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ARISTOTLE'S DEFENSE OF THE THEORETICAL LIFE:  
COMMENTS ON *POLITICS* 7

DAVID ROOCHNIK

ARISTOTLE OPENS *POLITICS* 7, his discussion of the “best form of government” (*politeias aristēs*), which he later calls “the city according to prayer” (*kat'euchēn*), by informing his audience of his plan of attack.<sup>1</sup> Anyone who undertakes an inquiry into the ideal city must, he says, first determine what the most “choice-worthy life” is.<sup>2</sup> After all, “it is fitting for those who are best governed to act in the best way.”<sup>3</sup> To commence discussion of the nature of this best life he refers to

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<sup>1</sup>Aristotle, *Politics* (hereafter *Pol.*), 1323a14 and 1325b36. The Greek text is William David Ross' edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). Translations are my own, unless noted otherwise. Translations by Richard Kraut, *Aristotle: Politics Books VII and VIII* (hereafter *APB*) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), Carnes Lord, *Aristotle: The Politics* (hereafter *ATP*) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), and C. David Reeve *Aristotle: Politics* (hereafter *AP*) (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998) have all been consulted. For a discussion of the phrase *kat'euchēn* see Richard Kraut, *Aristotle: Political Philosophy* (hereafter *APP*) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), who renders the phrase “a city that is the most one could hope or pray for” (p. 192). Also see Kraut (*APB*) for a defense of the claim that Book 7 offers a “description of the ideal city [that] must in some sense be realistic: it must be possible for such a city to exist” (52).

<sup>2</sup>One may, of course, object at the outset to Aristotle's procedure. Consider, for example, what John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 447–8, has to say: “Once the principles of justice are chosen . . . there is no need to set up the account of the good so as to force unanimity on all the standards of rational choice. In fact, it would contradict the freedom of choice that justice as fairness assures to individuals and groups within the framework of just institutions . . . Individuals find their good in different ways . . . This variety in the conceptions of the good is itself a good thing.”

<sup>3</sup>Aristotle, *Pol.* 1323a1718. Kraut's (*APB*) translation is, “it is appropriate that those who should fare best who live under the best political system.” Reeve (*AP*) is almost identical. Lord (*APB*) does a better job: “it is appropriate for those who govern themselves best . . . to act in the best manner.” He takes into proper account the fact that *tous arista politeuomenous* is the subject of *prattein*.

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what he calls “the exoteric discourses,” which, whatever exactly they were, seem to have expressed basic ethical principles.<sup>4</sup>

Concerning one distinction, no one would disagree. There are three divisions [to be made within the best life]: external [goods], those of the body, and those of the soul. All of these must belong to those who are to be among the blessedly happy (*makariois*).<sup>5</sup> For no one would say that the blessed man has no share of courage or moderation or of justice or practical wisdom, but is afraid of flies buzzing around, can resist nothing when he desires food or drink, destroys his dearest friends for a pittance, and is as foolish and prone to error when it comes to intellectual matters as a child or a madman. With these assertions everyone would agree.<sup>6</sup>

Aristotle is confident that no one would disagree that the best life requires possession of sufficient external goods (like money), a healthy body, and most important of all, the good which belongs to the “soul”; namely, “virtue” (*aretē*). He does not use this last word in the passage above, but his mention of courage, moderation, and so on, as well as the fact that he uses it shortly thereafter clearly indicate that “virtue” is what he has in mind.<sup>7</sup>

Even if it is granted that the best life requires virtue, it is not clear in what sort of virtue such a life consists. *Politics* 7.2 narrows the possibilities to two:

Which is the more choiceworthy life, that of engaging in political activity and sharing in the life of the city, or is it rather the life of the stranger (*ho xenikos*) whose ties to the political community have been dissolved?<sup>8</sup>

Among those who agree that the best life is most choiceworthy there is dispute whether the political and practical life is choiceworthy, or whether the life whose ties to all external matters have been dissolved—namely, the theoretical life, which some people say is the only life for a philosopher—is more choiceworthy. For it is nearly the case

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1323a22. Lord (*APB*) states that a study of all of the references to Aristotle’s ethical writings in the *Politics* “shows that all are demonstrably or arguably to the *Eudemian* rather than the *Nicomachean Ethics*” (19). Reeve (*AP*) says, that the “reference may be to lost works of Aristotle intended for a wider audience than the *Politics*” (76). In support he cites *Eudemian Ethics* 1217b22–3. Also see Kraut, *APB*, 53–4.

<sup>5</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*), 1101a6–8 and 1179a1–9 for the distinction between happiness (*eudaimonia*) and being “blessed.” The latter is free from misfortune.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1323a27–35.

<sup>7</sup> See also, *ibid.*, 1323a36.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1324a14–17.

that the most honor-loving of men, both of the past and of the present, seem to choose these two lives when it comes to virtue. The two I mean are the political and the philosophical.<sup>9</sup>

From a long tradition, Aristotle inherits the view that there are two genuinely excellent forms of life: the theoretical-philosophical and the practical-political.<sup>10</sup> In *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7–8 he argues unambiguously on behalf of the former. Most commentators think he is less straightforward here in the *Politics* 7.1. For example, Kraut says that Aristotle “does not decisively draw a conclusion about which is better.”<sup>11</sup> Reeve describes him as “cagey, dialectically balancing the claims on the political life against the philosophical, but not giving decisive precedence to either.”<sup>12</sup> Solmsen puts the point strongly by saying that “we have to accept the oscillations of Aristotle’s argument and the ambiguity of his conclusion; they are indicative of a deeper conflict between diverging tendencies and inclinations in his mind.”<sup>13</sup> Miller concurs: “Aristotle’s discussion is somewhat inconclusive because he does not explicitly answer the question he has posed as to whether the best life is political and or philosophical.”<sup>14</sup>

Miller’s assertion is based on his reading of the following passage.

Some consider that the despotic rule over one’s neighbors involves the greatest injustice, while political rule, even if it does not involve

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1324a25–32.

