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Was Aristotle an “Aristotelian Social Democrat”?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Although this article is largely concerned with criticism, it is not intended in any way to belittle Martha Nussbaum's significant work on Greek ethical and political thought. She has done a great deal to illuminate the subject and, in particular, to free it from the disciplinary fetters imposed by classics and philosophy with their different scholarly traditions and preoccupations. The author is in agreement with much of what she has to say, not only about the Greeks but also on more immediate matters of political and educational values, in particular in her eloquent defenses of social democracy and the humanities. On Aristotle, whose philosophy she places at the core of her philosophical and educational enterprise, her work is an enviable combination of expert scholarship and suggestive interpretation, combining the precision of the (mainly) British analytical school with the breadth of American liberal humanism. In her use of the *Ethics*, she has demonstrated convincingly how Aristotle's method of practical reasoning provides a significant improvement on the dominant Kantian and utilitarian modes of our era and how it can be used as a pathway to a fuller understanding of moral knowledge, for instance, through the insights of literature. If the opportunity provided by this symposium is used to question some of Nussbaum's interpretations, that is simply because debate is intellectually more interesting than deferential acquiescence.

The aspect of her view of Aristotle explored in this article belongs to his political rather than his ethical theory (though the two are closely linked and interdependent). It is her well-known identification of Aristotle and Aristotelianism as intellectual sources for the principles of social democracy.¹ Social democracy is understood as the type of welfare

1. The main sources for a discussion of social democracy are Martha Nussbaum, "Nature, Function, and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, suppl. vol. (1988), pp. 145–84, and "Aristotelian Social Democracy," in *Liberalism and the Good*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass et al. (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 203–52. Nussbaum also canvasses Aristotle's support for liberal democracy in "Shame, Separateness,

state democracy especially associated with the Scandinavian countries in which the citizens use collective mechanisms to distribute the material needs of life to each other on the basis of need. Social democrats accept the basic principles of liberal democracy, such as equal voting rights and basic political freedoms, but add to them a concern for redistributing wealth through the state for the purpose of improving the life chances of the worst off.

Nussbaum's argument that Aristotle is a social democrat thus places her among a wider group of influential modern interpreters who have identified Aristotle as a supporter of democracy and liberal democratic principles.² Although the argument for social democracy is peculiarly hers, the claim for liberal democracy in general is by no means unique and may almost have become the dominant orthodoxy, at least in North America. This article, while concentrating on the more specific claim that Aristotle advocates redistribution in favor of the most socially disadvantaged, also addresses the larger question of how far Aristotle may be said to support the principles of liberal democracy. It will be argued that there is insufficient evidence to characterize Aristotle accurately either as a democrat or as a social democrat and that such a characterization amounts to what Nussbaum herself refers to as "descriptive chauvinism,"³ namely, the interpretation of thinkers from another time or culture in terms of one's own preconceptions. Admittedly, particular passages or arguments in Aristotle, if followed to their logical conclusion, might yield democratic or social democratic principles. However, there is little evidence that Aristotle himself drew these conclusions. On the contrary, such conclusions run up against other strongly held positions which suggests that he would not have drawn the conclusions himself.

Nussbaum, it must be recognized, does not press Aristotle himself wholly into her "Aristotelian" social democratic mold. At important points she revises or extends his position, thereby distinguishing between what Aristotle himself actually believed and what an "Aristotelian" should believe. In that respect, she already concedes a negative answer

and Political Unity: Aristotle's Criticism of Plato," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amelie O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), and *Love's Knowledge: Essays in Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

2. For example, Bernard Yack, *The Problems of a Political Animal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Jeremy Waldron, "The Wisdom of the Multitude: Some Reflections on Book 3, Chapter 11 of Aristotle's *Politics*," *Political Theory* 23 (1995): 563-84; Susan Bickford, *The Dissonance of Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996); Arlene Saxonhouse, *Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theories* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); John Uhr, *Deliberative Democracy in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

3. Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 118-20.

to the question posed in the title of this article, that is, that Aristotle is not an Aristotelian social democrat. But though she accepts that he does not go all the way with her version of social democracy, she does claim that he comes very close to it and that he lays the essential philosophical foundation for social democracy. The point at issue, therefore, is not whether Aristotle is an Aristotelian social democrat but, rather, how close Aristotle comes to being one.

II. DO ARISTOTLE'S VIEWS MATTER?

As a further preliminary, we may note an interesting difference in intellectual milieu. This workshop was held in Canberra, Australia, and its author has spent his academic life largely in New Zealand and, latterly, Australia. For most Australians and New Zealanders, even those with an interest in political ideas, the question whether Aristotle actually was or was not a social democrat will seem to be a question of purely antiquarian interest. It may be of significance to the historian of ideas but will be of little consequence to the political philosopher let alone the broader politically interested public. What matters for political philosophy is whether social democracy should be adopted as a set of principles for our time and how philosophically robust these principles are by our own criteria of judgment. Whether or not these principles were also held by an ancient philosopher, even one of Aristotle's undoubted historical standing and influence, may seem beside the point, an issue to be left to the dwindling band of classical scholars and historians of ideas.

Where Nussbaum lives and works, however, such a question really matters to those with intellectual interests in the humanities and social sciences. In the United States, democratic Athens and the ancient Greek philosophers (especially Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle) form one of the battlegrounds in which the present-day conflict between liberals and conservatives is fought out. We need only look to the central role played by Greek philosophy in Alan Bloom's best-selling *The Closing of the American Mind* (trenchantly reviewed by Nussbaum at the time in the *New York Review of Books*) or the interest of long-time radical journalist I. F. Stone in the death of Socrates.⁴ Those on both left and right want to co-opt the Greek philosophers to their camp. The main explanation for this level of partisan interest, it may be speculated, is educational. In the United States system of university education, undergraduate liberal arts degrees provide a stepping stone to success and prosperity in many of the professions. Within college liberal arts degrees, a dominant role has been played by Great Books and other courses which have included major Greek authors (read in English translation). In Australia and New Zealand, we have never had the academic courage or the resources to make

4. Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); I. F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (Boston: Little Brown, 1988).

the liberal arts a gateway to the wealthy professions. Moreover, within arts and humanities faculties, the academic traditionalists took their lead from the British and poured scorn on the supposed superficiality of Great Books. The classicists were sufficiently entrenched in the universities to prevent the widespread reading of Greek works in translation until it was too late. The result, allowing for some exaggeration, is that in the United States it would be hard to find, say, a leading lawyer or journalist who had not come across Pericles' funeral speech or Plato's *Republic* in his or her education; in the antipodes, it would be hard to find one who had.

