

ARISTOTLE'S *POLITICS*: EXEGESIS

“Heterogeneity of stocks may lead to faction — at any rate until they have had time to assimilate. ... Most of the cities which have admitted others as settlers, either at the time of their foundation or later, have been troubled by faction.”

— Aristotle, *Politics*, V.3, 1303<sup>a</sup>13

In this section of Book V of his *Politics*, Aristotle examines the causes of factional conflict and constitutional change within the *polis*. A faction — any group of citizens that is smaller than the whole — is formed by either inferiors or equals, according to Aristotle, for “inferiors form factions ... to be equals, and equals ... to be superiors” (V.2, 1302<sup>a</sup>22). “Dissimilarity” is one of the causes of factional conflict that Aristotle aims to discuss further, particularly due to its “different” nature (V.2, 1302<sup>a</sup>34). However, to understand this statement better, one must first examine Aristotle’s definition of a city and the need for unity in light of his opposition to suggestions proffered in Plato’s *Republic*.

A *polis* is a the “most sovereign and inclusive association” that “comes into being for the same of some good (I.1, 1252<sup>a</sup>1). Aristotle further asserts that “the city is prior in the order of nature to the family and the individual” (I.2, 1253<sup>a</sup>18). However, such a *polis* presumes a certain unity, especially in light of the analogy of the body that Aristotle uses to establish the *polis* as prior to the individual. A closer reading of this analogy would reveal that if the *polis* is to function with an aim toward actualising the potential for good, then the parts must be in concord with one another to fulfil the telos assigned to the

whole. In such a case, one may surmise that factionalism is not intrinsically good because it creates conflict that prevents a true actualisation of the good.

This presumption of unity toward an actualisation of the good, however, is challenged by Aristotle's arguments against the conclusions reached by Socrates in Plato's *Republic*. It is here that Aristotle consistently maintains that the *polis* is "composed of those who are like one another," adding further that "a real unity must be made of elements which differ in kind" (II.2, 1261<sup>a</sup>22). Aristotle reasons that if everything in the city were truly uniform, and if the analogy in I.2 of the body were logically to be extended, the body could not be made out of uniform parts that think and do alike — it would be akin to having only three *different* people within the *polis*, if we followed Socrates' plans in *The Republic* — a *polis* could not truly exist. The unity that Aristotle is opposed to here is the banal uniformity of everyone beaten into submission by the authoritarian state imagined by Socrates; Aristotle is, as we shall establish, presumes harmony of a *polis'* citizens in the pursuit of its telos.

Having understood what a city and faction are, to decipher the meaning of the aforementioned quote, one must examine the word "settlers" and its relationship to the other definitional term Aristotle commonly uses: citizen. A citizen is defined as "one who is entitled to share in deliberative or judicial office" (III.1, 1275<sup>b</sup>13). However, while he repudiates the concept of solely deciding one's citizenship on the basis of the citizenship of one's parents, in the case of those "aliens" who were made citizens, such as in the case of Cleisthenes, who added certain "foreigners and slaves" to the ranks of Athenian

citizenships, he asks the following question: “Are they rightly or wrongly such?” (III.2, 1275<sup>b</sup>34). He further places emphasis on the indexical relationship man has to the *polis* using the analogy of flowing water in III.3, the assumption here being “a single population inhabiting a single territory” (III.3, 1276<sup>a</sup>34). This, in theory, is also a limitation on the size of the *polis*. The distinction Aristotle further draws is that a citizen is *ipso facto* an inhabitant of the *polis*, but not all inhabitants of the *polis* are citizens, and furthermore that while being culturally and ethnically similar to the original inhabitants of the *polis* are necessary for citizenship, they are not sufficient.