<sup>10</sup> See Andrea Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), for a general introduction to the theory-practice issue in Greek thought. Throughout this paper the English theory and words related to it will be used to translate the Greek *theoria* and words related to it. For an explanation of why see David Roochnik, “What is *Theoria*? Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 10.7–8,” *Classical Philology* (forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> Kraut, *APB*, 62. Kraut says that Aristotle here manifests “a reluctance to say unequivocally that a certain life is best for all” because he is leaving “open the possibility that the best life that can be achieved by nearly all of the citizens (a political life) is none the less inferior to a life that only a few of them can lead (a philosophical life)” (53). He later argues that Aristotle tries to show that “neither activity”—that is, neither philosophy nor politics—is “inherently flawed” (62). Reeve (*AP*) distinguishes between the best life and the best activity, and claims that while Aristotle does acknowledge that theoretical activity is best, he “does not tell us what the best life is” (p. xlvi).

<sup>12</sup> Reeve, *AP*, xlvi.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Solmsen, “Leisure and Play in Aristotle’s Ideal State,” (hereafter LPA) *Rheinisches Museum fr Philologie*, 107 (1964): 196.

<sup>14</sup> Fred Miller, *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle’s Politics* (hereafter *NJR*) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 216.

injustice, nonetheless is an impediment to one's own well-being. Others hold nearly the opposite opinion. They consider the practical and political life the only one fitting for a man . . . Some have made this sort of judgment, while others say that the despotic and tyrannical form of government is the only happy one.<sup>15</sup>

Miller argues that because Aristotle here distinguishes the political from the tyrannical, which involves the performance of unjust acts of excessive possession towards one's neighbors, he leaves open the possibility that the political is a viable candidate for the title of best life.<sup>16</sup> That Aristotle does indeed make this distinction is clear from his use of the phrase *despotikōs men . . . politikōs de* at 1324a36–37, and later material from Books 3 and 4.<sup>17</sup>

Such commentators are right in maintaining that Aristotle never explicitly argues on behalf of the theoretical life in *Politics* 7, and certainly does not do so in the same dramatic fashion he does in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10. Nonetheless, over the course of the entirety of Book 7 he comes down thoroughly and even decisively in favor of it. On this issue, then, the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* are consistent.<sup>18</sup> To explain and support this claim several segments of the sometimes choppy argument of *Politics* 7 must be examined.

## I

As indicated above, Aristotle is confident that no one would disagree with his assertion that the best life requires possession of sufficient external goods, a healthy body, and virtue. Unfortunately, this rather optimistic picture of human agreement is immediately followed by an observation that, although expressed quietly, casts a shadow not only over the previous statements, but also (as we shall see below) over all of *Politics* 7.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1324a35–b3.

<sup>16</sup> Miller, *NJR*, 215.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Aristotle, *Pol.* 1279b5–10 and 1289b1.

<sup>18</sup> There is thus no need to invoke the *deus ex machina* of chronology to explain this apparent inconsistency away as Kraut (*APB*) does when he claims that there is “a natural progression in Aristotle’s treatment of the rivalry between philosophy and politics. . . . The *Politics* . . . does not decisively come to a conclusion,” while the *Nicomachean Ethics* unambiguously “champions the philosophical life” (75).

With these assertions everyone would agree. Nonetheless, they differ on how much and what is preeminent. For while they consider any amount of virtue (*aretē*) to be sufficient, of wealth, money, power, reputation and all such things they seek an unlimited excess.<sup>19</sup>

While “everyone” (*pantes*) would agree that the best life requires virtue, “they” nonetheless subordinate concerns about virtue to the pursuit of money, power and fame.<sup>20</sup> “They” do so even though they know better. As we shall see below, “they” refers to “the many” (*hoi polloi*); that is, to most citizens, and the condition Aristotle (implicitly) attributes to them is “moral weakness” (*akrasia*): they know they should not do something bad, but do it anyway because they are overpowered by a passion.<sup>21</sup> The morally weak are those who cannot abide by the conclusions of their own reasoning.<sup>22</sup> As opposed to the genuinely vicious, their bad actions emanate from a passion or desire rather than from their basic character or from rational deliberation. Their knowledge of what they ought to do has temporarily gone to sleep and so their condition is similar to epilepsy.<sup>23</sup> When the “seizure” subsides, they will thus be “regretful” (*metamelētikos*).<sup>24</sup> Even when they do something wrong, after (*meta*) the fact the morally weak reveal that they care (*melein*) about doing what is right. As a result, even if they are diseased and do bad things they are still “curable.”<sup>25</sup>

This diagnosis of the moral weakness of the citizenry dampens neither Aristotle’s confidence nor his apparent optimism.

We will say to them that it is easy (*raidion*) to reach a reliable conclusion about these matters by referring to what really happens (*dia tōn ergōn*). For we see that they do not acquire and then guard the virtues by means of the external goods, but the external goods by means of the virtues. Furthermore, it is more common for human beings to live happily, whether in pleasure or in virtue or in both, when they have an excess of

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<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1323a34–8. In his translation Reeve (*AP*), adds “however small” to the phrase “any amount of virtue.” This has no basis in the text, but captures the sentiment of the sentence well.

<sup>20</sup> See also, Aristotle, *Pol.* 1323a34.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1324b32.

<sup>22</sup> See also, Aristotle, *NE* 1145b11–14, 1150b27–8 and 1151a20–2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 1147a13, 1147b7 and 1150b34.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 1150b30. See also, 1150a21

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 1150b32. For a thorough treatment of moral weakness and its relationship to vice see David Roochnik, “Aristotle’s Account of the Vicious: A Forgivable Inconsistency,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 24(2007): 207–20.

character and thought but are moderate concerning the possession of external goods than it is for those who possess more money than is useful, but are lacking in character and thought.<sup>26</sup>

Again, “they” refers to those many citizens who subordinate the pursuit of virtue to the quest for money, power and fame.<sup>27</sup> To “them” Aristotle offers what seems to be an empirical argument. If their strongest desires are for external goods, all of which are potentially “unlimited,” they are doomed to unhappiness. No amount of money can be highest because there is always more money to be had. No amount of power or fame can be maximum, for even if one were to rule or be admired by all humanity, there would still be the gods left to conquer. Such goods themselves can supply no terminus point, no *telos*, to ground or even measure their worth. A life guided by them is thus infected with, as Durkheim put it, “a morbid desire for the infinite.” The person living it “aspires to everything and is satisfied with nothing.”<sup>28</sup>

Aristotle offers a theoretical argument (one that is *kata ton logon*) to accompany this empirical claim.<sup>29</sup> An external good is like a “tool” (*organon*); its value is instrumental.<sup>30</sup> As such, it must be used in order to become charged with value. Money, for example, is worthless if kept under a mattress. It must be spent. Since it can be spent either well or poorly, it can bring benefit or it can cause harm. In turn, how well it is spent can be measured according to some standard or “limit” (*peras*).<sup>31</sup> If a man spends excessively on perfume the result may well be harmful both to himself and others. So too if he spends too little. Obviously, then, implicit in the argument is the notion of the “mean.”<sup>32</sup> When one seeks to acquire and then spend money the amount should be neither too much nor too little; it should be just right. Such a “mean” is rationally determinable by “practical wisdom,” which in the scheme of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (6.5, 8–12) is an

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<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1323a24–23b6.

