



# LETTING VIRTUE GET DOWN?

*Aristotle's equality according to desert in the Nicomachean Ethics and the Politics*

Brîndușa Palade

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3.2004



EDITION: ADRIAN REZUŞ (ed.)

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PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS – DECEMBER 26, 2004





## Brîndușa Palade

### LETTING VIRTUE GET DOWN?

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# Letting virtue get down?

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## Foreword

Virtue seems to be a somewhat uncomfortable issue today. Since it obviously relates to the *quality* of human beings and to some implicit moral hierarchies, virtue seems to be a rather vexing topic for those who believe that universalism, egalitarianism and impartiality are the ultimate truth of every sound and reliable ethical and political theory. Both the inequality and the partiality involved by the ideal of *ethical excellence* seem to stay, hence, at odds with the modern ambition of reaching an ascetic and impartial moral motivation that must be freed from any personal evaluations

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of reality.

But even those who appreciate subjectivity and are ready to claim that values and emotions should be allowed an epistemological role, because knowledge has an inescapable evaluative character seem to be often uneasy with the issue of virtue. It has recently happened to me to deliver a lecture on Hobbes's moral virtues in front of an audience mainly interested in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century philosophy,<sup>1</sup> whose main reaction was that I had better skip the virtues recommended by Hobbes's "bourgeois" moral philosophy, and go to my next topic announced in the programme, which was Hobbes's approach to passions. In an oversimplified form, the message sounded like: Well, virtues might be interesting, if you insist, but how about the literature of passions (which is, for obvious reasons a lot more frequented by people interested in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century)? Aren't the passions more fascinating precisely because they are by and large empirically stronger and, thus, more able to dominate the will than the virtues, and, to quote from a 17<sup>th</sup> Century work about passions, because they "trouble wonderfully the soul"<sup>2</sup> and agreeably pervert the will?

I guess this kind of reaction expresses a widespread modern schizophrenia, which is apparently still pervasive, between turbulent and violent passions and the disposition or tendency to master rationally the emotional "soul". This is the schizophrenic division between passions of the soul and reason that was apparently induced by the Renaissance image of the passions as forces acting beyond our control, whose extreme

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<sup>1</sup>I'm referring to the lecture on "Hobbes's *Morall Vertues*" which I delivered at the summer-school on "Souls, clocks, atoms and forces: Competing models of individual in the modern thought", Macea, Arad [Romania], 30 August – 13 September 2003.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Mind in General*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1604, ed. W. Webster, New York: Newbold, 1986, p. 94.



power may overthrow and enslave reason and understanding.<sup>3</sup>


For Plato and Aristotle instead, there is only one soul, whose parts may be either rational or irrational, without affecting however the unity of the entire soul. The *inner* division of the soul that preserves its integrity could possibly help us explain why for Aristotle, for example, ethical virtue is not isolated from and helpless in front of the passions. On the contrary, according to his *Nicomachean Ethics*, being a good person means having *the appropriate feelings*. Furthermore, having *the right emotions* is *necessary* in order to be *a good person*, because moral virtue is defined by Aristotle as a tendency or disposition (*hexis*), induced by our habits, to have the appropriate emotions. Virtues are thus seen in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as “states of character”, “in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions” (*NE*, Book Two, Ch. 5, 1105b27)<sup>4</sup>. In addition, virtues are also “modes of choice or involve choice” and consequently presuppose deliberation and judgment. For example, a courageous person can choose to face a danger after she has judged that it is worth facing it, and avoid a danger about which she thinks that is not worth confronting. But this example of good judgment in case of danger can help us move to yet another characteristic that Aristotle attaches to ethical virtue: its *intermediate* status, which he expresses by his famous “doctrine of the mean”. Virtue or excellence is seen as bringing “into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence” (*NE*, Book Two, Ch. 6, 1106a17)<sup>5</sup>. But, since “every art does its work well – by looking to the intermediate and judging its

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<sup>3</sup>See Susan James’s *Passion and Action. The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, pp. 10–14.

