike. This leads to further inquiry into the topics of the citizen and the ruler.

On the Citizen in Aristotle's *Politics*

When thinking about human beings, there are identifiable characteristics that distinguish them from animals and gods. They are mortal in contrast to the immortality of gods and goddesses and they have the capacity to reason in contrast to animals who rely upon instinct. Moreover, they can use speech to engage in dialogue, debate, and persuasion, which is not in the purview of gods or animals. Human beings can also form themselves into communities that are not merely for the sole purpose of feeding as a pack of lions or a school of fish may do, but for higher ends. Once communities are formed, another distinction between human beings and animals and gods is the designation of citizen.

Aristotle explains in Book III of the *Politics* that the designation of citizen and the requirements for citizenship vary according to the particular regime, but he gives two general definitions including "one who shares in ruling and being ruled" and "whoever is entitled to participate in an office involving deliberation or decision" (*Pol* III.13, 1). The common element in these seemingly disparate definitions is the activity: in the former, the activity of ruling both oneself and others; in the latter, the rational activity that distinguishes human beings from gods and animals and allows for the possibility of political organization and good governance. Ruling oneself and others again calls to mind the emphasis that Aristotle places on character and behavior in his political and ethical teaching. How well citizens perform participatory activities such as voting, serving on a jury, or holding an elective office is dependent upon their character.

Another inquiry that Aristotle pursues is asking whether the virtue of the good human being is the same as that of the excellent citizen. This question invites the reader to consider the measure of a good citizen. He gives the analogy of sailors who have many tasks on a ship yet share in the common goal of its preservation. Citizens, too, have many duties and responsibilities, but the preservation of the city is among the ends that unite all. In an era when many are quick to demand individual rights, thinking about the relationship between the

individual citizen and the city fosters a greater awareness of the intersection between individual rights and the common good. Are they complementary pursuits or does a tension arise that leads to conflict? If there is a tension, is the result a diminishment of rights or the destruction of the city or nation?

Aristotle also prompts one to consider whether living in close proximity to one another is sufficient for the foundation of a city or if several communities that form an alliance for purposes of trade, security, or maintaining peaceful relations could unite and be called a city. The city has been likened to a partnership and thus the citizens could be labeled as partners in these endeavors. Aristotle, however, rejects location, exchange, or alliance as sufficient and reminds his readers that the end of the city is living well. "The political partnership must be regarded, therefore, as being for the sake of noble actions, not for the sake of living together" (*Pol* III.9). Not only are the activities of the citizens emphasized, but the quality and aim of their actions are also highlighted. The opening lines of the *Politics* and the *Ethics* speak of the political partnership constituted for the sake of some good and human activity aiming at some good. The quality of life that Aristotle argues is possible encourages all to reflect upon their actions, their interactions with their fellow citizens, and the political setting that provides the structure for these noble actions to occur.

These general remarks about the citizen are part of a larger discussion that explores the various regimes that organize the citizenry and their governing practices. Further discussion of the citizen in light of the six regimes that Aristotle examines is in Book III and subsequent books of the *Politics*.

On Regimes in Aristotle's *Politics*

Living well is a recurring theme in the *Politics*. Beyond the common advantages present when families and villages come together to form cities, such as security and increased production of goods, the partnership of free persons and the presence of justice in the city lay the foundation for a good life. Yet the formation of the city is simply the beginning; what Aristotle calls the regime, defined as the arrangement of the offices in the city and the authority that acts in the capacity of a governing body, allows the city to function and the citizens to engage in varied pursuits. Democracy or democratic regimes dominate the current discourse, but Aristotle provides a more expansive framework and one that prompts consideration of features and consequences of various arrangements.

