

Abstract – Aristotle’s *Politics* 4.11

0 Introduction

Aristotle’s delineation of an ideal political system in Book 7 of the *Politics* – ‘the city of our prayers’ – is often treated as of less interest than his more ‘empirical’ or ‘realistic’ treatment of constitutions in Books 4 to 6. Jaeger thought it belonged to an earlier, more ‘Platonic’, and less mature stratum of the treatise. I will argue that its vision of a virtuous city and citizenry is still pivotal to the structure of Books 4 to 6, in a version that offers a way of its shaping reality.

1 *The city of our prayers*

Aristotle several times makes it clear that the prime aim of the project undertaken in the *Politics* is to articulate the nature of the ideal political community, ‘the city of our prayers’. For Plato in the *Republic* a prayer in this context is an unrealisable fantasy. For Aristotle, it is a serious ideal, requiring satisfaction of a complex set of preconditions for its realisation, some of which may just be a matter of good fortune. A key requirement is that the city itself be virtuous, and that in turn depends of a virtuous citizenry.

2 *Multiple tasks for πολιτική*

As well as considering (i) the nature of that city of our prayers, *Pol.* 4.1 rules that πολιτική has to consider (ii) the one best in prevailing circumstances, (iii) the origin and ways of stabilizing inferior constitutions, and (iv) the most apt and easiest for all cities – the one which as many as possible can share in.

3 *The programme for Books 4 and 5*

In *Pol.* 4.2 a variant of the scheme in *Pol.* 4.1 (as in (2) above) is sketched, which sets the programme implemented in Books 4 and 5 (Book 6 is an appendix to these). Its key novelties are (a) the requirement for a critical survey of existing constitutions, particularly those now dominant in Greece, democracy and oligarchy, and (b) a restatement of (iv) in (2) above, as ‘most choiceworthy after the best (i.e. (i) in (2)). Its positioning (*Pol.* 4.11) immediately after the survey (*Pol.* 4.3-10) indicates its pivotal role – largely missed in the literature – in the argument of Books 4 and 5. **(T1)**

4. *The realism of the ‘second-best’ constitution and its function as a yardstick*

This constitution is realistic not because it is easy to implement (it isn’t), but just because it doesn’t demand exceptional virtue of the citizens nor special natural potential or resources for their παιδεία, nor the ‘constitution of our prayers’ with all its preconditions. It functions as a yardstick by which democracies and oligarchies may be assessed and ranked for preferability. **(T2 and T3)**

5. *Specification of the realistic ideal*

Formulation of this ideal appeals to the ethical thesis that virtue lies in a mean, and applies it to the city and its constitution. As in Book 7, the virtue of a city is seen as deriving from that of its citizens **(T4)**. In *Pol.* 4.11 their virtue is taken to imply that such citizens will be neither too arrogant nor too submissive. That condition is best satisfied by predominance of a socially and economically middling class, liable to foster equality and friendship and regard for them, hallmarks of Aristotle’s concept of proper citizenship. **(T5-T6)**.

6. *The legislator’s task*

The legislator’s task as formulated in *Pol.* 4.12, given that a predominant middling class is seldom found, is to co-opt the members of that class to involvement in key positions in a democracy or oligarchy: i.e. to put the ideal to work. This will promote stability, particularly in large democracies. It is a resort to social engineering with an ethical subtext, not to political compromise (as in politics, as so described in *Pol.* 4.9). **(T7-T9)**.