<sup>4</sup>Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. and introduction by David Ross, revised by J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 35.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, p. 36.



works by this standard”<sup>6</sup> and “virtue is more exact and better than any art, as nature also is, then virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate”<sup>7</sup> (1106b8). In the case of courage, the virtue is a mean between the excess of confidence and the lack of it, which is also an excess of fear usually called cowardice<sup>8</sup> (1107a26).

To recap a bit, according to Aristotle, moral virtue “is concerned with passions and actions, and in these there is excess, defect, and the intermediate”<sup>9</sup> (1106b10). A passion like fear or confidence may be felt “both too much and too little, and in both cases not well”. Feeling it *well* means that it is experienced “at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way”<sup>10</sup> (1106b11). The conclusion so far is that “virtue is concerned with passions and actions, in which excess is a form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised as a form of success; and being praised and being successful are both characteristics of virtue”<sup>11</sup> (1106b15). This conclusion suggests that Aristotle’s own praise of the *intermediate* status of virtues is, in subtle ways, a radical one, which he also intimates by writing that “in respect of its substance and the definition which states its essence virtue is a mean, with regard to what is best and right an extreme”<sup>12</sup> (1106b39).

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.





## The circumstances of justice. Proportionate equality

Aristotle takes justice to be “the greatest virtue” and a “complete virtue in its fullest sense . . . because he who possesses it can exercise his virtue not only in himself but towards his neighbour also”<sup>13</sup> (1129b16). Further, he approaches justice in terms of equality – but of an equality that 1. should follow the doctrine of the mean, being an intermediate between two extremes and 2. should be established according to the particular circumstances of each case. “The just, then, – Aristotle concludes – must be both intermediate and equal and relative (i.e. for certain persons)<sup>14</sup> (1131a9–10).

The circumstances of justice are those by which a judge assesses which proportion should be given to each individual, in accordance with his merits that are relevant to the case. In other words, Aristotle’s scheme of distributive justice strongly recommends that rewards and “awards should be «according to merit»; for all men agree that what is just in distribution must be according to merit in some sense, though they do not all specify the same sort of merit”<sup>15</sup> (1131a26). This difference in the content of the merit depends upon the kind of the state in which distributive justice is applied: “democrats identify it with the status of freeman, supporters of oligarchy with wealth (or with noble birth), and supporters of aristocracy with excellence”<sup>16</sup> (1131a27).

“The just, then, is a species of the proportionate”<sup>17</sup> (1131a28) and a way of match-

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*




ing the ratios between the merits of individuals and the proportion they get from the whole share. Therefore, what is just should be seen as proportional to merit, and what is unjust, as violating that proportion.<sup>18</sup> (1131b16). Or at least this is how distributive justice ought to be applied, because Aristotle adds, in a realistic vein, that “one term becomes too great, the other too small, as indeed happens in practice; for the man who acts unjustly has too much, and the man who is unjustly treated too little”<sup>19</sup> (1131a16–17). To act justly is thus to re-establish the half-way between having too much and having too little, given the merits of each individual in the context of each particular case.

Now the interpretation of this individual desert can be easily regarded as too preferentially committed to the side of those who are already gifted and favoured by a good fortune, and one of the strongest objections addressed to an Aristotelian kind of moral partiality is precisely its exclusively elitist and aristocratic character, that would depend too much on both natural and social contingencies (a good birth, a good education, and so on). The social question that is usually suspected to remain unanswered by Aristotle would be: how should one treat the less favoured, if one did only shape his ethical principles by following the priority of excellence? Nonetheless, perhaps an unashamed acknowledgement of the inescapable existence of some networks of preference and partiality, accompanied by an expectation that such networks be morally commendable does not necessarily commit us to social indifference and uncharitable behaviour. If a radically hierarchical and strongly inegalitarian revival of Aristotle’s moral theory is not tenable indeed, perhaps a restoration of *some* principles

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 114.


