Leisure, Virtue, Politics, and Work:  
An Aristotelian Excursus

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At the start of his *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle declares politics to be “the most sovereign and most comprehensive master science” (1094a). For contemporary readers this is perhaps an unexpected move, to open a treatise on *ethics* by discussing *politics*, but for Aristotle it is at once natural and logical “way of talking.”

Aristotle views all human activities (politics and leisure very much included) as guided by characteristic ends in which they naturally culminate. Differences among these ends are the basis for establishing a hierarchy among human activities. An activity whose characteristic end (telos) is pursued for its own sake has (at least potentially) greater merit or excellence (areté) than an activity whose characteristic end is only to serve as a means to a different, further end. Greater excellence is associated with pursuit of ends involving the higher and defining human capacities (e.g., *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1098a). These are, according to Aristotle, the ability to reason and the desire to know (e.g., *Metaphysics*, 980a; *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1177a; *Politics*, 1323b). The excellence of an activity therefore depends on three criteria: first, the form(s) of reason it entails (*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1098a; on the forms of reason, see Bk. VI generally); second, the ends at which its aims (*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1177a, 1102a); and third, the extent to which actual reason and actual ends embody their ideal qualities. The ideal is the “final cause” of the actual, toward which the actual develops naturally if uncorrupted and unimpeded (see Sabine, 1961, ch. 6, esp. pp. 115-122, for nontechnical discussion of this complex issue). The ideal serves, then, as a standard guiding the actual and against which the actual can be assessed. Excellence is a matter not only of purpose but also of success. Intention must be combined with reason, and then carried into effective action. This close linkage of the ideal and the ethical — what we might call the normative and the empirical — is characteristic of Aristotle’s work, not least his political studies.

It is in fact the conjunction of human capacities as ideals and as actualities that constitutes politics as a “most sovereign and most comprehensive master science.” Politics, considered for the moment in their ideal sense, are for Aristotle the pursuit of excellence through the development and refinement of practical reason (praxis). If action based on reason is necessary to achieve excellence (*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1179a-b, 1177a-b), the arena for action based on practical reason is the city-state (polis, pl. poleis). Aristotle argues that the polis is the highest and most complete human association, in which all other partial associations (e.g., the household, oikos) achieve their fullest realization (*Politics*, 1252b). Only within the political association formed by polis can the human excellences be most fully developed. This applies particularly to the excellence most characteristic of citizenship, moral and practical wisdom (phronesis). Moral and practical wisdom requires integrating experience with and reflection on the constant and the contingent elements in human activity, a combination that can be achieved only through engagement in the affairs of the polis. The phronimos, the person characterized by moral wisdom who seeks excellence through virtuous activity in the polis, is the highest development of citizenship. For this reason, Aristotle characterizes human beings not only as rational by nature but also as by nature meant to live in a polis (and not, as often thought, simply as political by nature; see *Politics*, 1253a; see also *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1170a, 1097b). The civic virtues enabled by political association in the polis generate a specific way of life otherwise impossible. Indeed, Aristotle holds that any being living outside the polis must necessarily be either less or more than human because such a being is either unable to achieve the human excellences or is already so superior as not to need them. The “final synthesis” (Hamburger, 1951, p. 175) of these excellences made possible by political association in the polis is a complex virtue best labeled “felicity” (*eudaimonia*), not to be confused with more ordinary “happiness” (see Aekrill, 1974). A single act may bring glory and fame, a fortunate series of events may lead to prosperity, but only a lifetime of reflection on and engagement in virtuous action within the polis may culminate in the “final and self-sufficient” virtue of *eudaimonia* (*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1097b). It is this fragile telos at which politics in its ideal sense aims.