<sup>27</sup> In the Greek, the “they” is expressed only by means of verbs in the third-person plural.

<sup>28</sup> Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John Spaulding (New York: Free Press, 1979), 271, is cited here because he too takes himself to be making empirical claims.

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1323b6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 1323b8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 1323b7.

<sup>32</sup> Note Aristotle’s use of *metriazousin* at *ibid.*, 1323b4.



intellectual virtue and thus a form of “truthing” (*alētheuei*), a word which implies that the “mean” is objective and knowable.<sup>33</sup>

An opponent, perhaps one of the “many” citizens who dedicate themselves to the pursuit of money, power and fame, could object here by denying that such a “mean” actually exists. If it did not, then “more” could well substitute for “better” and the external goods could thereby make it to the top rung of the ladder of desire. But Aristotle abruptly cuts off this possible debate:

The best life, both for individuals separately and for a city is a life of virtue sufficiently equipped with the resources needed to take part in virtuous actions. With regard to those who dispute this, we must ignore them in our present study, but investigate them later.<sup>34</sup>

It is not clear why Aristotle suppresses this debate or to what later passages he might be referring.<sup>35</sup> In any case, at the end of *Politics* 7.1 Aristotle seems to have secured two propositions. First, the best life available to human beings must be determined in order to determine the nature of the ideal city. Second, the best life is the one lived in virtue. His confidence in these principles should, however, be tempered by his own earlier observation that even though “everyone” would agree with the second, and thereby acknowledge that they should not pursue external goods to the exclusion of virtue, they nonetheless “seek an unlimited excess of them.” In short, many citizens suffer from moral weakness, a fact that will resonate through the remainder of the discussion.

## II

Even if “everyone” agrees that the best life is spent in virtue rather than in the (endless and unsatisfying) quest for money, power and fame, it is not clear in what sort of virtue such a life consists. In *Politics* 7.2 the possibilities are narrowed to two: the political-practical and the philosophical-theoretical. Immediately after stating that “it makes no small difference which side has the truth,” Aristotle abruptly begins a discussion of despotism: “some consider that the

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<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, *NE* 1139b15.

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1323b40–24a3.

<sup>35</sup> Lord, *ATP*, 266, tentatively suggests *Politics* 7.13.



despotic rule over one's neighbors involves the greatest injustice, while political rule, even if it does not involve injustice, nonetheless is an impediment to one's own well-being."<sup>36</sup> "Others hold nearly the opposite opinion. They consider the practical and political life the only one fitting for a man."<sup>37</sup> As mentioned above, Miller relies on this passage to support his claim that Aristotle does not eliminate the political life from the competition for "best" because he distinguishes it from the despotic life and thereby preserves its potential for virtue. This argument is unconvincing not least because Aristotle's next move is to focus exclusively on the evils of tyranny, which he does at some length.<sup>38</sup> For example, he says the following.

Thus while in most regimes most laws are, so to speak, random, in those cases where they do aim at some one thing all (*pantes*) aim for ruling (*kratein*). For example, in Sparta and Crete education and most of the laws have been devised with an eye to war. Furthermore, among all those nations, such as the Scythians, the Persians, the Thracians, and the Celts, which are capable of wanting more (*dunamenois pleonektei*), such power has been honored.<sup>39</sup>

The laws of most regimes are haphazard, but—and this is an empirical claim—when cities have organized themselves with a specific purpose in mind, they "all" have aimed for domination over others. Such regimes suffer from *pleonexia* and their continual desire to have more drives them into expansionist policies. As a consequence their citizens are educated primarily in the art of war.<sup>40</sup>

This lengthy passage should be puzzling and may well look like a digression. After all, the topic at hand is whether the practical-political or the theoretical-philosophical life is best, and yet Aristotle has gone into some detail on the nature of tyrannical regimes. One possibility, suggested by his claim that all regimes with an organized set of laws "aim for ruling," is that he is here conflating the political with the tyrannical. Miller, of course, would deny this and, on the one hand, there is support for his position. First, to reiterate an earlier point, in Books 3 and 4 Aristotle clearly distinguishes legitimate political re-

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<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1324a33.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 1324a35–40.

<sup>38</sup> See also, *ibid.*, 1324b3–25a15.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 1324b4–11.

<sup>40</sup> For the purpose of this paper there is no need to inquire into the historical accuracy of Aristotle's claims about Sparta and Crete. See, however, Aristotle's earlier discussion of Sparta in *Pol.*, Book 2, especially 1271b2–6.

gimes from tyranny. Second, Aristotle does not offer this conflation in his own voice. Instead, he—in what Reeve would identify as his “cagey” dialectical manner—attributes it to “the many,” since it is they “who seem to believe that the despotic is the political.”<sup>41</sup> But the many’s belief is not merely an abstract error in judgment that offers itself up as an exercise in dialectic. This is because the many are the citizens and so their belief that the “despotic is the political” is itself a political fact or reality. This implies that cities, constituted as they are by the many, have within themselves a tendency towards expansionism and the conquering of their neighbors.

To reformulate this point: the fact that the many believe that the despotic is the political is an extension on the political level of their moral weakness that Aristotle uncovered in *Politics* 7.1. Recall that even though “everyone” would agree that the best life requires virtue, “they” (“the many”) regularly subordinate a proper concern about virtue to the pursuit of money, power and fame. Bigger is better in their eyes, and so when it comes to the city, expansion is deemed the highest good. As a consequence cities, like their many citizens, tend towards the disease of moral weakness. They endlessly strive for more and more, and thus inevitably become excessive in their ambitions.

If the above is correct, the following argument, formulated as a *modus tollens*, can be extracted from *Politics* 7.2 and can explain why Aristotle here treats tyranny at such length: if the practical rather than the theoretical life were counted as the best life for an individual it would follow that expansionist cities like Sparta or Crete would have to be counted as the best regimes. This they are not. Hence, the practical life is not the best, and so the theoretical life wins the prize. The first premise of the proposed argument makes particularly good sense. If the practical life were counted as best, then the horizon for human activity would be the city itself. And if this were the case, if there were nothing beyond itself by which a city could be guided, then its activity would be restricted to the reproduction, extension or expansion of itself.