<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*.



derived from the Aristotelian virtue ethics does not urge us to move that far in the elitist direction.

A distributive justice according to desert or a proportional equality applied to some situations, for example, in education or in selecting talented people on the job-market, can easily sit aside some policies which benefit the badly off members of a political community (and it does so, even if this is not overtly acknowledged at present by academic political theory, apparently for reasons of political prudence).

But since the fear of partiality is so widespread today, in most current theoretical approaches of distributive justice today the burden of justification lies on the side of those favouring *any* form of unequal distribution of goods and there is, instead, a *presumption of equality in all respects* to be found in most post-Kantian and even post-utilitarian ethical debates. That presumption is usually posited as a principle derived from the deontological axiom of equal respect for persons, that follows of course Kant's practical imperative. Yet, to infer from the principle of equal respect the principle of equal distribution of *all goods* seems to be a rather specious rhetorical move. Its main argument, that is very present for example in the very Kantian and yet slightly Marxist John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* is that the social and economical goods and the psychological resources for self-respect are interlinked. Consequently, having a basic decent social and economic standing would be an essential precondition for the self-respect of each rational person, *regardless of her merit*. Rawls's theory of justice is of course not aimed at leveling the distribution of goods, but its egalitarian penchant tends however to amplify by an artifice the importance of *being equal* to others and impartial toward every rational being, whilst it conceals somehow the value and the ethical significance of desert, that is of *being unequal* and reasonably biased.



But in spite of Rawls's theory of justice, the deontological principle of equal respect and the distributive justice could stay on quite different levels: at the first moral, substantive level, every individual should actively express his respect for others, let us say because he is aware that he has an equal God-given ontological status to every other human person. Yet, on the level of social and economic entitlements based on a proportional desert, a certain degree of inequality should be allowed, which is by the way one of two the principles of Rawls's theory (the difference principle)<sup>20</sup>. Perhaps one of the most important reasons for allowing such an *unequal* distribution of goods is the singular motivational force of having to reach an *exceptional* standard, in order to deserve some goods.


This emphasis upon the motivational import of desert follows a liberal argument in favour of different income levels and of restrained taxation: increasing the top rate of income tax would be *less incentive* for talented and potentially highly productive people to work hard and would indirectly make badly off people even worse off. The reason is that there will be a decrease in the total product, thus reducing the distributive gains for the egalitarian tax regime.

But the motivational force of a preferential, unequal and proportional account of justice seems to have also an ethical eloquence. For even if we admitted that partiality means narrow and subjectively shaped social networks, as well as a set of parochial values, we might gain instead *a more plausible content* of moral obligations than the impersonal "pure moral duty" of the Kantian ethics, for example.<sup>21</sup> This is

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<sup>20</sup>John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 52–58.

<sup>21</sup>See also John Cottingham, "Partiality and the Virtues", in Roger Crisp (ed.), *How Should One*



not necessarily a defense of an overwhelmingly emotional realm of virtues, that may evoke, for example, a certain prudish, puritanical notion of chaste virtue employed by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Victorian morality. If it is to be a defense of something, then it sustains rather the idea that some emotions could carry relevant evaluative judgments with a moral significance. Aristotle, again, attaches to some emotions in his *Rhetoric* the capacity to express moral judgments: “The Emotions are all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments, and that are also attended by pain or pleasure.” (*Rhetoric*, Book II, Part 1, 1378a29)<sup>22</sup>. And further he suggests that the expression of an emotion like anger may provide us information about the state of the mind of the angry people, the people who are the object of their anger and their grounds to get angry with some particular persons. The definition of anger, as well as any experience involving anger, thus presuppose some moral evaluations, since “anger may be defined as an impulse, accompanied by pain, to a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight directed without justification towards what concerns oneself or towards what concerns one’s friends” (1378a30–32)<sup>23</sup>.

