

The Unity of Aristotle's Theory of Constitutions

One of the most well-known ideas in Aristotle's *Politics* is his division of political constitutions (*politeiai*) into three broad kinds, each with a good and a bad form. The rulers in a city may be many, few, or one, and their rule may be “correct” or “deviant.” Constitutions are correct when the rulers aim at the common good of the city, deviant when they promote their own interests alone. Hence the correct form of monarchy is kingship, while its deviant counterpart is tyranny; rule by the few is aristocracy if correct and oligarchy otherwise; and the constitution is a democracy when many rule in their own interest, but a “polity” (*politeia*) if directed toward the common good (*Pol.* III.6 1279a17-21, 7 1279a32-b10). This sixfold classification of constitutions proved influential in later Western political thought and remains familiar today as one of the central features of Aristotle's political philosophy. Yet as Mogens Herman Hansen has recently emphasized, the sixfold division is neither Aristotle's most innovative contribution to Greek constitutional theory nor his most insightful. It has clear antecedents in Plato (*Plt.* 291c-292a) and Xenophon (*Mem.* IV.6.12), and it is supplemented in later parts of the *Politics* by a more elaborate account of the varieties of democracy and oligarchy and the possibility of “mixed constitutions.” (*Pol.* IV-VI) This latter account is more original, more sensitive to institutional differences, and more empirically adequate for the study of constitutions as they existed in historical Greek cities. So much would meet with general consensus among scholars of the *Politics*, but Hansen goes further. Against a recent trend to see the *Politics* as a more or less unified work (e.g., Cherry, Garver, Kraut, Lord, Rowe, Simpson), he argues that the more detailed theory of *Politics* IV-VI is “essentially incompatible” with the more conventional theory of Book III (Hansen 2013:2). He further maintains that the advances in Aristotle's analysis are a product of the more empirical and historical orientation of the middle

books, as opposed to the normative and philosophical approach of the earlier book.

Against Hansen, this paper argues that Aristotle's theory of constitutions in the *Politics* forms a single, coherent, unified whole. Several prominent philosophical studies have recently articulated a similar view, but none has adequately addressed the apparent inconsistencies that motivate Hansen's conclusions: the treatment of constitutions in Books IV-VI seems to omit kingship and tyranny, to analyze constitutions in terms that uniquely allow for "mixed" types, to replace the distinction between correct and deviant constitutions with a more subtle gradation of better and worse kinds, to collapse aristocracy and polity into a single kind of constitution, and to reduce the criterion of the number of rulers to the more fundamental principles and goals that determine the composition of the ruling class. Careful consideration of these features of the account in Books IV-VI shows, however, that they are consistent with, anticipated in, and even required by the more abstract theory of Book III. Furthermore, solving the problems that Hansen raises not only enables a more nuanced appreciation of the coherence and analytical power of Aristotle's theory of constitutions, but also helps to illustrate the underlying unity of the normative and empirical dimensions of Aristotelian political science. Hansen, reviving elements of the once influential theory of Werner Jaeger, sees the central books of the *Politics* as preoccupied with empirical and historical questions rather than with the assessment and prescription of ideal political arrangements, as we find in Books I-III and VII-VIII. A unified interpretation of the theory of constitutions, by contrast, underscores the ways in which, for Aristotle, assessment, prescription, description, analysis, and classification are inseparable aspects of a fundamentally *practical* kind of inquiry and knowledge, one directed toward helping cities to create and sustain the conditions that will best enable their citizens to flourish as human beings. The unity of Aristotle's theory of constitutions is thereby an expression of a deeper

tendency in his thought that resists understanding in terms of familiar modern dichotomies between description and assessment, explanation and prescription, and fact and value.

Bibliography

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