If the practical life were counted as best, then so too would expansionist regimes be best. But this they are not. We move next to a consideration of why they are not.

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<sup>41</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1324b32.

## III

Regimes like Sparta and Crete seek to conquer their neighbors. Because their only purpose is to get bigger, they do so indiscriminately. This is where they go wrong.

It would be absurd if what is despotic and not despotic did not exist by nature. Therefore, if this is the case, there must be no attempt to rule over everybody, but only those who are fit to be ruled. This is analogous to the fact that one ought not to hunt human beings for food or sacrifice, but ought to hunt only that which is suited to this, namely those wild animals that are edible.<sup>42</sup>

The key phrase here is “by nature.” Just as some animals are fit to be eaten, some human beings are by nature fit to be ruled. Therefore, not all human beings are fit to be ruled. In turn, this implies that in its unlimited expansion, the tyrannical regime, in seeking to dominate all, is blind to the natural heterogeneity of a human population and so its actions are contrary to nature and thereby unjust.

This passage harks back to Aristotle's argument on behalf of natural slavery in *Politics* 1 in which he claims that the ruling-ruled relationship exists throughout nature.

In everything that has been conjoined from many and comes to be some one common thing, whether it comes from many things that are continuous or divided, a ruler and ruled appears. This is characteristic of the entirety of nature and belongs to living beings. Indeed, some rule is present even in nonliving things, like a chord.<sup>43</sup>

The salient example of the ruler-ruled relationship in living things is that between soul and body: “one can first of all study despotic and political rule in an animal. For the soul rules the body with despotic rule.”<sup>44</sup> Just as in a healthy animal the soul commands the body, so too in a healthy city the natural master commands the natural slave. In such a case, both parties are benefited. Indeed, this is the essential criterion by which to identify a natural slave: he must be benefited by his enslavement.<sup>45</sup> This he is because he is by nature constituted to receive orders.

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 1324b36–41.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 1254a28–33.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1254b4–5.

<sup>45</sup> See also, *ibid.*, 1254b16–25.

For being able to use thought to see ahead is characteristic of one who rules and is master by nature, while being able to labor with the body is characteristic of the one who is ruled and is by nature a slave. In this way, the interests of both master and slave are served.<sup>46</sup>

The rational capacity of a natural slave is so limited that he does not have the foresight to make decisions for himself. He needs someone to think for him, which is precisely what the master does, and in doing so he benefits the slave.

This argument seems to run obviously afoul of our most cherished ideals of human dignity and equality. But before simply dismissing it as offensively and anachronistically elitist, the critic should first consider the role it plays in the argument. Lear has noted that because "Aristotle was the first political thinker to realize that slavery needed a defense" he was also the first to problematize the very institution of slavery.<sup>47</sup> Ambler makes the point more forcefully by arguing that Aristotle's teleologically based defense of natural slavery functions as a critique of slavery as actually found in the Greek world.<sup>48</sup> A standard Greek practice was to conquer a city, kill the men, and indiscriminately take the women and children as slaves. Therefore, as Ambler puts it, "Aristotle's natural master and natural slave establish standards which deny rather than establish the naturalness of actual slavery."<sup>49</sup> This contention is reinforced by the following passage:

There is both advantage and affection between the master and the slave when both are worthy of these designations by nature. When master-slave are not determined in this way, when the relationship exists by convention and has been instituted by force, the opposite is the case.<sup>50</sup>

To be properly counted as natural, a slave must not only be objectively benefited by his master, but must also feel some affection for him. By contrast, in the conventional practices of actual Greek cities, which Aristotle implies are unjust, slaves conquered in war surely did not feel much affection for their masters. If affection is a necessary condition of being a natural slave, then such beings are certainly

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 1251a31–3.

<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Lear, *The Desire to Understand* (hereafter DTU) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 197.

<sup>48</sup> Wayne Ambler, "Aristotle on Nature and Politics: The Case of Slavery" (hereafter ANP), *Political Theory* 15 (1987): 390–410.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>50</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1255b13–15.

miniscule in number. In fact, it is even possible that Aristotle intends to define the natural slave out of existence. After all, the rational capacity of the putative natural slave seems to be so limited as to preclude any sort of deliberation about the future. But all human beings, except those whose brains are damaged, can do that.

The following statement reinforces this point: “Slaves by nature are those who differ to the same extent that the soul differs from the body, and a human being differs from a beast.”<sup>51</sup> On the basis of this analogy, a natural slave is not a real human being at all. At the very least, given Aristotle’s criteria the number of natural slaves in any given population would have to be extremely small; so small, that he himself wonders whether one (*tis*) actually exists.<sup>52</sup>

To sum up: “It would be absurd,” Aristotle asserts, “if what is despotic and not despotic did not exist by nature.”<sup>53</sup> If there were no distinction between higher and lower human beings, there would be no conceptual barrier to unlimited expansion. Because the distinction does exist (and because the number of natural slaves in any given population is extremely small), “there must be no attempt to rule over everybody,” but only those who are fit to be ruled.<sup>54</sup>

This critique of indiscriminate expansionism leads Aristotle to a discussion of the political role of the military.

It is clear that even though one must count all military pursuits as noble (*kalas*), they are not to be taken to be the highest *telos* of all. Instead, they are for the sake of the highest *telos*. Seeing how the city and the human species and every other community might share in the good life and in the happiness that is available to them is the task of the serious (*spoudaiou*) law-giver.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 1254b16–18.

<sup>52</sup> See also, *ibid.*, 1254a17. I owe this observation to Ambler (*ANP*), who says “I am not surprised that he asks not whether there are many such creatures but whether there is any” (395). There is, unfortunately, countervailing evidence concerning Aristotle’s stance on institutional (nonnatural) slavery. For he seems to take it for granted that slaves are a necessary component of the best city. See 1329a25–6 and 1330a25. Also, as Professor Silvia Carli pointed out to me, Aristotle even suggests that freedom should be held out as “a reward for all slaves” (1330a33), which is a clear indication that they are not “natural.”

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 1324b36–7.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 1324b38.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 1325a5–10.