Therefore, one’s anger at a friend’s being insulted can indicate one’s care for his friend, as a reaction to the denial of importance of the person he cares about. And the anger at an unjust treatment that one should undergo may be a reasonable reaction of self-concern motivated by an Aristotelian self-love (*philautia*)<sup>24</sup>. Consequently, the interference of some emotions with moral attitudes can invite us to question the

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*Live? Essay of the Virtues*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 57–58.

<sup>22</sup>Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. by W. R. Roberts, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>See for this topic John Cottingham, “The Ethics of Self-Concern”, in *Ethics* 101 (1991): 798–817.



hegemony of the modern depersonalised and dispassionate ethical theories. <sup>25</sup>


Now, if the Aristotelian theory of virtues can have the potential to fuel contemporary moral philosophy with some “human” ingredients that could make its motivational force more plausible, we have to also bear in mind that its focus on *excellence* is seen by Aristotle himself as not entirely realistic and applicable as such in politics. Unlike Plato in his *Republic*, Aristotle has more restrained ambitions in his political theory, seeking not to transform imperfect regimes such as democracies and oligarchies into perfect ones, vibrantly devoted to the promotion of human excellence. Aristotle is rather in a quest for some measures that can moderate the inevitably unwise tendencies of most political regimes. If virtues can play a role in such a reasonable attempt to “humanise” politics, this is rather confined to some prescriptions related to public education, aiming at cultivating civic virtues. But what are those civic virtues and how are they conceived in comparison to the virtues of the good man enlisted in the *Nicomachean Ethics* we shall see in what follows.

## The flexible approach of virtue in *Politics*

Aristotle wants to prevent a reading of *Politics* that would rashly confuse “the virtue of a good man” and the virtue of “the good citizen”. After having dedicated two ethical treatises to “the virtue of the good man” (the *Eudemian* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*), he intends to cast light on a “general notion of the virtue of the citizen”.


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<sup>25</sup>See also Michael Stocker, “How Emotions Reveal Value and Help Cure the Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories”, in Roger Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live? Essay on the Virtues, ed. cit.*, pp. 173–190.



With this purpose in mind, he explicitly compares the virtue of the good citizen with the function that a sailor plays on a ship to secure the safety of navigation: “Now, sailors have different functions, for one of them is a rower, another a pilot, and a third a look-out man . . . and while the precise definition of each individual’s virtue applies exclusively to him, there is, at the same time, a common definition applicable to them all. For they have all of them a common object, which is safety in navigation. Similarly, one citizen differs from another, but the salvation of the community is the common business of them all.” (*Politics*, Book III, Ch. IV, 1276b20–30). Aristotle seems to be, again, very sensitive to the distinctiveness of each individual case, and to a particular approach of *individualism*, which relies primarily on the individual’s belonging to himself, though at the same time requires that the individual should serve other members of the community, but only to the extent that he can connect their interests to his own. If we grant Aristotle with a consistent, logical theory of political duty (and we are to do that) his emphasis upon the individual does not allow us to interpret literally his further suggestion that “Neither must we suppose that any one of the citizens belongs to himself, for they all belong to the state, and are each of them a part of the state, and the care of each part is inseparable from the care of the whole.” (*Politics*, 1337a25–30). This quotation does refer to the context of public education only, which is to be shaped according to the single *telos* of the community. But apparently it is not meant to support a stronger notion of community, that would entirely subordinate the individual to the state.

Going back to our main topic, “the virtue of the citizen must . . . be relative to the constitution of which he is a member” (*Politics*, 1276b30–1). Yet, on the ground of Aristotle’s own empirical observations about the diversity of the forms of government,




constitutions may differ. This is why the virtue of the good citizen, which is relative to the kind of state in which he lives, should differ as well. This connection of the virtue of the citizen to the legislative framework which normalises his public life could not be, of course, seen as “a perfect virtue”, for the latter can only be singular, and conceived as independent from the fluctuating and unpredictable political environment.