These differing levels of present-day interest cut both ways. On the one hand, the continuing resonance of the Greek texts in modern American political debates gives an urgency and sense of commitment to their academics' interpretations which do much to enliven academic discussion and can often throw new light on old problems. Nussbaum's work on Aristotle certainly has this strong sense of political engagement which tends to make the more dispassionate inquiries of scholars in countries such as ours seem pedestrian and inconsequential. On the other hand, with so much at stake politically, there must always be a temptation to read the ancient texts in a way that suits one's own position at the expense of distorting their historical meaning. This, it will be suggested, is what Nussbaum does in relation to Aristotle's supposed commitment to the principles of social democracy. She is not alone. All those who read Aristotle as supporting democracy in general are open to a similar charge of historical distortion. Aristotle, I will be arguing, is to be read in his historical context as, on the whole, antidemocratic and anti-liberal. But in so arguing in the antipodes, one can have the luxury of knowing that no comfort is thereby given to the forces of elitism or conservatism. They are not listening.

III. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When we ask whether Aristotle, or any other classical Greek, is to be seen as democratic or antidemocratic, the main focus of argument is the free male population of the Greek polis and their political rights. As is well known, the Greeks excluded women and slaves from full rights of citizenship, an exclusion which we now reject as contrary to basic human rights and as incompatible with democracy. Moreover, Aristotle offered what are now infamous justifications of these exclusions on the basis of the supposed natural inferiority of slaves and women.⁵ There

5. For slaves, the main discussion is 1.4–7, 13 (all Aristotle references are to the *Politics* unless otherwise indicated). See also 3.6.1278b32–37, *Ethica Nicomachea* (hereafter *EN*), 8.11.1161a32–b8; Richard Mulgan, *Aristotle's Political Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 40–44; Nicholas Smith, "Aristotle's Theory of Natural Slavery," *Phoenix* 37 (1983): 109–22. For women, see Aristotle, 1.12–13, 2.5; see also Mulgan, *Aristotle's Political Theory*, pp. 44–47.

are some modern writers who see the treatment of slaves and women as the dominant feature of Aristotle's political theory and who would, therefore, reject any suggestion that he could be any species of genuine democrat.⁶

On the other hand, most political theorists working in the mainstream of western political theory have traditionally separated the issue of basic eligibility for citizenship (from which women, slaves, and foreigners were excluded) from the issue of the distribution of political rights among those free males normally considered eligible for citizenship. After all, it is the latter issue, which, historically, provided the context for Greek arguments about the relative virtues of different types of government—monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, and democracy. It is here that we can look for parallels with modern arguments for and against democracy which we can then apply to our own more inclusive citizen populations. The unjust exclusions of the Greeks are not forgotten or openly excused. But they are set aside in the interests of sympathetically evaluating Greek theorizing about politics. Nussbaum writes within this mainstream tradition, and her arguments will be discussed against the same background assumptions.

Aristotle's attitude toward democracy, we would all agree, needs to be considered in its historical context. But not everyone agrees on the main components of this context. For instance, most modern readers of Aristotle's *Politics* come to this work immediately after an encounter with Plato, so that Plato's political philosophy provides the main background against which the *Politics* is assessed. Such a juxtaposition, however, may overemphasize Aristotle's democratic credentials. Plato's dialogues make a strong case against democracy, and his *Republic* advocates placing absolute political power in the hands of a few collectively oriented philosophers. Thus, Plato provides a classic statement of the elitist critique of the egalitarian and liberal principles of democracy. When we come to Aristotle, we find him disagreeing with Plato on a number of key points, such as the abolition of private property and the family for the class of

6. For example, Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979); Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), in the case of women. Followers of the cryptographic method of Leo Strauss have interpreted Aristotle's logically flawed accounts of slavery and of the subjection of women as deliberately intended to raise doubts about the justification of these institutions: e.g., Wayne Ambler, "Aristotle on Nature and Politics: The Case of Slavery," *Political Theory* 15 (1987): 390–410; on slavery, Arlene Saxonhouse, "Family, Polity and Unity: Aristotle on Socrates' Community of Wives," *Polity* 15 (1982): 202–19; and Harold Levy, "Does Aristotle Exclude Women from Politics?" *Review of Politics* 52 (1990): 397–416, on women. This approach is implausible; see Richard Mulgan, "Aristotle and the Political Role of Women," *History of Political Thought* 15 (1994): 179–202, "The Straussian Influence in the Interpretation of Aristotle's *Politics*," in *History of Philosophy Yearbook*, ed. Paul Thom and Udo Thiel (Canberra: Australasian Society for the History of Philosophy, 1994), pp. 219–35.

guardians, and the pursuit of excessive unity in the state.⁷ Moreover, Aristotle is distinctly more sympathetic than Plato to some of the supposed virtues of democracy, such as the collective wisdom of the assembly and the greater political stability produced by a more inclusive citizen body.⁸

On the other hand, a somewhat different perspective is provided by viewing Aristotle's political theory within the framework of the broader history of Greek political thought.⁹ The Greeks' reflections on the respective merits of different constitutions were dominated by two great conflicts, that between despotic kingship and the rule of free citizens fought out in the struggles between the Greek cities and the kings of Persia and then Macedonia and the conflict between democracy and oligarchy reflected most notably in the wars between the Athenians and the Spartans and their respective allies. Most Greeks of the classical period rejected monarchy as incompatible with their freedom and suitable only for inferior peoples, though, among philosophers, the notion of a benevolent despot was never completely ruled out and was canvassed sympathetically by Plato's contemporaries, Xenophon and Isocrates. The intellectual conflict between democracy and oligarchy was more evenly balanced, with substantial support given to each side as well as to various forms of "middle way" which sought a moderate compromise between the two extremes.¹⁰

Aristotle's general philosophical method is to begin with received opinions and to try to reach robust solutions that will fit experience while meeting the demands of philosophical coherence. In the *Politics*, we find him, not unexpectedly, keeping fairly close to the views of his contemporaries on these major political controversies. Thus, on kingship, Aristotle sides generally with the free Greek cities, though he is unable to exclude the rule of an absolute ruler, at least in the hypothetical and unlikely circumstances of someone "like a god among men."¹¹ On the relative merits of oligarchy and democracy, at least for everyday cities, he is naturally drawn to supporting the moderate or mixed constitution, which he calls the "constitution" or "polity," in preference to either extreme. Instead of the rule of the rich (oligarchy) or of the poor (democracy), power should rest with the middle class who are more steady and virtuous.¹² Aristotle's principle of political justice, according to which political rights and honors ought to be distributed according to virtue, is elaborated through a dialectical critique of the respective principles of

7. Aristotle, 2.2-5.

8. *Ibid.*, 3.12, 4.11.1296a13-18.

9. For example, Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Classical Athens* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), chap. 6.