The fragility of virtue, and with it the delicate linkage of the ideal and the actual, is hardly lost on Aristotle. His own tenuous status as a resident noncitizen in Athens would be enough to ensure this. Perhaps
no lesson had been impressed more forcefully on the ancient Greeks than the precariousness of human existence, exhaustively explored in Greek tragic drama while from the Homeric tradition the Greeks knew that “As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity” (Iliad, VI.146). Thucydides’s dispassionate history is organized to a significant extent around the increasing distance between a civic ideal and the follies and cruelties in which the Athenians increasingly engaged (see Ober, 1994). Aristotle, then, is not one either to mistake the ideal for the actual or to accept the actual as the limit of the ideal. Grounded in the philosophical principles governing his inquiry as whole, Aristotle’s analysis of the polis is also a study of the incessant factional and social strife (stasis) that wracked the Greek polis. It is in some ways an intervention in that strife. His partisanship is clear. It lies with an aristocracy that would use the independence allowed by landed wealth and social status to cultivate the civic virtues he values most highly. Yet Aristotle understands that even an approximation of this ideal had become increasingly rare. The limits set by nature on the pursuit of wealth (see Politics, 1256b) were more often transgressed as citizens focused more on living, and gratifying their inclinations, than on living well (Politics, 1257b - 1258a). If the polis is a form of human association intended to enable the development of the excellences culminating in eudaimonia, how is it that citizens have become more engaged in the excessive pursuit of wealth (pleonexia and chrematistike) and less in the cultivation of moral and practical wisdom (phronesis)?

Aristotle searches for the answers by exploring the constitutional structures of the Greek poleis. In Aristotle’s conception of politics as a “most comprehensive master science,” a constitution establishes institutions and procedures but extends beyond these to create in a polis a particular ethos, a characteristic way of life embodying underlying valuations of human activity (see Euben, 1978). The quality of a polis depends on the character generated within this ethos. Since it is the nature of human beings to pursue excellence and since they do so best in a polis, a well-governed polis is defined as one that not only enables its citizens to develop the excellences culminating in eudaimonia but one in which they actually do so (Nichomachean Ethics, 1099b). Aristotle thus focuses his political studies on two questions: first, whether actual constitutions are well or poorly conceived when assessed against this definition; second, what forces corrupt the operation of actual constitutions. He asks, in other words, what traits of character actual constitutions encourage and by what the development of civic excellence is thwarted.

In answering this question, Aristotle forges an indissoluble link between politics, leisure, and work. The good citizen (as distinct from the good person) requires a good polis (Politics, 1333b), one in which citizens are free to cultivate excellence. Aristotle therefore regards the provision of leisure to its citizens as a fundamental and generally acknowledged component of any well-governed polis (Politics, 1269a). This is a rather breathtaking claim for late moderns to absorb, so it bears repeating: Provision of leisure for its citizens is necessary if a political association is to be well governed. Aristotle takes the political centrality of leisure quite seriously. Its presence is necessary in a well-governed polis because, according to Aristotle (Politics, 1337b), the right use of leisure is “the basis of all our life” (Barker translation), “the first principle of all action” (Jowett), or “the first principle of all things” (Rackham). It is in the leisure provided by a well-governed polis that its citizens have the freedom necessary to develop the human excellences. To whom and how leisure as freedom is provided, and how it is used, are thus fundamental distributive questions in the constitution of any polis, for they determine much about the specific combinations and distributions of virtues that may exist within it.

Aristotle cautions that it is far more difficult to answer these questions in practice than in theory (Politics, 1269a) and indeed they are the roots of much political conflict. The freedom Aristotle identifies with leisure (and so often misunderstood in leisure studies) is in the first instance freedom from specific kinds of work. It is thus associated with specific factions in any polis. In ancient Greece the relevant aspect of work was not whether one worked (most Greeks engaged by necessity in some form of work; Ober, 1989, p. 272) or even whether that work was physically strenuous, but whether one worked independently of someone else’s control (M. Austin & Vidal-Naquet, 1977, pp. 15 - 16). One’s work was inseparable from one’s character. Servile work indicated servile character; to depend on another for one’s livelihood was servile. Independent agricultural work on one’s own land tended always to be more highly valued, while manual occupations were suspect (Finley, 1981, p. 5). Finance, trade, and manufacturing carried associations with lower social status and were often directed by resident non-citizens. In the end, however, it was the citizen’s
moral condition, not his economic condition that mattered. Although leisure as a cultural value continued to be elevated above work (Austin & Vidal-Naquet, pp. 16, 151), independent work was not devalued in itself unless it sank into the pursuit of wealth or high profits for their own sake (pp. 11 - 12, 13; see also Balme, 1984; Wood, 1988).