In the quote above, Aristotle prevents making a categorical statement by qualifying it through the caveat that most — but not all — cities are troubled with factional conflict when they admit settlers. But are settlers distinct from citizens, even if they take part in political life and hold office? The key here is the separation between the theoretical and the practical that Aristotle continuously makes, particularly in his discussion of the best practical regimes in comparison to ones that are the best in theory. Using Aristotle’s binomial classification, the issue at hand is divided into the genus of factional conflict and the species of dissimilarity. The examples Aristotle provides in V.3, 1303<sup>a</sup>13, are key to understanding the meaning of this conditional statement. In the cases of the Achaeans and Troezen in Sybaris, Byzantium, Thurii, Zancle, Apollonia, Syracuse, and Amphipolis, the issue is that of assimilation. The identity of the ‘other’ — whether settler or coloniser — took importance over that of the individual’s membership in the success of the *polis*, and consequently one is led to believe that this led to factional conflict insofar as the

members of the faction considered themselves to be markedly different from the group at large.

Furthermore, this qualification is prefaced with the understanding that “heterogeneity of stocks may lead to faction — at any rate until they have had time to assimilate” (V.3, 1303<sup>a</sup>13). From this sentence, one can separate the prior understanding that settlers constituted the ‘other’ from our now more nuanced understanding. The use of the phrase “heterogeneity of stocks” in parallel with the noun “settlers” (V.3, 1303<sup>a</sup>13) reflects the intrinsically different nature of those who seek to make a foreign *polis* their home vis-à-vis someone who is already in possession of Athenian citizenship but has not resided in Athens: there is a significant qualitative difference between them. However,

The *prima facie* understanding of what truly constitutes membership in a *polis* in the manner of citizenship fades away. Barbarians, who are neither ethnically nor culturally Greek, can have no standing in the *polis*, for “no naturally ruling element exists within them” (I.2, 1252<sup>b</sup>2) and consequently lack the ability to reason naturally or be citizens in a *polis*. While barbarians often served as resident aliens — *metics* — within the Greek world, they were still a distinct class separate from citizens and could not take part in political life. However, within the Greeks — who, here, can be construed as those men endowed with natural reason — the citizen of a particular *polis* owes participation and identity *erga omnes*: to the *polis* and its constituent citizens. This stems from the anterior understanding that the *polis* is the “most sovereign and inclusive association” (I.1, 1252<sup>a</sup>1), and therefore the citizen must only have one identity: as that of a member of the *polis*.

Anything else would lead to factional conflict insofar as it would compromise the harmony of the different parts of the *polis*, and not doing one's duty to the *polis*, whether as a slave or a citizen, would constitute a *malum in se*.

With the practical understanding provided by the application of the examples used by Aristotle, the emphasis lies on the integrating party — the “settlers” — to absolve themselves of all ties to their previous *polis* and retain membership in only the *polis* they presently are in insofar as they aim to become citizens; in practice, this would mean the integration of those rightfully eligible for citizenship by the endowment of natural reason and resources only when Cleisthenes chose to integrate “foreigners and slaves” (III.2, 1275<sup>b</sup>34) into the ranks of Athenian citizens. Those foreigners — regardless of where they would be from — would have to stop regarding themselves as outsiders and maintain ties based on origin in order to culturally and politically integrate as citizens.

In Aristotle's conception, the *polis* is logically prior to the individual, and as such, he admits that “A city cannot be constituted from any chance collection of people, or in any chance period of time” (V.3, 1303<sup>a</sup>13). The *polis* is not a constructed ‘thing’ but an intrinsic good that satisfies man's nature as a political, *polis*-animal (I.2 1253<sup>a</sup>24). While the *polis* exists prior to the individual, it is also not arbitrary; it is simultaneously natural and conventional, and while it stems from nature it must be sustained through cultivation and craft. Citizens *must* share a conception of telos and *eudaimonia* such that they can harmonise their approach to the good life, and while speaking the same language and sharing an ethnic background can make this association easier, the only goal of

immigration into a *polis* and to be a citizen is to assimilate completely into its political community. In sum it can be said that what Aristotle truly means with this statement is that it is merely the practical application of the teleological coming-together of the *polis*, for if the citizenry is not suited for political association, the association will descend into conflict and chaos, and ultimately destruction.