10. For example, Thucydides, 8.97; Isocrates, *Areopagiticus*.

11. Aristotle, 3.13.1284a3-14, 7.14.1332b22-27.

12. *Ibid.*, 4.11, 3.17.1288a12-15.

oligarchy (inequality in wealth) and democracy (equality in free birth), each of which is seen to be partial and deficient.¹³

The extent of citizenship in Aristotle's ideal state is a controversial issue, to which we need to return in more detail. For the time being, however, it seems clear that, within the context of the major political divide of the Greek classical period, Aristotle was not a democrat but a moderate, someone who preferred the tradition of the mixed or moderate constitution which was put forward as a halfway house between the ideological extremes of democracy and oligarchy.¹⁴ Although he certainly found some merit in democracy, he remains critical of its commitment to equality and personal freedom.¹⁵ Pace Nussbaum, he is no obvious sympathizer with the urbanized democracy of Periclean Athens but prefers the older, more conservative version of democracy based on a politically apathetic agricultural citizenry.¹⁶ Although he differs from Plato, he remains a spokesman for the class of self-styled "gentlemen" (*haloi kagathoi*), the propertied and leisured class who deplored the egalitarianism of a democracy dominated by the uneducated poor.¹⁷ From this perspective, any account of Aristotle that places him unequivocally in the democratic camp must be seen as running against the general grain of his political values.

IV. THE ARGUMENT OUTLINED

The main limbs of Nussbaum's argument that Aristotle is a source for the principles of social democracy may be summarized as follows: (i) the purpose of the polis (political community) is to provide the good life for its citizens, (ii) the good life requires both a necessary level of material welfare and also extensive education which the political community will therefore need to provide, (iii) distributive justice requires that citizens receive goods and education in terms of their differing needs, (iv) everyone (i.e., every free Greek male) has the natural capacity to live the good life of his choice. Therefore, it may be inferred, (v) it is the role of the state to give everyone the appropriate goods and education needed to live the good life of his choice, depending on each person's needs and social circumstances.

Most steps in this argument are certainly Aristotelian and appear to give him good credentials to being considered a social democrat. First, he clearly accepts a moral purpose for the political community in terms

13. *Ibid.*, 2.9.12, 5.1.1301b29, 6.2.1317b4; *EN* 5.3.1131a27–29.

14. See Aristotle (?), *Constitution of Athens* 33.

15. Aristotle, 3.12, 4.11.1296a13–18, 5.10.1310a25–36.

16. For example, Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, p. 353, "Aristotelian Social Democracy," p. 239; Aristotle, 6.4.1318b6–1319a18.

17. Ober, p. 306.

of the moral development and prosperity of its members.¹⁸ Second, Aristotle definitely recognizes that certain material conditions are needed for living the good life. These are the so-called external goods, such as wealth, health, friends, and family.¹⁹ Thus, the moral imperative on the community leads to the provision of these material goods. In comparison with modern laissez-faire liberals, Aristotle has no compunction about using collective means to enhance the prosperity of citizens. For instance, he approves of the practice of citizens eating together but criticizes the Spartan practice of relying on individual contributions which disadvantaged the poorer citizens. Better to fund the common meals from a common fund, as in Crete.²⁰ Moreover, education is essential to moral development.²¹ Although the family is clearly the most important and immediate institution for moral education, the state can also play a vital role, as it did, for instance, in Sparta. Third, Aristotle certainly accepts that material needs differ and that not everyone should receive the same material support. Thus, a professional wrestler needs more food than an average man, and a pregnant woman needs to take on extra sustenance.²² Fourth, Aristotle accepts that all free men are naturally capable of living the good life. Although women and slaves (including members of inferior races) are excluded from the good life on the grounds of natural incapacity, there is no suggestion that any free Greeks are unable to participate in virtue and happiness, given the right material conditions and education.²³

Nonetheless, there are a number of reasons for hesitating about classifying Aristotle as a full-fledged supporter of the principles of social democracy. Three particular points of difficulty will be pursued in this article: first, whether Aristotle is genuinely concerned to extend full rights of citizenship and the good life to all men who are naturally capable of it; second, whether his principle of distributive justice extends as far as rectifying social disadvantage; and, third, whether his concept of the good life allows the individual citizen to choose a life plan of his own.

V. WHOSE NEEDS ARE CONSIDERED?

How serious is Aristotle in believing that resources for happiness should be distributed fairly to everyone? The complicating factor, as Nussbaum recognizes, is Aristotle's strongly held conviction that the good life re-

18. For example, Aristotle, 1.2.1252b28–30, 3.6.1278b20–30, 7.14.1333a11–16.

19. Aristotle, *EN* 1.8.1099a31–b8, 10.8.1178b33–35.

20. Aristotle, 2.9.1271a29–37, 2.10.1272a12–27.

21. Aristotle, *EN* 2.1.1103a32–b6, 10.9.1179b20–21, 7.13.1332a39–40.

22. *Ibid.*, *EN* 2.6.1106b3; Aristotle, 7.16.1335b12.

23. For example, Aristotle, 7.7, cf. 7.10.1330a25–30.

quires a high level of leisure.²⁴ Aristotle believes that menial labor, for instance, the work of craftsmen or farmers, is demeaning and brutalizing and incompatible with a life of virtue and truly human happiness.²⁵ "Leisure is required both for the creation of virtue and for political activities."²⁶ When Aristotle says that menial labor is incompatible with the good life, he is not thinking just of slaves. Although the economy of the Greek cities depended in part on slavery, slaves did not perform all the manual labor, much of which was typically performed by poorer members of the free population. Hard manual labor, even when performed by free men, is degrading and slavish.²⁷ Even farmers are simply too busy for the life of political virtue.²⁸ Thus, Aristotle holds that in many cities, particularly in democracies, large numbers of people will have citizen rights who ought properly to be excluded from the citizen body. The reason for their moral deficiency is not any lack of natural capacity but more the crippling circumstances under which they are required to live.²⁹ In this respect the exclusion of laborers appears significantly different from that of women or slaves (at least "natural" slaves), whose exclusion from citizenship is justified, however feebly, in terms of certain natural psychological deficiencies.³⁰ Free laborers are excluded from the good life simply by the accidental fact of their socioeconomic situation.

In Aristotle's ideal state, none of the citizens are allowed to engage in menial laboring or commercial activities.³¹ Although the citizens need not be rich, they must all have enough property and leisure to live the good life and to form a citizen body of virtuous men on which the ideal state depends. They will be kept apart from trading activities which will presumably be carried on by resident foreigners (metics).³² The essential laboring tasks should, therefore, be performed by noncitizens, prefer-

24. For example, Nussbaum, "Shame, Separateness, and Political Unity," pp. 420–21, *Fragility of Goodness*, pp. 347–49, "Nature, Function, and Capability," pp. 156–57, 171–72, "Aristotelian Social Democracy," p. 248, n. 80.