The simplest division of Aristotle's framework is the rule of one, few, or many serving in the capacity of the governing authority: a monarchy, an aristocracy, or a polity. A more complex division is judging whether those who rule act on behalf of the common good or act to further their own interests that are not consistent with the good of the citizenry. Aristotle identifies the former as correct and the latter as deviations. The tyranny, the oligarchy and the democracy (or mob rule) fit the simple division of the rule of one, few, and many, but they are also the deviations. The lawless tyrant deviates from the monarch who rules in the interest of the people. The oligarchs who have greater wealth or property advance themselves or their own interests in contrast to those deemed the best, the *aristos* in Greek, who are few but because of their knowledge and wisdom govern well. The deviation of the rule of the many is likened to mob

rule, whereas what is identified as the polity is a mixture of oligarchy and democracy. This is also known as the mixed regime. The arrangement of offices in a polity has both oligarchic and democratic features such as some offices being chosen by lot and others by election or selecting some offices by assessment and others not. A correct or good form of government (polity) is possible from two deviations (oligarchy and democracy) because they moderate each other and allow for the implementation of a variety of governing practices and greater participation of the citizenry.

While these regimes allow for various forms of participation in governance, Aristotle encourages his reader to judge not only the intentions of those in authority, but the effects of their governance. In the course of the discussion of various regimes, he restates one of the original themes of the *Politics*: the city exists for the sake of living well. Whether it is possible for the citizens to live well is directly related to the type of governance and the character of those who rule. A regime, however, is more than an arrangement of offices and office holders. Aristotle raises the question whether there is another authoritative element in the regime besides the ruler.

As stated above, there are several possible rulers including the multitude, the wealthy, the best, the respectable, or the tyrant. The tyrant is the least desirable and if the only qualification of the wealthy is their ability to acquire material goods, then they too are not qualified to rule others. Those who are recognized as the respectable or the best suggest that they are of sufficiently good character and wisdom to command the regard of others. The observations that Aristotle makes about the multitude are noteworthy because he recognizes that while each individual may not be virtuous or prudent, as a multitude they may share these qualities with others. Aristotle likens this to the multitude becoming a single human being and argues that the multitude may participate best when they have a share in deliberating and judging with others (*Pol* III.10-11).

There is still another possibility with respect to the authoritative element that is not any of the rulers that Aristotle identifies, but is instead the law. Aristotle recognizes the value of law at the end of the *Ethics* (*NE* X.9) when he argues that it can compel behavior in a manner that a ruler cannot and moreover is better received than a ruler compelling the people to act or behave in a certain way. Thus, there are the two necessary and authoritative elements of the regime: those who rule and the law. There are instances when the ruler acts or performs those functions in the regime that the law does not address, but law as well is present and serves as a different sort of rule.

Aristotle is careful to specify that laws must be "correctly enacted." Just like there is a wide disparity between the rule of the tyrant and rule of the best or the rule of the mob and the rule of the many sharing in deliberation and judgment, there is also variation among laws. Laws can be "poor or excellent" and "just and unjust" (*Pol* III.11). Justice ensures excellent laws and allows for the possibility of the original purpose of the city or political regime, to live well. Just laws are authoritative and serve to guide the rulers and the citizens. Those regimes where justice is not present become the deviations—tyranny, oligarchy, democracy or mob rule—from the correct forms of monarchy, aristocracy, and polity. Recall Aristotle's admonition in Book I, "when separated from law and justice, man is worst of all."

The initial discussion of regimes, while seemingly formulaic, serves to bring attention to the structure of a political organization. Once the broad outlines are introduced, Aristotle engages in further inquiry into the constitution with a starting point of the best constitution. These topics will be addressed in a second set of essays on Aristotle. A brief review of the connection between his works on ethics and politics, which speaks to the continuity of the two themes, serves as a conclusion to this first set of essays.

On the Relationship between Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*

The complementary relationship between the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* has been noted since the outset of this inquiry. These two works combined expand the discussion to include many topics that are not typically associated with political themes. They also encourage a more comprehensive understanding of politics.

The content of the *Ethics* ranges from those topics already referenced such as virtue, justice, and happiness, but also includes discussions of self-restraint and lack of self-restraint, friendship, pleasure, and the contemplative life. From the opening line of the *Ethics*, "every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action as well as choice is held to aim at some good" (*NE* 1094a; all *NE* translations from Bartlett/Collins 2011 edition), the emphasis is focused on individual conduct, but it must be noted that Aristotle also recognizes the primacy of politics in Book 1 of the *Ethics*. He asserts that "[the political art] legislates what one ought to do and what to abstain from, its end would encompass those of the others, with the result that this would be the human good. For even if this is the same thing for an individual and a city, to secure and preserve the good of the city appears to be something greater and more complete: the good of the individual by himself is certainly desirable enough, but that of a nation and of cities is nobler and more divine" (*NE* 1094b5). Securing the good for a city or larger political community is within the purview of the legislator, but success is dependent upon application of the teaching in the *Ethics*.

