

Aristotelian Moderation as an Alternative to Liberal Toleration

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Recent debates over the value and legitimacy of liberalism have often focused on its posture towards religion. Some critics have decried what they see as liberalism's relentless campaign to exclude religion from the public square while barely tolerating it in private; that campaign, it is argued, trivializes all that religion claims to be, impoverishes our public life, and coarsens our very humanity. Liberalism's defenders, meanwhile, celebrate the ongoing secularization of liberal society, or at least warn of the dangers of halting or reversing it. Is secular liberalism not infinitely better than a Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice? Who would seriously propose replacing our liberal toleration with religious fanaticism?

But perhaps our options are not exhausted by the Last Man vs. the Taliban. In this paper I will begin to explore the alternative offered by Aristotle, who makes a point of including priestcraft as a common duty for citizens of his best regime, but who nevertheless cannot be described as a proponent of theocracy. I want to understand how Aristotelian political theory holds a place for religion in public life while maintaining the moderation characteristic of liberalism at its best.¹ [1]

1 [1] I hasten to mention my indebtedness to Robert Bartlett, who several years ago brought this aspect of Aristotle's *Politics* to my attention. See his "Aristotle's Science of the Best Regime" (*APSR*, June 1994) and *The Idea of Enlightenment: A Post-Mortem Study* (University of Toronto Press, 2001). The present paper focuses more narrowly on the role of priests as representatives of the contemplative life in the

A Divine Union of Politics and Philosophy

Aristotle begins his discussion of the best regime with the disputed question of the best way of life. For as Aristotle explains, it is appropriate for those who govern themselves best to live in the best possible manner; so long as that life remains unclear, one cannot know how to arrange things for its sake (*Politics* 1323a14-19).² [2] Aristotle treats as uncontroversial the proposition that the best life is one which somehow involves virtue. The controversy arises over exactly what that virtuous life is. Aristotle finds only two serious contenders for the title: "the political and active way of life ♦ or rather that which is divorced from all external things ♦ a certain contemplative life,"³ [3] for example ♦ which some assert is the only philosophic way of life" (1324a27-9). It may well seem strange that the field should narrow so quickly: in particular, Aristotle fails even to mention the life of piety as an alternative to the political and the philosophic lives. (To observe that Aristotle leaves piety off his list of virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* only begs the question of why he does so.) Accordingly, we might suppose that Aristotle's best regime will have little to do with religion.

This impression must be corrected, however, in light of how Aristotle arbitrates the debate between proponents of politics and philosophy. On the one hand, he defends the political life against the charge that it necessarily involves mastery: people of roughly similar virtue can be active, ruling and being ruled in turn, without needing to exert mastery over each other or

best regime. I would also like to thank my colleagues at Villanova University, including John-Paul Spiro, Andrew Bove, Joseph Prud'homme, Mark Shiffman, and especially Marylu Hill, for their insightful and patient conversations as I wrote this paper.

2 [2] *The Politics*, translated by Carnes Lord. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

3 [3] I have altered Lord's translation, which reads, "that involving some sort of study."

over neighboring cities (1324b22-25a5; 25b7-10). On the other hand, he also defends the contemplative life against the charge that it is inactive: it is, indeed, all the more active insofar as its thoughts are for their own sake rather than for the sake of what results (1325b15-20). And by the end of his discussion, Aristotle has brought the two seemingly opposed alternatives into an unexpected alignment. Just as a city can be active within itself, so can the individual human being; the same beautiful self-sufficiency is on display in each. "For otherwise," Aristotle remarks, "the god and the entire universe could hardly be in a fine condition, since they have no external actions beyond those that are proper to themselves" (1325b27-29). Although Aristotle says next to nothing about the divine in his discussion, what he does say plays a crucial role in settling the dispute over the best life.⁴ [4] It underscores the nobility both of a political life that refrains from needless wars and conquests and a contemplative life divorced from external things.