25. Aristotle, 3.5.1278a20–21, 7.9.1329a39–41.

26. *Ibid.*, 7.9.1329a1–2.

27. *Ibid.*, 3.4.1277a37–b7, 3.5.1278a17–21.

28. *Ibid.*, 7.9.1328b41–1329a2; see Fred D. Miller, *Nature, Justice and Rights in Aristotle's Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 161, 244.

29. Some commentators, e.g., W. L. Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1887–1902), 1.117, have inferred, on the analogy of his theory of natural slavery, that Aristotle believed in the existence of a naturally inferior laboring class of Greeks. However, there is no clear evidence for such an interpretation. Among Greek males, there are only natural slaves and natural free men, all of whom are potentially virtuous (Aristotle, 1.13.1260b1–3).

30. For example, Aristotle, 1.13.1260a10–12; see also n. 6 above.

31. Aristotle, 7.9.1328b36–1329a2.

32. Merchants are too concerned with acquisition and bodily desires (*ibid.*, 1.9.1257b23–1258a14). See Ober, pp. 340–41 and n. 87.

ably slaves or neighboring peoples reduced to subjection rather than members of the same ethnic group who might become a source of revolutionary agitation.³³ Thus, Aristotle's ideal solution appears to be to include in the population only enough free Greek males who can constitute a property-owning citizen body sustained by the labor of others of different ethnic backgrounds.³⁴ Such a requirement is by no means fanciful in Aristotle's time, when new cities were constantly being founded on new and often alien territory. The imagined formulation of an ideal state was an exercise in construction from scratch, including the selection of an ideal population, much like the planned British colonies in Australasia in the nineteenth century. It was not a question of devising an ideal constitution for a given population but more one of devising an ideal constitution with an ideal population selected for that purpose.³⁵

Of necessity, then, many free Greek males will be excluded from the good life. Even under ideal circumstances, the citizen body of virtuous men will only accommodate as many free Greeks who can be sustained by others performing menial tasks normally undertaken by free Greek laborers. The size of the ideal city will be severely limited, and many potentially virtuous citizens are thus left behind or shut out from such an ideal city.³⁶ In nonideal cities, which form the focus of much of Aristotle's political analysis, significant sections of the population—those devoted to menial labor as well as commerce—will not have the leisure to live the good life. They may be included as citizens under the rules of morally defective constitutions, particularly democracy,³⁷ but their claims to citizenship will be illegitimate by the absolute standards of the ideal constitution, not because of any natural deficiency but simply because of their socioeconomic circumstances. Aristotle thus accepts that many free

33. Aristotle, 7.9.1329a24–26, 7.10.1330a25–33.

34. Aristotle does not explicitly say that no free Greeks are noncitizens. However, his preference for slaves and foreigners in the menial roles, as well as his theory of distributive justice, suggest that no free Greeks were excluded. See David Keyt, "Aristotle's Theory of Distributive Justice," in *A Companion to Aristotle's Politics*, ed. David Keyt and Fred D. Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 238–78; Ober, pp. 340–41 and n. 87.

35. Nussbaum, "Nature, Function, and Capability," pp. 146–48, 156–57, interprets Aristotle's remark (7.2.1324a23–25) that the best constitution allows "anyone whatsoever" to live well as implying that the ideal state should provide a good life for everyone who is capable of it. However, the extension of "anyone whatsoever" may be confined to a pre-selected citizen body and need not carry any implication about how widely that citizen body is selected in the first place. See David Charles, "Perfectionism in Aristotle's Political Theory. Reply to Martha Nussbaum," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, suppl. vol. (1988), pp. 185–206, 194–97; Miller, p. 214 and n. 65.

36. Aristotle, 7.4.

37. Democracies may include laborers who ideally should be excluded (*ibid.*, 3.5.1278a15–20). Farmers, who are excluded from the ideal state, form the citizen body of the best (least bad) form of democracy (4.6.1292b25–29). Oligarchies, too, with their emphasis on wealth, may include as citizens rich merchants whose concern for trade and profit making would make them unsuitable citizens for the ideal state. See n. 32 above.

Greek males will be excluded from virtue and a just claim to citizenship even though they are naturally capable of achieving such virtue, given the right material and educational circumstances.

Nussbaum's own solution to this problem is consciously to amend Aristotle's theory, relaxing the leisure and wealth requirements necessary for happiness.³⁸ Although she accepts that some extreme levels of physical labor and material deprivation are inimical to happiness, she argues that Aristotle places the threshold far too high. Thus, a modern Aristotelian would accept that people living in third world conditions of grinding poverty are unable to flourish as human beings. However, happiness is open to the average inhabitants of the affluent West, even to those whose occupations are comparatively unskilled and who do not have the extent of leisure envisaged as essential by Aristotle. Nussbaum's revision of Aristotle seems reasonable and is not at issue. More questionable, however, is her assessment of how closely Aristotle's conception comes to her own and how much she has revised him.

Nussbaum sees Aristotle as being unable to face the logical consequences of his convictions. His exclusion of manual workers from happiness and virtue is a deep difficulty for him. He believes that all free Greek men are capable of virtue, given the right material circumstances and education, and yet is prepared to countenance a situation where normally some men are deprived of their life chances for the sake of others and are, therefore, exploited. He is unable to "look the issue in the eye."³⁹ "It is a dark spot about which he himself is evidently insecure and unhappy."⁴⁰ His unwillingness to face the radical consequences of this contradiction leads him "rather wistfully" to say that, in the ideal state, it would be best if the necessary menial tasks were performed by slaves or subjugated neighboring populations and if all free male inhabitants were admitted to the privileged conditions required for citizenship.⁴¹

Thus, Aristotle is portrayed as logically committed to the view that the state should provide for the happiness of all free males on the grounds of justice but as being unable to admit this conclusion because of his deep-seated belief that happiness requires a style of life which, only in exceptional circumstances, could be made available to all free males. He is therefore in a position of unease and bad faith, unable or unwilling to admit the unfairness and exploitation involved in his conception of the good life. It is this characterization of Aristotle's position as that of someone torn, if only subconsciously, between support for equal moral

38. Nussbaum, "Nature, Function, and Capability," p. 172, "Aristotelian Social Democracy," p. 248, n. 80.

39. Nussbaum, "Nature, Function, and Capability," p. 171.

40. Nussbaum, "Shame, Separateness, and Political Unity," p. 420.

41. Nussbaum, "Nature, Function, and Capability," p. 172.

opportunity for all and an inevitably exclusive view of human flourishing that is most open to challenge. To this reader, at least, Aristotle appears to accept the exclusiveness of his conception of the good life without any qualm whatsoever. This in turn raises the question of how genuinely he held to the principles which appear to commit him to a more egalitarian and democratic view, at least within the category of free Greek male.

