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Source: *History of Political Thought*, Spring 1993, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 1993), pp. 1-25

Published by: Imprint Academic Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26214417>

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ARISTOTLE'S 'SCIENCE' OF TYRANNY*

Roger Boesche

Aristotle, who wrote on everything from politics to poetics and from physics to the parts of animals, wrote comparatively little on tyrannies. In all of the volumes of Aristotle's writings that have come down to us, one can find the word *tyranny* on no more than a few dozen pages, and he gave us a sustained discussion of tyranny, by which I mean only a section of perhaps four or five successive pages, just once in the *Politics* and once in the *Constitution of Athens*. Nevertheless, almost in passing, Aristotle formulated the ancient world's most enduring political analysis of tyranny, bequeathing this analysis first to key Roman thinkers such as Tacitus, then to Medieval and Renaissance political theorists, and ultimately to the eighteenth century where *philosophes* such as Montesquieu substantially altered it to suit their own pressing political needs. Such is the influence of history's most brilliant thinkers whose almost parenthetical thoughts serve as fundamental conceptual tools for subsequent generations. A single five-page chapter in the *Politics*,¹ based most certainly on years of empirical observation of tyrannies, served as the best single study of the nature of tyranny (and perhaps even as the best advice to a tyrant wishing to create a lasting regime), at least until Machiavelli. In this article, we will distill Aristotle's analysis of tyranny from his wide-ranging writings.

Aristotle, of course, classified governments by who ruled and for what purpose. Either the one, the few or the many rule, according to Aristotle, and if the rulers govern in the general interest, then rule by one is a monarchy, rule by the few is aristocracy, and rule by the many is constitutional government or a polity. If, however, the rulers govern only in their own private interests, then they pervert the proper purposes of government, and rule by one becomes tyranny, rule by the few becomes oligarchy, and rule by the many becomes, in Aristotle's lexicon, democracy.² Using this means of classification, Aristotle defined tyranny as government by one person who ruled only in his or her own interest.

* All translations of Aristotle's works, except for the translation of his *The Athenian Constitution*, can be found in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, the revised Oxford translation (2 vols., Princeton, 1984).

¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. B. Jowett, Book V, ch. 11.

² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279a22–1279b10; R.G. Mulgan, *Aristotle's Political Theory* (Oxford, 1977), p. 60.

This tyranny is just that arbitrary power of an individual which is responsible to no one, and governs all alike, whether equals or better, with a view to its own advantage, not to that of its subjects, and therefore against their will. No freeman willingly endures such a government.

Since Aristotle defined a free person as one ‘who exists for himself and not for another’ or, as he put it elsewhere, ‘it is the mark of a free man not to live at another’s beck and call’, tyranny is clearly the government that most denies freedom.³ Despite the fact that all of these definitions and classifications, which remind us of Aristotle’s brilliant biological taxonomy, influenced political thinking about tyranny for more than twenty centuries, they strike us as rather stale and skeletal — stale, because these dry classifications tell us little about the terrifying political dynamics of tyrannies, and skeletal, because these classifications capture little of Aristotle’s rich analysis of the moral and political consequences of tyranny.

Tyranny as Unnatural

Aristotle’s ethical and political discussions are inseparable from his metaphysics.⁴ In order to understand how he analyses tyranny, we must review, at least in a summary fashion, his metaphysical assumptions. To look at the world through the spectacles of Aristotle’s metaphysics is to see a world in which everything is constantly changing and developing; nothing is static, because every part of the natural world is acting to attain some goal or purpose or end. ‘Therefore action for an end is present in things which come to be and are by nature.’ Since nature does nothing in vain,⁵ and every part of nature is acting to attain some purpose, Aristotle quite literally presented a picture of the world in which trees are trying to grow higher, animals to become stronger, and the heavenly bodies to continue performing their perfect heavenly functions.