Yet, one disquieting question may arise here, especially for a reader of Aristotle’s *Politics* who lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: which is the limit of this virtuous political duty of the citizen to the state? Given Aristotle’s awareness on the fact that different kinds of regime tend to produce citizens in the regime’s own image, and his ethical support of this political reality by recommending that the obligations of citizenship should fluctuate from regime to regime, the anxious question is what should be the duty of citizenship if a state turns into a blatantly authoritarian institution, or, in Aristotle’s more moderate terms, into a tyranny? If we admit of such a flexible character of citizenship, how far can an individual get in his allegiance to a state whose *telos* can be no longer perceived as his own? But, of course, it is not the aim of this paper to insist on this difficult challenge to Aristotle’s notion of the virtue of the citizen, which may be also beyond the political expectations of his place and time.

What seems to be important here is the minimalist and flexible approach of political virtue, if compared to the more demanding sketch of the moral virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle realistically assumes that “the state cannot be entirely composed of good men”, but claims that “each citizen is expected to do his business well, and must therefore have virtue” (*Politics*, 1276b35–40). Each individual should, therefore, contribute to the *telos* of the city by exercising his own virtue in a proper way. To sustain his distinction between the two kinds of virtue, Aristotle draws






from the functional difference between the citizens' virtues the difference between the variable and adjustable virtue of the citizen and the exceptional and unique virtue of the good man.

However, this distinction is not to be taken too rigidly. For Aristotle invites us to see if “there . . . be no case in which the virtue of the good citizen and the virtue of the good man coincide” (*Politics*, 1277a13–14). “To this we answer that the good ruler is a good and wise man, and that he who would be a statesman must be a wise man” (1277a14–16), is Aristotle’s immediate reply. And because this moral superiority of the ruler is “a must” for Aristotle, the means to reach it would be, as he proposes, “special education needed by a ruler” (1277a20).


Aristotle’s perspective on the political virtues is more transparent when he makes clear his further distinction between the virtue of a wise ruler and the virtue of the good citizen: “If then the virtue of a good ruler is the same as that of a good man, and we assume further that the subject is a citizen as well as the ruler, the virtue of the good citizen and the virtue of the good man cannot be absolutely the same, although in some cases they may; for the virtue of a ruler differs from that of a citizen.” (1277a22–24). But what is typical for the virtue of a ruler and what for that of a citizen? The answer is to be found in an explicit form in the text, and it also contains an evaluation of desert: “Now if we suppose the virtue of a good man to be that which rules, and the virtue of the citizen to include ruling and obeying, it cannot be said that they are equally worthy of praise.” (1277a27–30). The area of exercising virtue in the ruler’s case is thus supposed to be wider and more demanding than that of the citizen. To use a current phrase, this difference seems to consist in the higher *degree of responsibility* attached to a leading function, as compared to the



less demanding duty of a citizen. And to this hierarchy of desert, Aristotle matches a vertical difference of status and privilege, which could be, arguably, seen as a political expression of the notion of proportionate equality he had defined in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

However, the hierarchy at stake is not conceived in a rigid fashion, since it is part of the education of a ruler to learn how to obey a constitutional rule, before requiring others to comply with it: “This is not the rule of which we are speaking; but there is a rule of another kind, which is exercised over freemen and equals by birth – a constitutional rule, which the ruler must learn by obeying, as he would learn the duties of a general of cavalry by being under the orders of a general of cavalry, or the duties of a general of infantry by being under the orders of a general of infantry, and by having had the command of a regiment and of a company. It has been well said that «he who has never learned to obey cannot be a good commander». The two are not the same, but the good citizen ought to be capable of both; he should know how to govern like a freeman, and how to obey like a freeman – these are the virtues of a citizen.” (1277b8–16).