In his analysis of everyday Greek politics, he accepts the pervasive division of communities into the rich, who support oligarchy, and the poor, who support democracy. If he were truly a social democrat, we would expect him to advocate democracy in preference to oligarchy and to show sympathy for the democratic principle of justice that social goods, including citizenship rights, should be allocated equally to all free citizens. Instead, he opts for a middle way between democracy and oligarchy.⁴² As already mentioned,⁴³ his preferred principle of justice, that political power should be allocated on the basis of contribution to the purpose of the community, thus giving preference to the claims of virtue, is presented in opposition to both oligarchic and democratic conceptions, while incorporating elements of each.

When Aristotle argues for extending the ranks of citizens or for distributing resources to the less well-off, concerns that might count as those of social democracy, his reasons are prudential, in terms of the overall security and sustainability of the regime. Thus, his main criticism of Sparta is that its restrictive property and citizenship laws led to a drastic decline in the number of citizens and, therefore, to the city's eventual defeat.⁴⁴ The exclusiveness of the citizenship was not so much unjust or unfair to deserving individuals as destructive of the state. Similarly, in dealing with everyday states, Aristotle recommends that the poor should not be further impoverished or totally excluded from positions of power.⁴⁵ But this advice is given as means of preserving the regime and avoiding revolution, not of preventing injustice. It is an application of his general principle that, in the interests of stability, "the loyal citizens should be stronger than the disloyal."⁴⁶ Although he does show some slight preference for democracy over oligarchy in the ranking of defective constitutions, it is on grounds of its superior stability, not out of any respect for its principle of justice.⁴⁷

Similarly, in connection with the ideal state, when Aristotle argues that the menial, noncitizen tasks should be reserved for slaves and ethnically distinct neighbors, his stated reason for doing so has nothing to do with the supposed injustice of having these tasks performed by free

42. See n. 12 above.

43. See n. 13 above.

44. Aristotle, 2.9.1270a30–b7.

45. For example, *ibid.*, 5.8.1309a15–31.

46. *Ibid.*, 5.9.1309b16–18.

47. *Ibid.*, 4.11.1296a13–18, 5.1.1302a8–13.

Greeks of the same ethnicity and ethical capability as the citizens. The reason given for preferring outsiders is purely prudential, in terms of the reduced likelihood of revolution.⁴⁸ That is, free laborers of the same ethnicity who are excluded from citizenship will agitate for a share in the constitution and thus threaten the stability of the state. Much safer to have laborers of more docile and less spirited ethnic stock and include only as many Greeks as will be able to live a life of propertied leisure. The result of such a reading of Aristotle's political theory is that Aristotle appears not at all bothered by the injustice of excluding laborers and traders from the good life and full citizenship, though he sometimes may be concerned by the political imprudence of so excluding them. What ought to be deeply troubling, from our point of view, seems not to have concerned him at all. He simply accepts without question the common assumption of well-to-do Greeks that virtue and the good life require a level of material wealth and leisure that must lie beyond the reach of many members of the community.

Thus, instead of seeing Aristotle as someone who guiltily refuses to accept the need for greater equality to which his principles commit him, we should see him as someone who accepts with equanimity the unequal and accidental distribution of life chances. Such a view may require Aristotelians to moderate their admiration for the master, but it is readily intelligible and not without philosophical interest. The acceptance of contingency in the allocation of virtue and happiness is deeply rooted in Greek moral experience. It is a theme richly explored by Nussbaum herself, in the *Fragility of Goodness*, and more recently by Bernard Williams in his Sather Lectures.⁴⁹ The Greeks lived in a world where the rich and powerful were always susceptible to death or capture into slavery and where men would think themselves lucky not to have been born as slaves or even as women.⁵⁰ The life of the city depended on the forced labor of subject people, and, ultimately, one's status in society was a matter of chance.

Aristotle attempts to reduce this individual contingency at the center of his moral and political philosophy by his arguments for the natural inferiority of women and slaves. If women and slaves can be shown to lack a completely rational psyche capable of fully independent deliberation, then their subordinate status can be justified in terms of "nature" rather than "convention" (or "right" rather than "might"). But his attempts to justify the natural subordination of women and slaves, as has often been pointed out,⁵¹ are (to our eyes) ludicrously weak and, in the case of women, hopelessly perfunctory. That they passed muster at all for

48. *Ibid.*, 7.10.1330a29. See Charles, p. 191.

49. Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, esp. chaps. 1, 11; Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

50. Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, chap. 1; Williams, p. 122.

51. See nn. 5, 6 above.

a philosopher of Aristotle's intelligence and persistence can only be explained by the depth of his conviction, which he shared with his contemporaries, that the roles of slaves and women were socially necessary and, therefore, natural. His exclusion of free laborers from a life of virtue without any justification in individual physical or psychological deficiency is to be seen in the same light. It reveals the same acceptance of social and political inequality as socially inevitable and, therefore, part of the nature of things.

VI. DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

A similar lack of concern is also evident in his application of the principles of distributive justice. The concept of distributive justice plays a central role in Aristotle's political theory. All constitutions incorporate a principle of justice, and the roots of most revolutionary struggle are to be found in clashes between competing conceptions of justice.⁵² Aristotle's own conception of political justice is that political offices should be distributed on the basis of contribution to the true purposes of the state, that is, the achievement of virtue and the good life. As already indicated, he develops this conception through dialectical analysis of the competing claims of oligarchy and democracy, both of which apply faulty criteria for distribution (wealth and freedom, respectively).⁵³

In the course of this argument, Aristotle uses as an analogy the question of who should receive the best flutes. The best flutes should be allocated to the best players even if they are inferior in birth or beauty.⁵⁴ Nussbaum interprets this as implying that flutes should go to those with the best natural capacity, and she is therefore able to infer an intention to seek out those with the best potential talent, an intention which implies the same concern for equality of opportunity which animates social democracy.⁵⁵ Certainly, such an implication follows logically from Aristotle's own assumptions about natural capacity and the role of education. However, all that Aristotle actually says is that the flutes should be given to the best players, a position which is quite consistent with their going to those wealthy enough to have paid for the best lessons and not to those with the best natural potential.⁵⁶ Similarly, his other examples of distribution in terms of differing needs, such as to wrestlers and pregnant mothers referred to above, are examples of recognizing actual differences, not potential capabilities. Nussbaum's suggestion that such examples imply that "children from disadvantaged backgrounds need

52. Aristotle, 3.9.1280a9–11, 5.1.1301a25–28, 5.2.1302a24–31.

53. *Ibid.*, 3.12.1283a15–20. Wealth (oligarchy) and freedom (democracy) are necessary for the state's existence, but virtue is necessary for living well.

54. *Ibid.*, 3.12.1282b35–37.