Cities like Sparta and Crete are dedicated to nothing but expansion and so in them education and political culture generally aim to train the citizens for war. Because there is no horizon beyond the political, war becomes an end in itself. As a result such regimes are, one might say, Heraclitean, since for them “war is the father of all things.”<sup>56</sup> As such, they are in violation of an essential Aristotle precept, one that will be discussed below: “war is for the sake of peace.”<sup>57</sup> War can be a noble pursuit, but only when it is defensive and in the service of securing a peace that will allow its citizens to have a “share in the good life”; in other words, to live a life of virtue.<sup>58</sup>

Once again, this material in *Politics* 7.2 may seem like a digression, for Aristotle may seem to have dropped the debate between the theoretical and practical lives. In fact, he hasn't. If the practical life were counted as the best, then expansionist regimes like Sparta and Crete would have to be counted as the best. But because for them war is not for the sake of peace, this they are not. Hence, the theoretical life is best. Such an argument remains implicit, but remarks from *Politics* 7.3 help to disclose it more fully.

#### IV

Aristotle's description of the theoretical-philosophical life as belonging “to the stranger (*ho xenikos*) whose ties to the political community have been dissolved” makes it tempting to agree with Solmsen who finds the claim that it is the best available for a human being “unacceptable.”<sup>59</sup> First, determination of the best life is required in order to guide the conceptual construction of the ideal city. But if the theoretical life is that of the alienated stranger, how can it possibly accomplish this task? Second, “happiness is activity or *praxis*” (*hē gar eudaimonia praxis estin*), while the theoretical life seems utterly impractical.<sup>60</sup> Aristotle anticipates such objections and then begins to

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<sup>56</sup> Heraclitus, B53. H. Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Rev. W. Kranz (Berlin, 1961).

<sup>57</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1333a35.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 1325a8.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 1324a17; Solmsen, *LPA*, 195.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 1325a32

counter them by claiming that his critics misunderstand the nature of *praxis*.

But the practical (*praktikon*) life need not be in relationship to other human beings, as some think it must, nor should only those kinds of thoughts that come to be for action and for the sake of what results be counted as practical (*praktikas*). But much more [practical] are those thoughts that are autotelic (*autoteleis*) and the kinds of theory (*theōrias*) that are for the sake of themselves. For the *telos* is good *praxis* (*eupraxia*), so that it is some sort of *praxis*.<sup>61</sup>

There are two senses of “*praxis*” and its derivatives. The first refers only to political or ethical activity that is “towards other human beings”; in other words, that is essentially social. The second is far more broad, and refers to all forms of activity, of actualizing a potentiality, from metabolic functioning to theorizing. Even if it is not directly political, theoretical activity can surely be counted as “practical” in this latter sense. As such, Kraut’s translation of *praktikos* here as “active” may seem tempting. For reasons to be discussed in section VII below, this temptation, while reasonable, should nonetheless be resisted. As we shall see, the theoretical life is “practical” in both senses of the word.

In any case, Aristotle goes even further: theorizing, which is an end-in-itself, is “much more” (*polu mallon*) practical than conventional political activity. This description is somewhat mysterious.<sup>62</sup> Kraut goes so far as to say that “unfortunately, Aristotle’s arguments are marred by his failure to face squarely the question of precisely what it is to be active.”<sup>63</sup> It is likely, however, that Aristotle here means that “theorizing” represents the maximum actualization of human capacities. This is at least the claim he makes for it in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10 when he says that “the actualization of mind (*hē tou nou energeia*), which seems to be theoretical (*thēoretikē*),” is the highest form of human activity, happiness and virtue.<sup>64</sup> It is also consistent with the description of the development of theoretical knowledge he presents in *Metaphysics* Book 1.1–2 and to which we shall next briefly turn.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 1325b16–21.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 1325b19.

<sup>63</sup> Kraut, *APB*, 73.

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle, *NE* 1177b19.



The process of knowing begins with perceptions, and then develops through memory and “experience” until it culminates in the attainment of knowledge. Differently stated, it progresses from awareness of particulars to an understanding of the universal; from simply knowing “that” to knowing the cause or the “why.” “Knowledge,” Aristotle explains, “comes to be whenever from many thoughts that have emerged from experience one universal conception emerges about these similar things.”<sup>65</sup> Relevant to our inquiry here is the distinction Aristotle draws between those who have knowledge, and so can offer “a rational account” (*logon*) of the cause, and those who are merely “experienced” (*hoi empeiroi*) and whose purview is thereby limited to “the particulars” (*ton kath’hekaston*). When it comes to “acting” (*pros men to prattein*) the latter, precisely because they are fluent in the particulars, may actually “succeed more often” (*mallon epitunchanousin*) than the former.<sup>66</sup> To explain by updating Aristotle’s own example: someone who has experienced the pain of many headaches, and then the relief that came from taking aspirin, may well advise a friend whose head hurts to do the same. And her recommendation may actually work. But she has no explanation for why it worked, and hence no real knowledge. The physician, by contrast, does. Nonetheless, even a physician with a firm grasp of the science of anatomy may goof up in treating a patient precisely because the patient is particularized and thus only an incidental manifestation of a more general structure. Experience may be more useful than universal knowledge when dealing with real people.<sup>67</sup>

Aristotle concedes this limitation but nonetheless insists that genuine knowledge of the universal is superior to even the most efficacious and “practical” forms of experience. On this point he cites the Egyptian priests who were the first to develop pure or theoretical mathematics. They were able to do so because, to introduce a critical word that will be discussed shortly, they were allowed “leisure” (*scholazein*).<sup>68</sup> They were “counted as wonderful by others” not

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<sup>65</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (hereafter *Metaph.*), 981a5–7. The Greek word for “knowledge” in this passage is *techne*, which is not used here in the narrow sense of “productive knowledge” that it receives in *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 981a14–16.