At the beginning of Book 1, Aristotle explains that politics is the most authoritative and architectonic: "such appears to be the political art. For it ordains what sciences there must be in cities and what kinds each person in turn must learn and up to what point" (*NE* 1094a27). The subject of politics is again taken up at the end of Book 1 in the discussion of virtue. "And the politician in the true sense seems to have labored over this especially, for he wishes to make the citizens good and obedient to the laws. . . . And if this examination is a part of the political art, it is clear that the investigation would be in accord with the choice made at the beginning." (*NE* 1102a7). This reference to the original plan suggests that one should go beyond the inquiry of ethics and take up that of politics. Recall that the closing lines of the *Ethics* announces topics addressed in the *Politics*.

Another way to view the relationship between ethics and politics is that politics "legislates what one ought to do and what to abstain from" (*NE* 1094b5) and ethics, derived from *ethos,* guides the carrying out of these activities. Aristotle explains in Book 2 in the discussion of moral virtues that none are present in us by nature. "Neither by nature, therefore, nor contrary to nature are the virtues present; they are instead present in us who are of such a nature as to receive them, and who are completed through habit" (*NE* 1103a24). The reciprocal relation with politics

is that "by habituating citizens, lawgivers make them good, and this is the wish of every lawgiver; all who do not do this well are in error, and it is in this respect that a good regime differs from a base regime" (*NE* 1103b). Also incumbent upon the legislator is his regard for the upbringing of youth:

> . . . the soul of the student must be prepared beforehand by means of habits so as to feel delight and hatred in a noble way, just as must land that will nourish the seed. For someone who lives according to passion would not listen to a speech meant to deter him, nor in turn would he even comprehend it. . . . So there must first be an underlying character that is somehow appropriate for virtue, one that feels affection for the noble and disgust at the shameful. (*NE* 1179b26, 30)

Aristotle divides his discussion of virtue into two parts: the moral virtues and the intellectual virtues. The first distinction between the two is that habituation is the means of acquiring moral virtue, whereas intellectual virtue results from teaching and requires experience and time (*NE* 1103a15). The teaching of the *Ethics* is in part exercising one's capacity to listen and to exercise reason and not succumb to those appetites and desires that may provide momentary pleasures and that ultimately do not lead to happiness. The relation to politics is that good political regimes have laws that have as an end the formation of good moral character and the encouragement of their exercise. Aristotle does caution, however, that he wants the focus to be on the activity that results from the knowledge and not on the knowledge itself. He affirms this in the last chapter of Book X of the *Ethics*.

> If, then, what concerns these matters, as well as the virtues and, further, what concerns friendship and pleasure, have been sufficiently stated in outline, ought one to suppose that the task chosen has reached its end? Or, just as is said to be the case, is the end in matters of action not contemplating each thing in turn and understanding it, but rather doing them? And so is knowing about virtue not sufficient either, but is it necessary instead to try to possess the virtues and make use of them, unless we become good in some other way? (*NE* 1179a33)

These ideas about virtue and politics, written more than 2,000 years ago by a Greek, can contribute to political discussions in America. George Washington stressed the importance of a moral foundation in his Farewell Address: "It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule, indeed, extends with more or less force to every species of free government. Who that is a sincere friend to it can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric?"

The American fabric needs mending and a means to achieve this is by looking to those whose writings are outside of the deep divide that currently plagues the country. Aristotle's writings on politics and ethics are a source of reigniting thoughtful political discourse. The topics discussed above—the origin of politics, justice, judging political communities, political rule, the citizen, regimes, and the relationship between Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*—are just a few of the many that he addresses that relate to contemporary discussions in America. They introduce principles and points of discussion that are unique or long forgotten, and serve as a fresh approach to current crises.