If the citizen should know how to rule by attending some public debates and being involved in public decision-making, as well as how to obey the rule, there is however a *differentia* that distinguishes the function of a ruler from that of a citizen: the exercise of practical wisdom. Echoing the standards for the good man he had traced in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle prescribes that “practical wisdom only is characteristic of the ruler: it would seem that all other virtues must equally belong to ruler and subject. The virtue of the subject is certainly not wisdom, but only true opinion; he may be compared to the maker of the flute, while his master is like a flute-player or



user of the flute.” (1277b26–30).


Therefore, not only the ethical virtues discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but also the more minimalist political virtues endorsed by Aristotle in his *Politics* imply a hierarchical structure and a vertical ranking of values that presuppose a notion of desert and some qualitative views about the human character.

But even if we agreed that Aristotle had his upright reasons to sustain such qualitative standards for his own society, i.e. the Athenian *polis* of over two thousands years ago, what could be the relevance of this discussion for a contemporary approach of politics in our time? For, given the impressive authority of the liberal notion of neutral and anti-perfectionist state, whose non-interference with the private sphere would also involve setting aside from the formation of human character according to a qualitative perspective, the very idea of human excellence seems to be somehow illicit and odd for a liberal-democratic analysis of social institutions today. Not surprisingly, this tendency coincides with the rather insignificant treatment of education in the theoretical literature of liberalism. Both the issue of virtue and the cultivation of human character are little frequented in the Western liberalism, though there are also a few, but auspicious dissents that are initiated by Joseph Raz, Stephen Macedo, William Galston and Peter Berkowitz.

The idea of a basic liberal commitment to the non-intrusion and neutrality of the state may be, of course, justified up to a certain extent, although in the noteworthy liberal-communitarian debate the critics of liberalism have convincingly argued that such neutrality couldn't be sustained radically, since even a liberal state promotes its own values through education and public discourse.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>See Charles Taylor, “Atomism”, in *Philosophy and the human sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge



Yet, there is also another key element, especially in the Left-oriented American liberalism that can possibly explain the current eclipse of virtue and human excellence: the promotion of the more horizontal notions of equality, impartiality and fairness in all respects. Or else, *the presumption of equality in every respect*. But, if this presumption implies, *inter alia*, that a liberal-democratic state can lie on a firmer foundation without paying attention to the quality of its citizens and officeholders, it seems that the neutrality, the universalism and the egalitarianism required by liberalism are pushed to an extreme. And it is possible that a reconnection of liberal theory with a certain notion of virtue and desert can provide social institutions the breathing room needed for a good functioning (it is, by the way, the sort of breathing room that is not lacking in the writings of a protoliberal like Hobbes and of “founding fathers” of liberalism like Locke and Mill). This is the sort of unashamed qualitative and reasonably preferential approach of politics that may get some inspiration from Aristotle’s moderate treatment of equality according to desert in his *Politics*. A “qualified defense of moral parochialism”, to use the phrase of an American “republican liberal”,<sup>27</sup> could still formulate some questions in Aristotelian terms.


## How should one preserve a suitable regime?

In Book V of *Politics*, dedicated to revolutions, Aristotle departs from his moral concern about the practical absence of justice according to desert, or of proportionate

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University Press, 1985.

<sup>27</sup>Richard Dagger, *Civic Virtues. Rights, Citizenship, and Republican Liberalism*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 59–60.




equality, in most kinds of political regime: “in the many forms of government which have sprung up there has always been an acknowledgement of justice and proportionate equality, although mankind fail attaining them” (*Politics*, Book V, Ch. 1, 1301a26–29).

The detailed explanation of this absence comes immediately afterwards, and it seems to be nourished by Aristotle’s own empirical observation of politics: ” Democracy, for example, arises out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects; because men are equally free, they claim to be absolutely equal. Oligarchy is based on the notion that those who are unequal in one respect are in all respects unequal; being unequal, that is, in property, they suppose themselves to be unequal absolutely. The democrats think that as they are equal they ought to be equal in all things; while the oligarchs, under the idea that they are unequal, claim too much, which is one form of inequality. All these forms of government have a kind of justice, but, tried by an absolute standard, they are faulty; and, therefore, both parties, whenever their share in the government does not accord with their preconceived ideas, stir up revolution.” (1301a28–1301b7).