<sup>67</sup> See also, Aristotle, *Metaph.* 981a5–b1.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 981b25.

because they had “done” anything useful, but simply because they were “wiser.”<sup>69</sup> Theoretical knowledge is good not for any consequence or specific application it may generate, but simply in and of itself, as the complete actualization of human nature. “It is clear that we do not seek such knowledge for any other need; but just as we say that someone who is for the sake of himself and not for another is free, so of the forms of knowledge this sort alone is free.”<sup>70</sup>

To sum up this line of thought: in both *Nicomachean Ethics* 10 and *Metaphysics* 1 theoretical activity is described as autotelic. It is an end in itself and even if it cannot be applied to produce overtly practical results, it is the most complete actualization of human capacity. In this sense, a theoretical life could be construed as much more “practical” (*praktikos*) than any other form of human activity. With this result in mind, we can return to *Politics* 7.3. Against the critic who would complain that the theoretical life is neither active nor able to guide the conceptual construction of the best possible city, Aristotle argues that not all forms of *praxis* are ethical or political and that in fact the theoretical life is the highest form of *praxis*.<sup>71</sup> To supplement this conclusion, and to begin to elaborate its consequences, he next offers the following:

Cities that have been established with respect to themselves (*tas kath'autas poleis*) and have chosen to live in this way do not have to be inactive (*apraktein*). For it is possible that [being active] occurs in regard to their parts.<sup>72</sup>

This statement is in keeping with an earlier comment Aristotle had made:

A single city, the one which governs in manifest fineness, could be happy with respect to itself (*kath'heautēn*), if it is possible for a city to live by itself (*kath'heautēn*) using decent laws. Its form of government would not be directed towards war or domination of its enemies.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 981b15.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 982b24–7.

<sup>71</sup> Kraut (*APB*) is thus wrong in saying that “Aristotle does not emphasize the point that philosophical thought is more active than others pursuits; that is, he does not turn this point into an argument for the superiority of philosophy, as he does in other works. His modest goal is to show that the philosophical life is not vulnerable to the criticism that it is inactive” (74).

<sup>72</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1325b23–6.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 1325a1–4.

A self-contained, nonaggressive city is like an organic whole consisting of a set of dynamically interacting and mutually enabling parts. As such, it can be every bit as active, even more so, than a city that devotes its energy to expansion beyond its borders.<sup>74</sup> Aristotle strikingly employs a metaphysical phrase to explain: cities can be “with respect to themselves” (*kath hautas*).<sup>75</sup> In other words, a city can be like a substance (*ousia*); namely a mode of being characterized by the highest degree of ontological independence. A substance does not depend on any other category for its being. By contrast, a quality (such as green) depends on there being a substance (such as tree) in which it inheres. In an analogous fashion, a substance-like city would attain self-sufficiency and remain content to stay within its political borders and economic limits. By contrast, expansionist regimes reflect ontological confusion: they wrongly elevate the category of quantity over that of substance, and thus the infinite over the finite. As a consequence they are doomed to catastrophe.<sup>76</sup>

To push this thought even further, the best city emulates not only a substance, but both the cosmos and god as well.

For many communities are with respect to each other in their political parts. And in a similar vein this condition can be achieved by a single human being. For [if this were not so] then god could not be in a leisurely and fine condition nor could the whole cosmos, because they have no external actions in addition to those that belong to themselves.<sup>77</sup>

The argument seems to be this: if a community or an individual could not be “itself with respect to itself,” nor a substantial whole in which one part rules another, then god, understood as a maximally

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<sup>74</sup> To borrow language from the *Metaphysics*: it is more like an *energeia* than a *kinesis*. See 1048b28.

<sup>75</sup> In the *Metaphysics* this phrase is said to refer to the essence of a being (1022a26).

<sup>76</sup> Silvia Carli suggests that this statement conflicts with the notion that both citizens and cities suffer from moral weakness, for here I state that they “wrongly” elevate the category of quantity over substance. In other words, they seem not to know better. Recall, however, that Aristotle is convinced that “everyone” would agree that the best life requires virtue. Therefore the “confusion” I here attribute to cities is a component of the complex and conflicted condition that characterizes moral weakness. The arguments against expansionism are so “easy” to make that even regimes like Sparta and Crete would upon hearing them know they should change their ways; even if they don’t.

<sup>77</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1325b23–30.

actualized being, could not be “itself with respect to itself” either. But god certainly is this. Therefore, it is possible for an individual or a city also to be in this condition, namely limited, localized, well-functioning and happy. The same argument applies to the cosmos. Since nothing is beyond it, it can only be active with respect to itself. Because the world is characterized by this consummate level of ontological self-sufficiency, so too can (and should) a city aspire to political self-sufficiency rather than the expansion of their power. The same holds on the level of the individual. Believing that greater and greater amounts of money or fame constitute happiness is fundamental self-deception. Instead, the best goal is to become substance-like, like god or even the world itself.<sup>78</sup> The best human life is one that stays at home and works hard to develop character and virtue rather than one that continually tries to gain the spotlight. And the maximum form of this work is theoretical activity. As explained in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10, the theoretical is the most “divine” and “self-sufficient” of lives.<sup>79</sup> As such, it can function as a the model by which the best city is constructed and without a doubt wins the contest against the practical-political life for title of the “best.”

## V

As if he understands that these arguments might be too abstract, Aristotle turns next to concrete descriptions of the ideal city. For example, it must have decent access to the sea, its citizens must be of Greek stock, and so on. Above all else, the best city knows when enough is enough. So, for example, it vigilantly monitors its population, making sure there are neither too many citizens nor too few. A city must not be excessively populous, since it should be ruled by law, and this becomes unmanageable if it gets too big. Furthermore, procreation must be limited because too many people will lead to more poverty, which in turn leads to instability.<sup>80</sup> Nor must a city be too

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<sup>78</sup> Rmi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World*, trans. Teresa Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) is masterful on the theme of cosmology as ethics.

<sup>79</sup> Aristotle, *NE* 1177a15, 1177b28 and 1177a27.

<sup>80</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1265b9–12. Aristotle assumes that “the rich are everywhere few and the poor many” (*Pol.* 1279b37–8 ).

small, for like a work of art, it must be beautiful and fine, qualities it cannot achieve if it is does not have sufficient magnitude. In general, a city does not become great “by number,” which is of course without limit and hence unable to generate a meaningful *telos*, but by its “capacity” (*dunamin*); specifically, its capacity for excellent activity.<sup>81</sup>

Aristotle offers the following comparison: “as is the case with animals, plants and tools, when it comes to the magnitude of a city there is a certain proper measure (*metron*). For each of these will not achieve its own potentiality if it is too small or too big.”<sup>82</sup> A ship only a few inches wide or ten miles long is not really a ship. Similarly, living beings are big enough when they have matured and attained their proper form. More specifically, a city is big enough when it is self-sufficient and, most important, able to provide the conditions that allow the citizens, or at least some of them, to achieve their excellence, to live “in leisure and freely and with moderation.”<sup>83</sup> As we will see in the next two sections, the best city is big enough when some of its citizens have the free time to theorize.