55. Nussbaum, "Nature, Function, and Capability," pp. 166–68.

56. Charles, p. 195.

more money spent on them," while logically sound, goes beyond Aristotle's social and political agenda.⁵⁷

True, in the imagined ideal state, where Aristotle is starting with a clean slate and constructing an educational system which will develop the capacities of all citizens, opportunities may be genuinely equalized. But he does not use this ideal as a standard by which to judge the everyday imperfect world and to argue that the community should be concerned with equalizing life chances through redistribution. Rather, he appears to accept that some people will happen to be more advantaged than others, through the accident of birth or other fortune, and will, therefore, have better access to virtue and other relevant qualifications (such as strength for wrestlers) which make them more deserving of political and other honors. Like many other social conservatives or supporters of meritocracy, he does not extend the distributive principle of just desert to the initial distribution of qualifications on which distribution is based. In practice, equality of opportunity is strictly confined to the recognition of existing merit and the exclusion of other, irrelevant criteria.

VII. INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM AND CHOICE

A third respect in which Nussbaum and others may be in danger of aligning Aristotle too closely with modern values is in his attitude toward personal freedom and autonomy. Choice, for Aristotle, is an essential element in virtuous action, involving not only voluntary decision or intention but also reason and rational deliberation.⁵⁸ Nussbaum is in no doubt that individual choice is as central to Aristotle's conception of human flourishing as it is to modern liberals such as herself and John Rawls. Aristotle's notion of deliberative reason, the faculty that distinguishes the free man from the slave, involves being able to make oneself "a life plan."⁵⁹ Indeed, planning a life is a deep need of all fully rational humans.⁶⁰ Aristotle's system of moral education, which relies on the importance of inculcating the right habits and developing the right character, is thus aimed at developing the citizens' capability for choosing their own life plan. But while public education develops capacities for choice, it does not enforce the choices themselves. "The government aims at capabilities and leaves the rest to citizens."⁶¹ Moreover, Aristotle's view that virtue is not subject to hard and fast rules but requires assessment of unique situations implies a variety of equally valid options about how to

57. Note 22; Nussbaum, "Aristotelian Social Democracy," p. 111.

58. Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 79–86.

59. Nussbaum, "Shame, Separateness, and Political Unity," p. 417.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Nussbaum, "Aristotelian Social Democracy," p. 214.

live. Thus, a "sphere of privacy and non-interference" is built around each citizen, as it was in democratic Athens.⁶²

As Nussbaum recognizes, in spite of his supposed emphasis on the value of personal choice, Aristotle was unconcerned about the issue of drawing the limits of state interference in the lives of individuals.⁶³ Indeed, he supports what to the modern liberal would appear to be some remarkable infringements on personal liberty. For example, he advocates the regulation of the ages for marriage and childbearing. He not only permits, but also requires, abortion for reasons of population control and infanticide of the disabled. This degree of paternalism, however, Nussbaum claims is "not intrinsic to the Aristotelian conception."⁶⁴ Much of the offensive authoritarianism is aimed at women and so can be explained, if not excused, by Aristotle's strongly patriarchal view of the status of women. Male citizens, it is inferred, would not be subject to the same degree of interference and control, and it is in his views about the life of the free male citizen that we should look for the Aristotelian conception of human good.

However, it would be misleading to suggest that Aristotle is concerned with controlling the behavior only of women, children, and slaves. In the ideal state, the adult male citizens too will be subject to extensive control.⁶⁵ They will be barred from living a vulgar, commercial or farm laborer's life. They will be required to attend common meals. Indecent speech is to be punished with public dishonor (along with a beating for the young), and indecent paintings and writings are to be banned. In general, the close control over what the young are allowed to see and hear is extended into adulthood until such time as the citizens can be counted on to have been educated into immunity against evil influences (1336b 20–24). Such recommendations fit with Aristotle's remarks at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he turns to consider the role of legislation in moral training: "But is it surely not enough that when they are young they should get the right nurture and attention; since they must, even when they are grown up, practise and be habituated to them, we shall need laws for this as well, and generally speaking to cover the whole of life; for most people obey necessity rather than argument, and punishments rather than the sense of what is noble."⁶⁶

The notion of having laws to "cover the whole of life" suggests a strongly authoritarian impulse in Aristotle.⁶⁷ Admittedly, Aristotle did

62. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

63. *Ibid.*, quoting Jonathan Barnes, "Aristotle and Political Liberty," in *Aristoteles' "Politik": Akten des XI Symposium Aristotelicum*, ed. Gunther Patzig (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), pp. 249–63.

64. Barnes.

65. See Miller, pp. 248–49.

66. Aristotle, *EN* 10.9.1180a1–4.

67. Barnes, p. 259; Mulgan, *Aristotle's Political Theory*, pp. 34, 79–80.

not expect public authorities to use their power to interfere in all aspects of an individual's life. Aristotle's ideal state is not 1984. The family will sometimes be more efficient than the state in enforcing good behavior,⁶⁸ a truth overlooked by Plato when he advocated the abolition of the family. But Aristotle still agrees with Plato in the right and duty of the community to use its power to make people virtuous. He is prepared to see the use of not only "written" but also "unwritten" laws (i.e., general social norms enforced by authorities) for this ultimate moral purpose.⁶⁹ Any limits he places on the law appear pragmatic rather than principled.⁷⁰

Again, we need to remember Aristotle's generally conservative stance politically. In endorsing a system of publicly provided and controlled education, Aristotle is following a conservative rather than a liberal model. In the Greek world, it was the Spartans who maintained a system of public education in order to train a highly regimented, warrior elite. Although Aristotle criticizes the values pursued by Sparta, he is impressed, like Plato, by a system which is directed at inculcating shared values.⁷¹ By contrast, the Athenians, though they prided themselves on their commitment to individual liberty, saw no need for the public provision of education as a means of providing everyone with an equal basis for the enjoyment of liberty. Rather, individual liberty extended also to the provision of education.

Although Aristotle lived and worked in democratic Athens for much of his life, he was not a supporter of the extent of personal freedom allowed to Athenian citizens. Like Plato, he criticizes the democratic conception of freedom ("living as one likes") as politically dangerous and as involving a mistaken conception of freedom. Freedom, for Aristotle, is essentially about having one's own independent value and about not being subordinate, like a slave, to the interests of someone else.⁷² We should, therefore, hesitate before attributing to Aristotle, as Nussbaum does,⁷³ any principled support for the sphere of personal noninterference enjoyed by Athenian citizens.

68. For example, Aristotle, *EN* 10.9.1180b3–13.

69. *Ibid.*, *EN* 10.9.1180b1; Aristotle, 6.5.1319b40. That the word normally used for law (*nomos*) could also refer to social norms or conventions shows the difficulty in Greek of clearly distinguishing between law and morality or of seeking to limit the law's concern with morality.