By gradual advance in this direction we come to see clearly that in plants too that is produced which is conducive to the end — leaves, e.g. grow to provide shade for the fruit. If then it is both by nature and for an end that the swallow makes its nest and the spider its web, and plants grow leaves for the sake of the fruit and send their roots down (not up) for the

³ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1295a19–23; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross, 982b26–27; Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. Rhys Roberts, 1367a31–32.

⁴ See T.H. Irwin, ‘The Metaphysical and Psychological Basis of Aristotle’s Ethics’, in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 35–53.

⁵ Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, 199a7–8; also, Aristotle, *Politics*, 1342b18–19; and Sir Ernest Barker, *The Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle* (New York, 1959 (originally published 1906)), pp. 208, 220, 353.

sake of nourishment, it is plain that this kind of cause is operative in things which come to be and are by nature.⁶

Aristotle called the ends that nature attempts to attain 'final causes', although they are not really causes, at least in the sense that we use the word *cause*, but rather, a final cause explains why something occurs or the purposes that one finds in nature.⁷

Aristotle distinguished between that which is actually and that which is potentially. For example, an acorn is in actuality a seed, but it is potentially a mighty oak tree; and as the acorn passes from seed to sapling to tree, that is, as it attains its proper end, it is said to actualize its potentiality.⁸ When something attains its end, when it actualizes its potentiality, it becomes what in one sense it really is, because it attains its most essential or defining characteristics, its essence. 'For a thing is more properly said to be what it is when it exists in actuality than when it exists potentially.' If we know the essence of something, then we know the end outlined for it by nature, and to know the end or purpose of something is to know what is good. 'For what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature, whether we are speaking of a man, a horse, or a family. Besides, the final cause and end of a thing is the best'.⁹ Human beings are also part of nature and thus have an end or purpose to achieve, and indeed there is a human essence we should attempt to attain. For Aristotle, human beings should strive for a life of virtue, excellence and greatness — characteristics we are likely to attain in a good *polis* in which we can devote time to contemplation and citizenship. Not surprisingly, tyranny obstructs all efforts at reaching this actualization of potential.

Because Aristotle thought that human potential could develop only in the best *polis*, he logically concluded that tyranny, or the worst *polis*, is an unnatural political order that undermines the proper development of human potential. When Aristotle said that 'the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal', he meant both that nature intended human beings to live in a *polis* and also that human beings can develop their potentials or come

⁶ Aristotle, *Physics*, 199a23–30.

⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 994b9–10; Aristotle, *Physics*, 194b32–195a3.

⁸ See, for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1017a35–1017b9.

⁹ Aristotle, *Physics*, 193b7–9; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252b32–1253a1; also, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b5–8; 1015a10–11; 1032b1–2. For a recent defence of Aristotle's argument for a human essence, see Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism', *Political Theory*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1992), pp. 202–46. For an examination of how Aristotle argued that women lack this human essence, see Arlene Saxonhouse, 'Aristotle: Defective Males, Hierarchy, and the Limits of Politics', in *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*, ed. Mary Lyndon Shanley and Carole Pateman (University Park, PA, 1991), pp. 32–52.

to perfection only in a Greek *polis*¹⁰ (which makes this undeniably an ethno-centric argument). Just as an acorn can actualize its potential to become a mighty oak only in the proper soil and the proper climate, so human beings can attain their end or approach perfection only in the soil of the Greek *polis*, an argument that penultimately rests on biological assumptions about human beings and ultimately on his whole philosophy that sees purposes built into the world by nature. Within the proper setting of a good *polis*, human beings can attain greatness, but living without a *polis* or in a corrupt political environment such as a Persian despotism, human beings cannot develop. 'For man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all.' Elsewhere in the same chapter, Aristotle suggested that an individual without a state 'is either a bad man or above humanity' or later 'either a beast or a god'.¹¹

While Aristotle certainly condemned tyranny because it denies personal freedom and is violently cruel, he opposed it most because it violates the natural order of things, because it is an unnatural political order inhibiting the development of human morality and excellence. To hope that human beings can flourish and achieve greatness under a tyranny is very much like hoping that an oak tree can grow tall without sunlight, and thus Aristotle despised tyranny not just because it is brutal, but most of all because it murders in human beings precisely what Aristotle regarded as most beautiful, the natural tendency to grow towards greatness.