It is worth comparing this passage with the end of the *Eudemian Ethics*, where Aristotle discusses the same intersection between virtuous politics, contemplation, and the divine. The last chapter is devoted to discussing a comprehensive virtue which Aristotle calls "nobility."⁵ [5] Nobility, he explains, differs from the sort of virtue possessed by the Spartans, who take full advantage of the natural goods but regard those goods as the goals of their activity. In contrast to Spartan virtue, which is political but not noble, the virtue of nobility uses good things for noble

4 [4] See Bartlett, *Idea of the Enlightenment*, pp. 163-71. As Bartlett observes, Aristotle's argument in chapters 1-3 is less than wholly convincing. But this only underscores the importance of his invocation of the god in settling the dispute.

5 [5] Or "gentlemanliness": *kalokagathia*, which literally involves both the noble (or beautiful) and the good. Like magnanimity in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, nobility is here said to sum up all the other individual virtues; it is "complete virtue" (EE 1249a16).

ends. The distinction becomes clear in light of two "governing principles." The first of these is prudence, which governs practical activity as the art of medicine directs the curing of disease. But just as the art of medicine looks off to something else, namely health, so must prudence look to an end beyond itself:

Thus it is with the speculative <part>.6 [6] For the god is a governor not in a prescriptive fashion, but it is *that for which* practical wisdom prescribes (but *that for which* is of two sorts ♦ they have been distinguished elsewhere ♦ for the god is in need of nothing). So if some choice and possession of natural goods ♦ either goods of the body or money or of friends or the other goods ♦ will most produce the speculation of the god, that is the best, and that is the finest limit; but whatever, whether through deficiency or excess, hinders the service and speculation of the god, is bad. Thus it is for the soul, and this is the best limit for the soul ♦ to be aware as little as possible of the non-rational part of the soul as such. But let what has been said be enough on the limit of nobility, and what the goal is of things good without qualification. (EE 1249b13-25)7 [7]

Nobility is here distinguished from merely political virtue by its devotion to "the service and speculation of the god." That "service," it must be noted, is of a rarefied and unorthodox sort, as the god prescribes nothing to us and needs nothing from us; the service apparently lies in the

6 [6] Or, "the contemplative <part>." Woods uses "speculation," "speculative," etc. to translate variants of *theoria*.

7 [7] *Eudemian Ethics, Books I, II, and VIII*. Translated by Michael Woods. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1982.

contemplation itself. Nevertheless, Aristotle goes very far in subsuming moral virtue within an activity that stands at the summit both of intellectual virtue and of piety.

Aristotle's position in the *Politics* may not contradict that of the *Eudemian Ethics*, but it surely comes to sight as far more moderate. It is a fuzzy but practical balance in which the contemplative life remains distinct from the political one, but it still shimmers in the distance as a cynosure for morally serious citizens. If political men are too busy to do more than taste the contemplative life from time to time, they can still see how war and dominion take a step in the wrong direction, and they can take that life as the pattern for a whole city wherein virtuous men freely participate, ruling and being ruled in turn. And if Aristotle refrains from presenting "the contemplation of the god" as *the* standard for nobility, he still invokes the divine in a way that would worry modern liberals from Hobbes to Rawls.

But how, concretely, does Aristotle expect to strike this balance in the best regime? One answer is liberal education, a subject which dominates the closing chapters of Book VII and the whole of Book VIII of the *Politics*. Before turning to education, however, Aristotle gives another answer, one that is very different but no less important.

Replacing Philosophers with Priests

At first it appears that moving from the best life to the best regime will be fairly straightforward. It is simply a matter of having the "equipment" that allows the best life to flourish. Such equipment includes a suitable territory, climate, access to the sea, neighbors, and so on. But it also includes the human beings that make up the city itself; "human resources" could seem a barbarous phrase, but it translates very easily into Aristotle's terminology. Unlike us, however,


Aristotle faces the difficulty raised by his discussing human beings as equipment. In chapter 8 he asks: Who are the people that fully share in the partnership that is the city, i.e. who are the citizens? This is no small question, for different partnerships will amount to different regimes dedicated to promoting different ways of life (1328a35-b2). In order to address this fundamental issue, Aristotle first will list the tasks that need to be done in the city; then he will determine who should perform those tasks and whether they should be designated as citizens or non-citizens.