70. Richard Sorabji, "Comments on Barnes," in Patzig, ed., pp. 264–76. Sorabji, though less inclined than Barnes to find a totalitarian impulse in Aristotle (referring particularly to Aristotle's vindication of the family), nonetheless rejects the view of Donald Allan that Aristotle held a minimalist view of the role of the state. See Allan's "Individual and State in the Ethics and Politics," in *La Politique d'Aristote*, ed. Rudolf Stark et al. (Geneva: Fondation Hardt, 1964).

71. Aristotle, 2.9.1271a41–b10, 7.14.1333b10–1334a11, 8.4.1338b10–16; and *EN* 10.9.1180a25–29.

72. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A.2.982b25, *Rhetoric*, 1.9.1367a33.

73. Nussbaum, "Aristotelian Social Democracy," p. 239.

How then does this morally conservative view of the state's role in inculcating values fit with Aristotle's insistence on choice as an essential part of the good life? The answer is that, though choice is certainly necessary for the life of virtue, it is not sufficient. A number of factors are required for fully virtuous action: first, the virtuous agent must act "knowing" or "in knowledge"; second, the virtuous agent must choose the acts and choose them for their own sakes; and third, the person must act from a firm and unchangeable character.⁷⁴ For present purposes, the most significant factor is the first, the requirement that the agent acts "knowing" or "in knowledge." Aristotle's account of the knowledge involved in virtuous action (practical wisdom [*phronesis*]) is obscure and disputed.⁷⁵ A few general points, however, are fairly uncontroversial. Practical wisdom is to be distinguished from purely intellectual or scientific knowledge and is concerned with deliberation over ethical ends as well as means.⁷⁶ Because of the complexity of human affairs, practical wisdom cannot be reduced to general principles but requires wise judgment of individual situations. However, though imprecise and flexible, it still counts as knowledge, and therefore its conclusions are right rather than wrong. Aristotle is committed to a version of ethical truth. In any situation, there will be one morally right path of action which the person of moral virtue will choose, taking into account all the relevant characteristics of the situation.

It is misleading to interpret Aristotle's recognition of the imprecision and unpredictability of ethical judgment as implying any significant degree of ethical pluralism, that is, as endorsing alternative, equally valid conceptions of virtue and the good life. Ethical judgments made by practical wisdom may be complex and not susceptible of being reduced to rules, but they do not leave room for principled disagreement or different solutions. Ends or ultimate values may certainly conflict, and people will need to choose between them but only because happiness is complex, not because people are allowed a choice between equally valid options. Thus, though choice is essential, unless the action chosen is the right one, then it will not count as a fully virtuous act.

Aristotle's theory of ethical virtue and practical wisdom, therefore, does not entail a plural or liberal state in which the main emphasis is on allowing individuals to act as they choose and to choose their own life

74. Aristotle, *EN* 2.5.1105a30–34.

75. See, e.g., John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), chap. 1; W. F. R. Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), chap. 11; Terence Irwin, *Aristotle's First Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), chap. 7.

76. Aristotle, *EN* 6.5; David Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Wisdom," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amelie O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 221–40; Sherman, pp. 79–94; Irwin, p. 336.

plan.⁷⁷ Such a state is based on an assumption of difference, that different people will want to make different choices and should be allowed to do so (within certain limits set by the need to respect each other's liberty). Rather, Aristotle's ethical theory leads to a state in which there is collective agreement on shared moral values which are inculcated by families and reenforced by public authorities. Those capable of achieving full moral development will come to choose to act in accordance with these values for their own sakes, just as mature members of a closed religious community will come to freely accept the principles on which the community is based. Indeed, that Aristotle's ethical theory was so congenial to medieval Catholicism may tend to confirm its singular, antipluralist character. If we are looking for modern successors to Aristotle's view of the role of the state in education, we should perhaps be looking more to the conservative right, who want schools to inculcate voluntary allegiance to an accepted moral code, than to the social democratic left.

Admittedly, the community will exercise its authority lightly. Much of the life of citizens, indeed, many of its most enjoyable and valuable aspects, will be lived within the relatively private circle of family and close friends which provides the focus for so much of the ethical virtues. Day-to-day decisions about what to do and how to live will be made by mature individuals exercising their own choices and displaying their own characters in ways which are essentially similar to the way in which individuals behave in modern liberal societies. Indeed, it is this close affinity between the ethical experience depicted in Aristotle's observations of his own society and that familiar to modern moral philosophers that has allowed his *Ethics* to be used so fruitfully as a basis for present-day ethical analysis.

One reason for this affinity is that the good life for the individual as Aristotle describes it is largely domestic and taken up with close, interpersonal relations and does not require membership of a political community directed toward its values. Admittedly, in the ideal state, political power will be in the hands of men of virtue, and the legal and education systems will be directed to reinforcing the agreed principles of the good life, as they were, for instance, in a medieval Christian community or are, today, in some Muslim states. However, the fully good state, in which virtuous citizens control the community for virtuous purposes, is an imagined (though not impossible) ideal.⁷⁸ It requires a whole citizen body of good men which, in turn, requires, among other things, a properly constructed education system unlike any that had hitherto existed

77. Such a pluralist view of Aristotle, advanced, e.g., by Yack and Waldron, is rebutted in Richard Mulgan, "Aristotle, Ethical Diversity and Political Argument," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 7 (1999): 191–207.

78. Aristotle, 7.4.1325b38–40.

in a Greek city. The fully good individual, however, is a far from utopian possibility. The *Ethics* depict the good life and ethical virtue as actual human conditions observable in Greek society and not simply based on wishful and hypothetical imagination. We are to assume, therefore, that some people, at least, can develop the right character and practical wisdom from their family and its immediate circle without needing the controlling influence of the laws. Individuals will be able to live the life of virtue and "happiness" even if the community as a whole is not directed toward the achievement of the good life.