The absence of a sense of proportionate equality is thus, for Aristotle, an explanation of many dramatic political uprising in his time. Political regimes which tend to the extreme of either equality or inequality are shown as heavily paying the costs of their domestic unbalanced management of merits, risking their own annihilation by revolution.


If this is an examination of the causes of the violent failures of most political regimes in Aristotle’s time, the remaining question is “what are the modes of preservation in states generally, or in a particular state, and by what means each state may be best



preserved” (1301a22–24). With this question in mind, Aristotle starts revising the doctrine of the two kinds of equality that his teacher Plato has first outlined in the Book Six of the *Laws*.

According to this doctrine, “equality is of two kinds, numerical and proportional; by the first I mean sameness or equality in number or size; by the second, equality of ratios.” (*Politics*, 1301b30–33). Numerical equality is quantitative and arithmetical, whereas proportional equality is qualitative and restricted to the criterion of merit. And even if Aristotle’s ethical preference is clearly on the side of equality according to merit, in his *Politics*, however, he looks for solutions to preserve the stability of a regime. For the sake of political stability, he thus admits that “both kinds of equality should be employed; numerical in some cases, and proportionate in others” (1302a7–9), because it is realistic to expect, for example, that nobleness and virtue be rare, and to start from the premise that wealth and number are a lot more frequent. As a result, suitable, though imperfect regimes are to be preserved by compromising between proportionate equality and numerical equality. In operational terms, that would mean that some offices are taken after popular or democratic elections, though some others should be distributed after a more qualified assessment of the candidates’ merits.

As for the most stable kind of regime envisaged by Aristotle, he notoriously prefers Greek democracy, for the practical reason that it “appears to be safer and less liable to revolutions than oligarchy.” (1302a9–10). “For, as he further explains, “in oligarchies there is the double danger of the oligarchs falling out among themselves and also with the people; but in democracies there is only the danger of a quarrel with the oligarchs. No dissension worth mentioning arises among the people themselves. And we may



further remark that a government which is composed of the middle class more nearly approximates to democracy than to oligarchy, and is the safest of the imperfect forms of government.” (1302a10–15).

Given the empirical awareness that Aristotle mobilizes in writing his *Politics*, he cannot overlook the unavoidable conflict between a wealthy upper class and a worse situated lower class – which is by the way why some Western political scientists see now Aristotle as the first proponent of a theory of social conflict. And apparently his ethical doctrine of the mean can also provide him a political instrument for taming this conflict, by envisaging the stabilizing role that a middle class can play in a democracy. But if the preservation of a political regime is seen as the highest goal of Aristotelian politics, this is not to be done at all costs. Finding the middle ground for a steady political regime does not mean letting virtues get down completely. Virtues are of course less demanding in the public sphere of politics than in the private area of individual life, and “the virtue of the citizen” should not be realistically expected to reach very often the exceptional quality of “the virtue of the good man”. Yet, Aristotle does not seem to be ready to bargain with politics all of his ethical preferences. According to his own theoretical approach of the intermediate, such a hegemony of realistic political priorities over the human core of social life would be an excess with respect “to the definition which states its essence”, and “with regard to what is best and right”, that is to the idea that a political community aims “at the highest good”, is “an extreme” (*NE*, 1006b39). For “the highest good” that Aristotle purports as the aim of a political community at the beginning of *Politics* is not abstractedly conceived, but it is the good of a certain community whose members are entitled to dignity and self-concern rightly understood. Thus, the question “How should one preserve a suitable regime?”

could become more far-reaching, if by “preserving” what is suitable for a political community one also means the perpetuation of some extrapolitical values that may ensure its endurance, beyond the practical strategies of managing political interests in a proper way. The primary interrogation of this paper is, therefore, whether equality according to desert should be included in the list of values that could “preserve”, in a wider sense of the word, a community.







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