One final way to make this point: a good city must be of such a size that it can be “easily seen as a whole” (*eusunopton*).<sup>84</sup> Like the earlier use of *kath heautēn*, this word suggests a comparison with a basic metaphysical concept; namely, *eidōs*, which is usually translated as “form,” but because it is derived from the verb “to see” literally means the “look” of a thing as a whole. A properly scaled city should be form-like. Its boundaries must give it shape by limiting it to a specific place; not too big, not too small, but just what it takes to be easily seen as a whole.

To sum up: Aristotle's “ideal” city is of moderate size, does not aim for indefinite growth, and so does not need to order its form of government with an eye towards domination of its enemies. Its army is strictly defensive, for it understands that war is for the sake of peace. As mentioned, this principle goes to the heart of Aristotle's political teaching. Furthermore, it is regularly coupled with another, to which we now turn: lack-of-leisure is for the sake of leisure.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 1326a12.

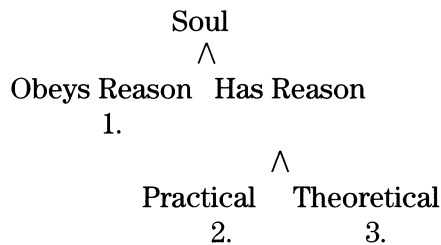
<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 1326a35–8.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 1326b31–2.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 1327a1.

## VI

Aristotle's closing arguments in 7.13–15 make it clear that the theoretical wins the competition over the practical life, for it is the best available to human beings. Aristotle begins by reconsidering the nature of happiness, which is here defined as “the complete actualization of virtue” (*energeian aretēs teleian*), and is the goal of both the best individuals and the best city.<sup>85</sup> In this context, he divides the soul into two parts: one that has reason (*logos*) and one that is capable of obeying it.<sup>86</sup> Next, reason itself is divided into its “practical” (*praktikos*) and the theoretical (*theōrētikos*) dimensions.<sup>87</sup> These divisions result in a tripartite hierarchy in which theoretical reason is the pinnacle of the activity of the soul.



*Pace* Reeve, Solmsen, Miller and Kraut, there is now no reason to doubt that Aristotle champions the theoretical life. Even if there were, the following passage would dispel it.

We shall say that actions (*praxeis*) stand in an analogous fashion [to the hierarchy sketched above]. Those are more choiceworthy that belong to what is better by nature for those who are able to attain them either all or two of them. For it is always the case that what is most choiceworthy is the highest which someone can attain.<sup>88</sup>

Immediately after making these remarks, in yet another move that initially appears choppy or even digressive, Aristotle asserts, “life as a whole must be divided too into lack-of-leisure (*ascholia*) and leisure (*scholia*), and war and peace.”<sup>89</sup> In each pair the former must be for the sake of the latter. This mention of leisure has significant consequences, for it is a decisive feature of Aristotle's conception of the

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 1332a9.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 1333a16–7. Compare similar distinctions found in *NE* 1098a3 and 1102a25–1103a3.

<sup>87</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1333a25

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 1333a27–30.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 1333a30-1.

best life. Most important, it is integral to his account of the theoretical life. As explained in *Metaphysics* 1, only when men had leisure (as they did in Egypt) were they able to experience “wonder” and so be provoked to ask the “why” questions that begin scientific inquiry.<sup>90</sup> Because answers to them are universal and not readily applicable to the particulars, “why” questions drive the questioner away from the busy, particularized world of “experience.”<sup>91</sup> As a result, “when it comes to acting” (*pros men to prattein*), those with “causal” knowledge of universals are often inferior to those with only “experience.”<sup>92</sup> The latter are fluent in the particulars; the former, living in leisure, stand at some distance from the responsibilities, preoccupations, disruptions, interruptions, and general busyness (*ascholia*) of daily political or social life.<sup>93</sup> They are “strangers,” precisely because they are concerned with universals, knowledge of which has value only “for itself.”<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, the life they lead is the best of all.

In *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7, Aristotle offers numerous reasons why the life spent in theorizing is the happiest and most virtuous. Among them are these: (1) We can theorize more continuously than we can do anything else. (2) Theorizing is most pleasant. (3) It is most self-sufficient; that is, it has the least need of external goods or human assistants. (4) Theorizing is the only activity loved for its own sake, for it produces no gain other than itself. These characteristics are encapsulated by (5): it is most leisurely.<sup>95</sup> Leisure activity is performed in the absence of external constraint and without an eye to the clock. As such, it is as close to “free time” as human beings ever come.<sup>96</sup> Only in leisure can the search for knowledge of “causes,”

<sup>90</sup> Aristotle, *Metaph.* 982b20.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 981a17.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 981a13. It is, of course, vital here to remember that Aristotle's conception of “cause” embraces the final and the formal, not just the efficient.

<sup>93</sup> In order to emphasize the fact that *ascholia* is composed of an alpha-privative, and thus depends for its very meaning on *scholē*, it is important to avoid words like “business” or “occupation” as translations.

<sup>94</sup> Kraut's (*APB*) translation of *xenikos* as “alien” is too narrow, for it suggests that what Aristotle has in mind is simply a non-citizen.

<sup>95</sup> See also, Aristotle, *NE* 1177a23–b15.

<sup>96</sup> Recall that “it is clear that we do not seek such knowledge for any other need; but just as we say that someone who is for the sake of himself and not for another is free, so of the forms of knowledge this sort alone is free” (Aristotle, *Metaph.* 982b24–7).



rather than merely learning how to get something done, take place. Such theorizing is the *telos* of human activity. Aristotle expresses this point by adding two more reasons on behalf of theorizing: (6) it actualizes what is most divine in us; (7) it actualizes what human beings in fact are, namely mind or intellect.<sup>97</sup>

Although (6) and (7) may seem to contradict one another, they do not. To be most human is to seek an understanding of the cosmos, to think about universals rather than particulars. It is thus to be separated from, to be a “stranger” to, the commonplace or political; it is somehow beyond the human, for it is to emulate the divine (which is famously described in *Metaphysics* 12.9 as “thought thinking itself”) In short, to be most human is to cease, as much as possible, to be merely human.

To state the central contention of the next section: this argument, which may seem itself to be entirely abstract or theoretical, can actually be reinforced by practical-political considerations. It is ultimately good for a city to have philosophers in it who engage in theorizing.

