

Aristotle's Feast: Political Participation in *Politics* 3.11

Politics 3.11 advances the following argument for why the many, despite individual deficiencies in virtue and wisdom, are the best political decision-makers (1281b1-10):

For the many, of whom each individual is not a good man, when they meet together may be better than the few good, if regarded not individually but collectively, just as a feast to which many contribute is better than a dinner provided out of a single purse. For each individual among the many has a share of excellence and practical wisdom, and when they meet together, just as they become in a manner one man, who has many feet, and hands, and senses, so too with regard to their character and thought. Hence the many are better judges than a single man of music and poetry; for some understand one part, and some another, and among them, they understand the whole. (Trans. Barnes 1984)

τοὺς γὰρ πολλοὺς, ὧν ἕκαστός ἐστιν οὐ σπουδαῖος ἀνὴρ, ὅμως ἐνδέχεται συνελθόντας εἶναι βελτίους ἐκείνων οὐχ ὡς ἕκαστον ἀλλ' ὡς σύμπαντας, οἷον τὰ συμφορητὰ δεῖπνα τῶν ἐκ μιᾶς δαπάνης χορηγηθέντων· πολλῶν γὰρ ὄντων ἕκαστον μῦρον ἔχειν ἀρετῆς καὶ φρονήσεως, καὶ γίνεσθαι συνελθόντας ὥσπερ ἓνα ἄνθρωπον τὸ πλῆθος πολὺποδα καὶ πολὺχειρα καὶ πολλὰς ἔχοντ' αἰσθήσεις, οὕτω καὶ περὶ τὰ ἦθη καὶ τὴν διάνοιαν. διὸ καὶ κρίνουσιν ἄμεινον οἱ πολλοὶ καὶ τὰ τῆς μουσικῆς ἔργα καὶ τὰ τῶν ποιητῶν· ἄλλοι γὰρ ἄλλο τι μῦρον, πάντα δὲ πάντες. (Rackham 1932)

This argument consists of two analogies. The first is the feast analogy, which claims that the many, as if at a feast to which many contribute (τὰ συμφορητὰ δεῖπνα), are better than the few (1281b3). The second analogy is that of the crowd: the many are able to judge better (κρίνουσιν

ἄμεινον) than a single excellent individual (1281b8), like a crowd in which each individual appreciates a part of a performance.

The feast analogy, in particular, has received a good deal of attention in the literature. Scholars have wondered how exactly it is supposed to show “the collective superiority of the many” (Waldron 1995, 564). There are roughly two answers to this question. The first argues that the feast is like a potluck, demonstrating that many are ultimately more knowledgeable since they propose a variety of solutions and therefore deliberate more effectively (Waldron 1995 and Ober 2013). The second argues that the feast is about the aggregate amount of food, thus demonstrating that the superiority of the many lies in the fact that large groups exhibit more collective *arete*, or the moral or intellectual capacities which produce right action (Cammack 2013). These two approaches differ about how the feast analogy establishes the many’s collective superiority, yet they agree that it suggests the synthesis of something—knowledge or virtue—possessed by the many, which results in better overall deliberation.

This paper argues for a novel interpretation of the feast analogy, according to which it is not about synthesizing either knowledge or virtue. Whereas the crowd analogy does concern collective reasoning, the feast analogy is about the neutralizing effects of political inclusion on a varied population. A bit later, Aristotle presents another food analogy as a reason to enfranchise the many: “impure food when mixed with what is pure (τῆς καθαρᾶς) sometimes makes the entire mass more wholesome than a small quantity of the pure would be” (1281b37-9). Here the point is that broad political participation neutralizes both pure and impure contributions to the decision-making process. This introduces a possible reading of the feast analogy: the deliberation of the many is like “a feast to which many contribute” since a collective feast consists of both pure and impure foods. At such a feast, the pure food neutralizes the impure food, and the impure

food makes the pure food go further. The implication is that broad political participation, by exposing everyone to better ideas, prevents bad elements from corrupting vulnerable populations. It also allows good ideas to have more influence, since they spread to more members of the society. Thus understood, the point of the feast analogy is not that the many have more collective knowledge or virtue than the one or few, but that broad political participation neutralizes both bad and good elements within a society, resulting in a more politically stable and uniformly beneficial arrangement for all.

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