For there is by nature both a justice and an advantage appropriate to the rule of a master, another to kingly rule, another to constitutional rule; but there is none naturally appropriate to tyranny, or to any other perverted form of government; for these come into being contrary to nature.

If the goal of a true *polis* is the good life, then the goal of a tyranny is at best mere life, something even the household can provide (and tyranny of course even threatens to end this), and if statesmen in a true *polis* 'aspire to do . . . great deeds', then tyrants strive first and foremost to secure their own personal 'protection'. Aristotle, who regarded tyranny as the 'worst' form of government, was even willing to declare 'great is the honour bestowed . . . on him who kills a tyrant'.¹²

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a1–3; Mulgan, *Aristotle's Political Theory*, pp. 3, 23. See also, Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, 'The Place of Contemplation in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics', in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Rorty, pp. 377–94; and Richard Mulgan, 'Aristotle and the Value of Political Participation', *Political Theory*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1990), pp. 195–215.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a31–32; 1253a3–4; 1253a29–30.

¹² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1287b37–41; Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1391a24; 1366a6; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1289b2; 1267a15–16.

In Aristotle's suggestion that tyranny is unnatural, we doubtless find the shadow of Plato. When Aristotle said that human beings have an end or purpose outlined by nature, when he argued that the best *polis* most completely meets our biological needs, he had in mind, as did Plato, the notion that human beings tend by nature to develop towards a state of 'perfect health', which entails both citizenship and a life of reason. Aristotle, as one article put it, 'uses "nature" in *almost* exactly the same way as Plato uses the idea of the just and the good'.¹³ For Plato, a life according to reason is healthy and just; for Aristotle, it is healthy and natural. Tyranny, according to Aristotle, is unnatural, precisely because it arises either from disease or from stunted growth. Of Solon, Aristotle wrote, 'that he had the opportunity to become tyrant is evident from the diseased state of affairs'.¹⁴ Of course, Plato and Aristotle did not have identical concepts of health, because Aristotle advocated a kind of political participation and citizenship that Plato would not have countenanced.

Tyranny as a Household: The Elimination of Politics and the Primacy of Economics

Aristotle criticized Plato for trying, in his *Republic*, to transform a *polis* into a family or household (*oikia*). Although both *polis* and household are essential to human development¹⁵ their functions, according to Aristotle, are very different, and the kind of rule one finds in a *polis*, where citizens meet as equals, differs significantly from the hierarchical relationships of the household. Consider first how rule in the *polis* differs from rule in the household. Despite more than once praising monarchy and aristocracy, in general when Aristotle discussed political rule, or the kind of rule one finds in a good *polis*, he described a government by equals and praised citizenship. Such rule he labelled 'constitutional rule', that kind of government 'which is exercised over freemen and equals by birth'. Because Aristotle accepted so many of the assumptions of his contemporaries, he always assumed that the number of adult male citizens would be small compared to the total population of the *polis*, and to this extent

¹³ K. Von Fritz and E. Kapp, 'The Development of Aristotle's Political Philosophy and the Concept of Nature', in *Articles on Aristotle, 2. Ethics and Politics*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Malcolm Schofield and Richard Sorabji (London, 1975), pp. 113–34, esp. pp. 116–18; also Stephen G. Salkever, 'Aristotle's Social Science', *Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1981), pp. 479–508, esp. pp. 479, 495–7, 501–3.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, trans. P.J. Rhodes (New York, 1984), Ch. 6. Although Rhodes himself argues that Aristotle most likely did not write this book, I think most modern scholarship is persuasive in attributing this work to Aristotle.