## VII

Recall that in part (4) above it was mentioned that when Aristotle states that “much more [practical] are those thoughts that are ‘autotelic’ (*autoteleis*) and the kinds of theory (*theōrias*) that are for the sake of themselves,” the temptation to join Kraut in translating (the implicit) *praktikos* as “active” rather than “practical” is strong.<sup>98</sup> After all, the sense of *praxis* at work in the passage is that of an actualization of a capacity. Nonetheless, “practical,” a word which connotes political activity, was preferred. This section will explain why.

A fundamental symmetry obtains between an individual citizen and the city: both share the same *telos* and are governed by the principle, “the *telos* of war is peace, and of lack-of-leisure leisure.”<sup>99</sup> An individual requires leisure in order to live well; most important, in order to theorize. Analogously, a good city should aim to maintain the peace in order that its best citizens can be free from the least leisurely

<sup>97</sup> See also, Aristotle, *NE* 1177b30 and 1178a2.

<sup>98</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1325b16–7.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 1334a15–6.

of all activities, namely “military and political actions.”<sup>100</sup> In order for a city to achieve this goal it must itself be virtuous. The citizens must be law-abiding and show moderation. When the city is attacked they must be courageous enough to put on their armor and hold their positions in order to defend it. When there is peace they must be sufficiently patient in order to engage in political deliberation, and be well enough disciplined to resist those who urge the city to attack its neighbors or expand its borders. Distressingly, however, it is during peace that the trouble begins.<sup>101</sup> In a brief statement that has terribly sobering consequences—and that echoes the equally sobering acknowledgement of the citizens’ moral weakness in *Politics* 7.1 (see section (1) above)—Aristotle says this:

For war forces men to be just and moderate, while the enjoyment of good fortune and peaceful leisure makes them more violently arrogant (*hubristas*).<sup>102</sup>

As intrinsically desirable as both may be, peace and leisure are nearly impossible to sustain, for most men cannot tolerate them. Especially those with strong desires, who are high-spirited and ambitious, become restless. They lack the ability to amuse themselves and the self-discipline required to use free time well. Unconstrained by external commands, they don’t know what to do with themselves and so become ill-at-ease. With too much time on their hands they get bored. They start pointless fights and do stupid things. That this regularly occurs is yet another expression of the disease that Aristotle locates at the heart of ordinary human and political life and which was discussed in the first two sections of this paper: most people and cities mistake the source of their own happiness even when “easy” arguments are available to show that they are being wrong-headed. They devote their best energy to the pursuit of wealth, power, or fame and thereby misconstrue the very meaning of their own lives. They are incapable of appreciating the gift of leisure and so they disturb the peace. In fact, most young men are far better behaved when they are in uniform. Military discipline forces them to act in a moderate fashion and to take heed of the common good rather than simply

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<sup>100</sup> Aristotle, *NE* 1177b5–6.

<sup>101</sup> As Kraut (*APB*) puts it, “Paradoxically, although war endangers our lives and freedom, peace and abundance pose greater threats” (144).

<sup>102</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1334a25–8.

indulging their own violent impulses or selfishly seeking their own pleasures.

War is for the sake of peace, lack-of-leisure is for the sake of leisure, but most men can tolerate neither peace nor free time. But therapy is available. For when it “comes to leisure” (*pros tēn scholēn*) philosophy is both required and valuable.<sup>103</sup> It provides a paradigm for how to use leisure well.

In studying the world the philosopher separates himself from the ordinary doings of his fellow citizens. In this one sense he is almost like a criminal. But the philosopher teaches, or at least shows, how to separate oneself well. His activity and his healthy indifference to ordinary political affairs reveal that “human being is not the best thing in the world,” which in turn implies that practical reason is not the highest form of reason.<sup>104</sup> Most people become restless or violent if no one tells them what to do. Not the philosopher. He does not need external constraint to keep him in line because the world, inexhaustible in its invitation to be studied, is always present as a source of wonder and amazement.

For it is on account of wondering and being amazed that human beings both now and at first began to philosophize. At first, they were amazed and wondered about those oddities that were staring them in the face, and then little by little they progressed and became puzzled by greater questions; for example, about the changing attributes of the moon and the sun and stars, and about the becoming of the whole.<sup>105</sup>

The world is wonderful, beautiful, intelligible, nourishing and welcoming. For those who use their intellects, it promises rewards greater than money, power or fame. Only philosophy, the theorizing of the world, can satisfy even the most restless of souls.

These remarks hark back to a comment Aristotle makes in *Politics* 2.7. He first mentions that some acts of injustice are committed for the sake of pleasure and the “fulfilling of desire,” and not just (as Phaleas mistakenly thought) to acquire necessary goods like food or shelter. For such wrong-doers, who are prompted by their own *pleonexia* and “who wish to enjoy themselves for the sake of *themselves* . . . there is only one cure: philosophy.”<sup>106</sup> Because the strong and

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 1334a23.

<sup>104</sup> Aristotle, *NE* 1141a21–2.

<sup>105</sup> Aristotle, *Metaph.* 982b12–7.

<sup>106</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1267a11–2.

restless desires of such criminals has already “separated” them from the community, only philosophy, which allows them to continue in their alienation, offers them a suitable and satisfying replacement for the money, power and fame they would otherwise seek to acquire. It offers them the entire world as an object for theoretical inquiry.

Philosophers bear some similarity to criminals, for they too are marginalized.<sup>107</sup> Preferring leisure to being-busy, and therefore opting out of the realms of politics and war, out of the competition for money, power and fame, they become strangers. But their alienation is simultaneously a completion. For they think, they theorize. In doing so philosophers function as a paradigm of how to use leisure well. They are reminders that the too familiar urge to succeed in the city rather than to pursue excellence is wrong-headed. Philosophers exhibit a *telos* for human activity, without which there would be nothing for humans to want but more of the same; without which it would be impossible to say when enough is enough. This is their “practical” contribution, however indirect, to the well being of the city. By being both inside and outside of the city at the same time they show the citizens that, however tied they may be to their local community, the world is much bigger than that given to them by their national borders. If there were no philosophers, then expansionist regimes like Sparta and Crete would have to be counted as the best of all. And this they are not.

To conclude: *pace* Kraut, Miller, Reeve and Solmsen, *Politics* 7, read in its entirety, provides a sustained and decisive, even if implicit, argument on behalf of the theoretical life. Furthermore, it does so on both theoretical and practical grounds.

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<sup>107</sup> By having Socrates associate with characters like Alcibiades, Critias and Charmides, this is a point that Plato regularly makes.