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A Reconstruction of Aristotle's Argument on Government

In *Politics*, Aristotle envisions an ideal and attainable way to govern a city that brings about the best life for its citizens¹. Aristotle's notion of polity – a mixture of the desirable elements of democracy and aristocracy – is the best political regime. Implementing this mixed regime that focuses on allowing the middle class to flourish, Aristotle constructs a noble and virtuous government that emphasizes the happiness of the entire city².

Foremost, Aristotle distinguishes this mixed regime from democracy by arguing for the merit of virtue in the governing body. Whoever contributes the most virtue to the city merits the most political influence because virtue brings moderation and happiness. Because the ruler is complete in virtue and is capable of both ruling and being ruled³, he or she is willing to take on public office temporarily and solely for the sake of the common good and the impartial application of the law⁴.

Since the citizens must act deliberately and freely to live the good life, Aristotle provides incentives to ensure that each citizen can attain happiness. For example, no one can hold multiple public offices because each task is done best by one individual. To prevent civil strife, inequality, and bad rulership on the part of the many, the office-holders may not profit. The citizens have enough leisure to develop moral and intellectual virtues to be upheld both in war and peace. Only through the deliberate actualization and practice of moral virtue and prudence can humankind carry out its goals and thus live the most choice-worthy way of life⁵.

¹ Aristotle. *Politics: Second Edition*. (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2013). 7.2.5.

² Ibid., 4.12.

³ Ibid, 1.13, 3.18.

⁴ Ibid., 2.8-2.11.

⁵ Ibid., 7.13, 2.9-2.11, 5.8, 7.4-7.13.

In contrast to Plato's concept that the best rulers are philosophers who are dedicated to their office for life, Aristotle's system of governance is more practicable and reveals underlying differences in the two philosophers' conceptions of human nature. According to Aristotle, permitting the same people to rule all of the time gives them too much power and therefore creates factional conflict. The fundamental premise that Aristotle follows is that a person's qualities are not set in stone at birth. People become virtuous or evil not by chance but through knowledge and experiences; a person does not have to be a philosopher by nature in order to become a ruler⁶.

Another premise of Aristotle's is that the individual most cherishes what belongs to him or her. If people cherish and derive the most pleasure from what is their own, the citizens cannot be unified without eliminating that happiness and therefore creating strife. This is the reason that, unlike Plato, Aristotle does not believe that a city is better suited to pursue its common goal when every citizen regards each other as his or her own. Aristotle tells us that because people do not care as much for that which belongs in common, such an arrangement does not work – keeping farmland in common results in division and resentment toward those who take more than the equivalent of their labor. To make the city a unity is to forfeit the joys of philanthropy⁷.

Because they cannot perform their defining functions without being autonomous to some extent, Aristotle does not agree with Plato that the ideal individual, household, and city are one in every possible sense. Furthermore, as Aristotle defines the best and most noble city as exercising political rule over free and equal citizens, excellence and justice in both citizens and the city cannot be created by circumstances of birth but by thought to virtue⁸.

⁶ Ibid., 2.5, 7.1.

⁷ Ibid., 2.3-2.5.

⁸ Ibid., 1.7.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *Politics: Second Edition*. Translated by Carnes Lord. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1984.