¹⁵ W.F.R. Hardie, 'The Final Good in Aristotle's *Ethics*', in *Aristotle: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J.M.E. Moravcsik (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1968 (originally published 1967)), pp. 297–322, esp. p. 303; I. Finley, 'Aristotle and Economic Analysis', in *Articles on Aristotle*, ed. Barnes *et al.*, pp. 140–58, esp. p. 144.

he was not defending what he called 'extreme democracy' but he was suggesting that those lucky enough to be citizens did meet in the public assemblies as equals. 'But in most constitutional states the citizens rule and are ruled by turns, for the idea of a constitutional state implies that the natures of the citizens are equal'. Equality did not imply for Aristotle that citizens were all alike, having the same interests and opinions, because a *polis* by nature is 'composed of unlikes'.¹⁶ If Plato sought one big harmonious family united in its common opinion of and pursuit of justice, Aristotle pictured citizens differing and deliberating in the assembly about the common good.

Aristotle was willing to define a citizen as 'one who shares in governing and being governed'. If we wonder what more precisely Aristotle meant by this, we find that a citizen 'shares in the administration of justice, and in offices', and 'has the power to take part in the deliberative or judicial administration' of the *polis*. The good citizen should 'know how to govern like a freeman, and how to obey like a freeman'.¹⁷ In this argument, the man who left the private world of the household entered the public world of politics and political deliberation as an equal among his fellow citizens, and while Aristotle was hardly a fully-fledged democrat, he did offer a lasting defence of citizen participation in the governance of the *polis*. Citizenship, for Aristotle, is essential to the development of human excellence.

Whereas the government of a good *polis* involves a high degree of equality and participation, the household, by contrast, is a hierarchical social system involving not only the immediate family but also servants and slaves, and as a result household government must be monarchical. 'The rule of a household is a monarchy, for every house is under one head; whereas constitutional rule is a government of freemen and equals.' Even within the household, Aristotle described two different kinds of rule — royal rule over those who by nature are free, such as one's wife and children, and despotic rule over those who by nature are servants or slaves.¹⁸ The word *despotes* also connotes rule in one's own interests, so the master of the household who abuses his responsibilities and rules the entire household selfishly is said to rule despotically.¹⁹ Strictly speaking a despot (*despotes*) is a master who rules over people who are slaves by nature, and such despotic rule is in a sense appropriate not only towards most servants and slaves within a household but towards all, such as barbarians, who are unable by nature to be free. 'For barbarians, being more servile in character

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1277b8–9; 1277b3–4; 1259b4–6; 1277a5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1283b42–1284a1; 1275a21; 1275b19–20; 1277b15–16. Also, 1332b26–27, 1333a1–2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1255b19–20; 1254b1–1255a3. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City, 1959 (originally published 1958)), pp. 27–34.

¹⁹ Mulgan, *Aristotle's Political Theory*, pp. 36, 44. See also John F. Wilson, 'Power, Rule, and Politics: The Aristotelian View', *Polity*, Vol. XIII, Number 1 (1980), pp. 80–96.

than Hellenes, and Asiatics than Europeans, do not rebel against a despotic government.'²⁰

This suggests that tyrants turn the political world upside down. Even though free men should share in the government of the *polis*, tyrants treat free men as slaves and rule despotically; even though citizens should govern as equals, tyrants rule hierarchically; even though government should be for the common good, tyrants rule selfishly; and even though the political rule of the *polis* should be the proper soil in which human excellence can flourish, tyrants transform the *polis* itself into a household and rule as master. Aristotle noted that monarchy greatly resembled household management. 'For as household management is the kingly rule of a house, so kingly rule is the household management of a city'. By extension, he certainly regarded tyranny, the perverted form of monarchy, as the cruel misrule of a household. Just as the master of a household uses his servant as a tool or an 'instrument',²¹ by using the labour of the servant to provide himself with leisure, so tyrants use their subjects as tools in their selfish pursuits.