The material conditions for individual happiness are a modicum of health and wealth together with friends and family (the "external goods" referred to earlier).⁷⁹ The life of the ethical virtues, though it includes some virtues with a civic dimension (e.g., courage, ambition, and magnanimity) is largely concerned with domestic and business relationships rather than with the specifically political activities of citizenship. One need not be a citizen in order to enjoy a good life.⁸⁰ Aristotle's famous doctrine that "the human being is a political animal" entails only that human beings should live in a polis, not that they should necessarily engage in politics or even possess the rights of citizenship.⁸¹ Indeed, in the normal oligarchy or democracy typical of classical Greece, there would inevitably be some good men excluded from their rightful political role. Their absence might be a regrettable loss for the city, but it did not prevent the individuals concerned from achieving virtue. The main function required from the state in order to safeguard the happiness of such individuals was the protection of life and property on which the external

79. See p. 91 above.

80. Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, p. 349, argues that the key virtues of justice and equity are largely political in scope and that a life of full virtue requires citizenship and (at least the right of) political participation. It can be argued, however, that the virtues of the ethical treatises, though compatible with citizenship, do not require it; see Richard Mulgan, "Aristotle and the Value of Political Participation," *Political Theory* 18 (1990): 195–215. See also Miller, pp. 237–39; Tim Duvall and Paul Dotson, "Political Participation and *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle's *Politics*," *History of Political Thought* 19 (1998): 21–34. Of the external goods, it is the loss of family and friends rather than of power and citizenship which particularly damage happiness (Aristotle, *EN* 1.8.1099b5–6, 1.9.1100a7–8). Thus, Aristotle's own life as a *metic* (foreign noncitizen) was not as deficient as Nussbaum suggests (*Fragility of Goodness*, p. 497, n. 8; see also her "Shame, Separateness, and Political Unity," p. 419, and "Aristotelian Social Democracy," pp. 232–33).

81. Aristotle, 1.2.1253a2–7. Aristotle uses the gender neutral *anthropos*, not the male *aner*, for "man," which suggests that he is talking about living in a polis, not about the rights of citizenship. Aristotle uses the "political animal" argument to indicate human sociability contrasted with living alone, not political participation contrasted with exclusion from political activity (3.6.128b20; *EN* 9.8.1169b18). Nussbaum's own analysis of this argument stresses sociability and friendship rather than specifically political activity; see her "Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundation of Ethics," in *World, Mind and Ethics*, ed. J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 102–10.

goods depended. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Aristotle places so much emphasis on political stability, rather than on justice or political participation, as the overriding objective of institutional design for everyday states.⁸² So long as the constitution is stable, order can be guaranteed and the external goods protected, thus enabling virtuous individuals to live the good life. The life of virtue can thus proceed without much direct contact with the life of politics.

In practice, then, outside the ideal state, Aristotle provides us with a picture of individuals living a life of virtue within a political context which is potentially hostile or indifferent to their most precious values. The state may be protecting their lives and property, but it is not necessarily dedicated to inculcating their ideals. In some respects, this picture is similar to that of the modern liberal state, for instance, that of Rawls, where individuals are free to pursue their own life plans and the state's role is confined to providing the necessary "primary" goods which are needed whatever life plan is chosen. Indeed, Aristotle's external goods, as Nussbaum points out, do have a close, if not complete, resemblance to Rawls's primary goods.⁸³ However, the key difference is one of principle. The modern liberal seeks to restrict the role of the state on principle, in order to protect the right of the individual to choose a life plan of his or her own. For Aristotle, on the other hand, a state which does no more than safeguard external goods is merely to be accepted *faute de mieux*. It has much less to offer than a state collectively dedicated to the provision of the good life, if such a state could be found. Using the religious analogy again, Christians, Jews, or Muslims living in political communities that are indifferent or hostile to their religious beliefs will tend to emphasize the importance of legal protection for their lives and property (together with their right to worship unmolested). But they may still hope and pray for a community totally committed to their beliefs where their values are universally enforced through the institutions of the state.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In contrast to Nussbaum's Aristotle, an alternative interpretation can therefore be advanced: an Aristotle who is prepared to exclude a sizable proportion of free Greek males from the rights of citizenship and the material prosperity necessary for happiness, who does not carry his concern for justice beyond the recognition of existing qualities which may depend on privilege or chance, and whose support for moral choice does not carry through into support for a liberal polity. Such an interpretation

82. Aristotle, 4.1.1288b28–30, 5–6.

83. Nussbaum, "Aristotelian Social Democracy," pp. 208–13. Nussbaum considers Aristotle's account superior because it treats material goods as clearly instrumental and allows for individual variation according to need.

of Aristotle, though it may make Aristotle less sympathetic to present-day liberal democratic sensitivities, can at least be used instructively to highlight similar, more recent, instances of limited moral imagination.

First, with respect to Aristotle's exclusive view of happiness, though we are nowadays less inclined to draw distinctions within the adult populations of individual nation states, we are still often unwilling to extend the same rights or resources to citizens of other states on whom our prosperity depends. Sometimes this exclusion is buttressed by reasons of racial superiority, more often by simple expediency. Sometimes, again, there may be feelings of anguished guilt and refusal to face an unjustifiable discrimination. But these feelings are more usually confined to the moralizing liberal elites and do not surface in the political mainstream. Most people in the affluent West still have no moral difficulty in accepting superior life chances for themselves which are based on contingency and luck. That Aristotle does not follow the logic of his argument from natural capacity to its logical conclusion of universal redistribution is neither surprising nor without philosophical interest. In particular, it draws attention to the two-edged sword of Aristotle's philosophical method. The determination to "save appearances" and not to move too far from mainstream beliefs saves him from much fanciful folly. But it does prevent him from radically questioning the values of his own society.

Again, Aristotle's apparent unwillingness to press the assumption of natural capacity to the point of equalizing the life chances of individuals with equal capacities finds many modern parallels in the application of equal opportunity principles. In most cases, the emphasis given to equal opportunity, say in employment or education, does not go further than the actual capacity of individuals at the point of decision, as in Aristotle's example of flute playing. For instance, allocation of university educational opportunities in terms of actual educational achievement, such as through externally moderated examinations, is certainly more equitable than relying on parental influence or wealth. But it leaves open the issue of the prior social injustice involved in the educational achievement at school, which may be largely determined by the socioeconomic status of parents rather than the natural potential of pupils. Equalizing opportunity is like peeling an onion—one layer of injustice is removed to reveal another. We may contend that sincere belief in distributive justice should commit us to equalizing all apparently initial positions one by one until we come to rock-bottom, unalterable differences (whatever they may be in an age of genetic manipulation). At the same time, however, we must recognize that most theories of social justice, like Aristotle's, go only so far and no further.

Finally, Aristotle's acceptance of the value of choice without a liberal society may provide a salutary jolt to liberal complacency. The liberal conviction that people should be free to choose a life plan for themselves is usually based on a belief that no one life plan is demonstrably superior

to all others. However, this moral pluralism is not the only logical basis for valuing choice. Believers in an objective moral code can still value choice as an element of true observance of that code. At the same time, and with equal consistency, they may require legal enforcement of the actions required by that code on the part of those who lack either the knowledge or the faith to perform these actions of their own free will. More broadly, and perhaps more provocatively, the fact that much of Aristotle's ethics resonates so well with modern liberal experience, particularly that conveyed in the modern novel, may reveal something about the continuity and overall domesticity of the moral life lived by prosperous and educated elites. What the ethical worlds of Aristotle and Henry James have in common, one suspects, is a general indifference to the political context which sustains their society.