Here is Aristotle's list:

First, then, sustenance must be available; next, arts, for living requires many instruments; third, arms, for those who are partners must necessarily also have arms among themselves both with a view to ruling for the sake of those who disobey and with a view to outsiders who attempt to do them injustice; further, a ready supply of funds, so that they have [what suffices] with a view both to their needs among themselves and to military needs; fifth, and first, the superintendence connected with the divine, which they call priestcraft; sixth in number, and the most necessary thing of all, judgment concerning the advantageous things and the just things ♦ those [affecting the citizens] in relation to one another. (1328b5-14)

We immediately notice that the list includes "the superintendence connected with the divine," which recalls the passage that interested us at the end of chapter 3. And given the importance of the god as a model for noble activity, no wonder Aristotle immediately corrects the relatively low ranking he had originally given that task: it is "fifth, and first."

But if we are expecting Aristotle to identify superintendence of the divine as philosophic contemplation, we are in for a surprise; instead, he links it with "priestcraft." In moving from the best way of life to the regime that promotes it, priestcraft replaces philosophy. Still, Aristotle chooses his words carefully here. He does not himself say that the superintendence connected with the divine *is* priestcraft; it is only "what *they call* priestcraft" (1328b13, emphasis mine). For Aristotle, such superintendence is, strictly speaking, philosophy, and he evidently does not expect a city's priests to be philosophers. Nor is this surprising: perhaps the greatest document of philosophic superintendence connected with the divine, and certainly the greatest within the Aristotelian corpus, is the *Metaphysics*, and no city (so far as I know) has ever used that book as its guide for ordaining priests. Priestcraft does no more than approximate the serene contemplation which Aristotle presents as philosophic, but it is the approximation that he thinks can play a significant role in the city.

Even as Aristotle lowers his expectations of a direct influence of philosophy in public life, liberals might still wish to charge him with a kind of recklessness. Does he not assign priestcraft first place in the city? The answer is, yes and no. For no sooner does he say that divine superintendence comes "fifth, and first," than he adds that "sixth in number, and the most necessary thing of all" is "judgment concerning the just things and the advantageous things  those [affecting the citizens] in relation to one another" (1328b12-14). Let us refer to the latter as "political judgment." Now unless Aristotle is grossly contradicting himself, divine superintendence and political judgment would not appear to be primary in the same way. How are they to be distinguished? Aristotle does not explain in this context, but his position seems clear enough. Divine superintendence is primary not in terms of necessity, but in terms of

nobility, and its nobility derives from its being attentive to the highest things. Political judgment, in contrast, is most necessary because it guides every practical decision the city makes.

We may still wonder why Aristotle would place *both* divine superintendence and political judgment near the bottom of the list, even as he stresses that either one might have been listed first. I would suggest that Aristotle means to distinguish among different kinds of necessity. Since his list is of the things "without which a city could not exist," the ranking of first through sixth considers what is most *immediately* necessary for the *mere* existence of the city. On this scale, the ranking makes more sense: a city without political judgment will founder sooner or later, but without food it will die in days. This ranking in terms of the sheer survival of the city corresponds to a Hobbesian understanding of politics. Unlike Hobbes, however, Aristotle has other rankings of necessity than that which privileges sheer survival; in providing for the good life, for happiness, political judgment is most necessary. And Aristotle departs most sharply from Hobbes in ranking priestcraft first in a respect that has nothing to do with its necessity.⁸ [8]

But Aristotle has yet to clarify what the distinction between priestcraft and political judgment means for the best regime itself. One need not look at the Old Testament, one need only remember the trial of Socrates, to see that superintendence of the divine can tend to overlap with judgment about the just things. If Aristotle refuses to build a wall of separation between priestcraft and politics, how exactly does he intend to keep these functions distinct?

The Three Lives of a Citizen

⁸ [8] See Bartlett, *Idea of the Enlightenment*, pp. 171-2, 175-77, for a somewhat different explanation of the ranking of priestcraft in the best regime.

We get the answer in chapter 9, where Aristotle assigns the various indispensable tasks to people in the city. What must be decided is which tasks to assign to which people, and whether the people given a certain task ought to be citizens or not. Aristotle attempts to arrange these things in a way that will maintain a genuine yet limited presence of the divine in public life.