Aristotle’s evaluations of work run counter to this cultural tradition and have aristocratic political implications. The freedom in leisure to be provided by the polis was not from a general “necessity to labor” (Barker) but from the necessity to work at “menial occupations” (Rackham) or from the necessity of providing for one’s “daily wants” (Jowett). Such freedom is necessary for the development of virtuous character because, as Aristotle makes plain in his Rhetoric, “it is not noble to practice any sordid craft, since it is a mark of a free man not to live at another’s beck and call” (1367a). The distributive question raised by Aristotle regarding the provision of leisure in the well-governed polis is also about the distribution of work, and thus of the burdens associated with undesirable yet necessary forms of work. In the context of ancient Greece, these burdens were borne not only by slaves, the practice of slavery being widely accepted, but also by ostensibly free citizens. The internal logic of Aristotle’s argument forces a confrontation with the moral and political consequences of the distribution of work and leisure within the political association. His conception of the well being necessary for the development of excellence through virtuous action is not austere; it assumes a certain minimum threshold material security has been crossed (Politics, 1256b, 1257b - 1258a; Nichomachean Ethics, 1099a). Citizens must be “furnished with the conditions with the conditions of virtuous action” (Barker, 1959, p. 285) in order to eliminate threats posed by material want to the cultivation of excellence. Although not requiring wealth as such, this threshold does exceed the level of material resources available to most citizens in ancient Greece. The political consequence is that the supposed burdens of “menial occupations” and of practicing a “sordid craft” are imposed unevenly within the citizenry of a polis, with the further moral consequence that those on whom these burdens are imposed are precluded from developing precisely the excellences of character their work frees more fortunate citizens to cultivate. This character is indifferent to the necessity or usefulness of such work. Whatever the criteria for citizenship imposed by the constitution or institutional support for political participation (e.g., pay for jury duty, attending the assembly, or holding administrative office; see Finley, 1981, pp. 58, 86; Hignett, 1952, pp. 215 - 221; Ostwald, 1986, passim; de Ste Croix, 1975), of more importance to Aristotle is the distribution of leisure’s privileges and work’s burdens (which lies at the heart of his “political sociology”; see Ober, 1991). It is this distribution that determines who within the citizenry will actually be able to engage in the virtuous activity leading to excellence of character.

There is nothing inevitable for Aristotle about the achievement of excellence. Although it is an ideal toward which human beings by their nature tend, actual excellence depends on the arena created for human activity by a polis through its constitutional institutions and procedures. His analysis of actual constitutions is intended to reveal which in fact do so. A polis must not only provide leisure but also properly educate its citizens for its right use, that is, for virtuous action (Nichomachean Ethics, 1094a, 1099b; Politics, 1333a, 1338a). Aristotle understands that the actual educations citizens receive and the uses to which they are put often destroy precisely those excellences ideally developed in leisure. He condemns such failure in the strongest terms, arguing that a special measure of moral shame falls to those who fail to use leisure rightly (Politics, 1334a). To have access to the goods of life but not to employ them in virtuous action is a profound moral failure, a weakness of character that destroys both polis and citizen. Thus it is, for example, that the Spartans, bred and reared as warriors whose iron discipline made them feared and admired throughout ancient Greece, were defeated not by an enemy in war but by the deterioration of their own character in the peace their strength had won them. The Spartan ethos created fortitude and strength, yet had no place for politics unconstrained by war, a politics of citizens rather than warriors. The Spartans, writes Aristotle (Politics, 1271b), were defeated by leisure.
Notes

1. Contradictions within Aristotle's discussions of the types of reason and their values, most famously between Bk. X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the remainder of that work and the *Politics*, have generated endless debate. See, e.g., Ackrill (1974; 1981, ch. 10), Kraut (1989), Rorty (1980), and Stocks (1939). For discussion of this issue in relation to Aristotle's conception of leisure, see Hemingway (1988).