He begins with a step that is bound to trouble any thoughtful reader who would like to take his best regime as a model for reforming liberal democracy. Farmers, craftsmen, and merchants must be excluded from citizenship, Aristotle argues, on the grounds that their "way of life" lacks the leisure needed for cultivating virtue and engaging in political activities (1328a33-29a2). Aristotle would say that by opting for a broader coalition, our regime compromises its ability to promote a happy life for its citizens; not the moral virtues, but the mercantile ones, for example, will come to the fore.

But now Aristotle must build a workable coalition of his own. He begins by considering what to do with the soldiers in the city. We have already noted his concern that political men will tend to understand their virtues as best exercised in the activities of war and domination. The most straightforward way of addressing this problem would be to exclude soldiers from citizenship, or at least from any share in rule. This is not a serious possibility, for as Aristotle tersely remarks, "those who have authority over arms also have authority over whether the regime will last or not" (1329a12-13). But Aristotle has a neat solution to the problem: citizens are to be soldiers when young, statesmen when in the prime of life. While soldiers are not forever prevented from making political decisions, but at least they must wait until they retire from the military. The course is not without risk, as it conceivably allows citizens to become habituated to exercising their virtue through war. By the same token, however, even as soldiers

they will tend to view virtue differently insofar as they see themselves bound for a life of statesmanship. Their lives will reflect what Aristotle had said in chapter 2: "all of the concerns that are with a view to war are to be regarded as noble, but not as the highest end of all, but rather as being for the sake of that" (1325a6-7).

Priests are also to be included in Aristotle's coalition of citizens, and their case loosely resembles that of the soldiers.

Of the things enumerated there remains the stock of priests. The arrangement of these too is evident. No farmer or vulgar person is to be appointed priest, for it is proper for the gods to be honored by citizens. Since the political element is divided into two parts ♦ these being the armed element and the deliberative element ♦ and since it is proper that those worn out with age should both render worship to the gods and find rest themselves, it is to these that the priesthoods are to be assigned. (1329a26-33)

Thus citizens of Aristotle's best regime may be said to live not one life, but three: they are soldiers in youth, statesmen in their prime, and priests in old age. It is tempting to see this arrangement as an amusingly underhanded scheme to keep political authority even further from the priests than from the soldiers. Aristotle does go so far as to say that "the political element" includes *only* two parts, the "armed element" and the "deliberative element" ♦ and not the priests, who will be completely inactive where politics is concerned. The priesthood could seem, then, like a kind of shuffleboard for men who are "worn out with old age."

As we have seen, however, Aristotle is not Hobbes. It is true that he goes further here than he had with the soldiers, sidelining priests from any active political role. Yet he does insist that they be citizens: "No farmer or vulgar person is to be appointed priest, for it is proper for the gods to be honored by citizens." One could imagine worrying about an insurgency fueled by religious extremism, but that does not appear to be Aristotle's concern here. He rather wants priests whose civic duty is to set the proper example of what is to be honored in the city. It is also true that by reserving priesthood for the old and politically inactive, and by balancing priests by soldiers and statesmen, the best regime will keep its distance from theocracy. But this limitation on the political power of priests can also be derived from their positive role within the city. Aristotle's priests are at an age fit for a more leisurely, contemplative kind of activity. Statesmen can look forward to that activity upon retiring from politics, just as they looked forward to politics when they were still soldiers. Once again, therefore, Aristotle has found an arrangement that helps steer political life away from war and conquest by elevating an approximation of the contemplative life as a distant standard for nobility in politics.

Conclusion

If liberalism requires one to tolerate religion as a variety of opinions confined to the private sphere, Aristotelian political science cannot be described as liberal. Aristotle insists on assigning "the superintendence connected with the divine" to a citizen-priesthood whose worship is supported by public funds and regarded as a civic duty. He understands this task as being of primary importance within the city, not only because it helps persuade citizens to be just ♦ as some liberals have been willing to grant ♦ but

above all because it turns their gaze to the things that transcend politics altogether. At the same time, by confining the priesthood to a more contemplative role rather than a deliberative one, Aristotle gives statesmanship full responsibility for political decisions. It is a mark of Aristotle's moderation that he neither allows divine contemplation to eclipse political judgment concerning the just and the advantageous, nor banishes the divine from the public sphere while boasting of his toleration. If liberalism is characterized not by its toleration but by its noble humanity, Aristotelian political science may once again be recognized as liberalism par excellence.