2. The Thucydidean Pericles’s boast that in Athens whoever “takes no part” in politics is regarded neither as retiring or unambitious, but as “useless” (II.40) reflects this ideal. The nature, extent, and content of political participation in the historical Athens (the *polis* about which we know most) remain, however, subject to considerable disagreement. Actual participation seems likely to have varied considerably and seldom to have conformed to the ideals as presented either by the Athenians themselves or by their later admirers. For critical assessments, see (among others in a vast literature) Ober, 1989; and Sinclair, 1988, ch. 5.2. See also Carter, 1986; and Saxonhouse, 1996. This is the place to note that the average *citizen* (who was quite different from the average *resident*, being an adult native male required to verify his legitimate descent at least from a citizen father and often from a native mother as well) probably participated less frequently in the central government and administration of his *polis* and more often in smaller districts or neighborhoods (see Whitehead, 1986).

3. The ancient Greeks had a well-developed constitutional tradition, grounded in codes of law and long established custom. For discussions of the Greek constitutional tradition, see Hignett, 1952; Hansen, 1983, 1991; Ober, 1996; Ostwald, 1969, 1986; Sealey, 1987; Shaw, 1991. Aristotle and his students collected the constitutions of something like 158 *poleis*. The sole remaining text is the *Constitution of Athens*, more probably written by a student than by Aristotle himself. The *Politics* includes findings from this research project.

4. Sylvester has recently (1999) called attention to the importance of analyzing work if we are to understand more fully classical and modern conceptions of leisure. By emphasizing how these conceptions are embedded in specific historical contexts entailing social values with specific political implications, Sylvester provides a useful correction to the occasionally overly enthusiastic appreciations of classical leisure found in leisure studies.

5. The practice of slavery is a haunting presence in any discussion of ancient Greece, not least in considering Aristotle's conceptualization of leisure. He takes it as axiomatic that some people have characters by nature fit for nothing more than slavery (*Politics*, 1255a); this cavalier view is extreme even for the Greeks. Although the full extent of slavery is strenuously debated, this much seems clear. First, slavery existed and was important particularly in the wealthier *poleis*, including Athens. Second, slaves tended to be non-Greeks except for those Greeks taken captive in war or enslaved as punishment (e.g., for nonpayment of debts, but note that debt slavery was banned in Athens by Solon's reforms). Third, slave and free labor coexisted side by side in almost all spheres of ancient Greek work (see, e.g., Hansen, 1991, p. 62 - 63) except for the most brutal, from which free citizens were excluded (e.g., the Athenian silver mines), or the most sensitive, from which slaves and (in general) non-citizens were barred (e.g., the military). Interestingly, slaves were employed in the Athenian police force, including those who dragged the famous red-painted rope through the *agora* to drive citizens to the assembly. The grounds for this seem to have been that it was degrading for one citizen to lay his hands forcefully on another citizen. Fourth, the aristocratic ideal could not become actuality without the presence of slave labor, nor should the importance of resident non-citizens (the *metics*) in trade and commerce be forgotten. There can be no doubt that “living well” as Aristotle conceives it depends on slavery as well as the submissive labor of non-aristocratic citizens. For discussions of slavery in ancient Greece, see Finley, 1981, pp. 97 - 100; Jameson, 1977/78; Martin, 1996, pp. 65 - 66; de Ste Croix, 1981; Wood, 1983.
References