All of this means that tyrannies reverse the proper functions of the household and the *polis*. In the development of human excellence, the function of the household was to free the citizen from the labour process, so that the citizen would have leisure or free time, almost literally time in which to be free, to strive for both political and intellectual excellence. 'Property is a part of the household, and the art of acquiring property is a part of the art of managing the household; for no man can live well, or indeed live at all, unless he is provided with necessities.'²² Athens had about 40,000 to 45,000 adult male citizens out of a total population of about 250,000, perhaps slightly more, which means that the labour of the great majority — slaves, servants and women — was providing the necessary leisure for comparatively few adult male citizens. Aristotle saw no alternative; if the development of human excellence requires freedom from the labour process, then for any to be free, others must labour. The only other option Aristotle recognized was for all to labour and none to be free, although he did fantasize that if fields could plow themselves and shuttles could weave on their own, then masters would not need slaves, a passage that Marx quoted many centuries later when he dreamed of a world in which machines freed us all from necessary or forced labour.²³ Knowing nothing of modern

²⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1285a19–21. I have used Ross's original translation of *barbaros* as 'barbarian', instead of the revised translation of 'foreigner'.

²¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1285b31–33; 1253b30–34.

²² *Ibid.*, 1253b23–26.

²³ M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Greeks: An Introduction to Their Life and Thought* (New York, 1964), pp. 38, 55; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253b33–1254a1. See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York, 1906), Part IV, ch. XIV, section 3, b. (pp. 445–6). '“If”, dreamed Aristotle, the greatest thinker of

dreams of automation, and faced with an economy of scarcity, Aristotle regarded *oikonomike* or household management as an inferior, but nonetheless essential, economic task furthering the possibility of freedom for a few citizens. 'Hence those who are in a position which places them above toil have stewards who attend to their households while they occupy themselves with philosophy or with politics.'²⁴ It is worth noting that neither in constitutional government nor in tyranny should women, in Aristotle's view, have any measure of citizenship.

The household was designed by nature to provide the economic means to a political and moral end, and it was itself a primitive form of government that could suffice for mere life but not for the good life. In this, Aristotle clearly regarded the economic (*oikia*) as subservient to the political (*polis*). By Aristotle's definition, the tyrant eliminates what is political — citizenship, participation, popular assemblies and deliberation — and transforms political rule into household management or *oikonomike*. With tyranny, we see the eclipse of politics and the primacy of economics.

The Consequences of Avarice and Tyranny

For Aristotle, wealth was a means to the good life and not an end to be pursued for its own sake alone. Although no person can live well without a moderate amount of property, any person who pursues superfluous amounts of property is morally deficient and ignorant of the proper ends of life because, just as we must sometimes engage in war but only as a means to peace, so we must only undertake 'business for the sake of leisure'.²⁵ Unfortunately, too often people misperceive the purposes of life and regard the accumulation of wealth as an end and not a means.

Hence some persons are led to believe that getting wealth is the object of household management, and the whole idea of their lives is that they ought either to increase their money without limit, or at any rate not to lose it. The origin of this disposition in men is that they are intent upon living

antiquity, "if every tool, when summoned, or even of its own accord, could do the work that befits it, just as the creations of Daedalus moved of themselves, or the tripods of Hephaestus went of their own accord to their sacred work, if the weavers' shuttles were to weave of themselves, then there would be no need either of apprentices for the master workers, or of slaves for the lords." . . . Oh! those heathens! . . . They perhaps excused the slavery of one on the ground that it was a means to the full development of another. But to preach slavery of the masses, in order that a few crude and half-educated parvenus, might become "eminent spinners", "extensive sausage-makers", and "influential shoe-black dealers", to do this, they lacked the bump of Christianity.'

²⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1255b35–38.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1333a35–36; Barker, *The Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle*, pp. 382–4.

only, and not upon living well; and, as their desires are unlimited, they also desire that the means of gratifying them should be without limit.²⁶

In a brilliant analysis, Finley suggested that Aristotle did not have a systematic and modern economic analysis, mainly because he regarded economics as a necessary but subservient function to be carried out by foreigners, household stewards and slaves.²⁷ In fact, Aristotle despised commerce, regarding it as a life unfit for a free citizen and considering, for example, 'retail trade' as an 'unnatural' occupation in which people use each other for profit.²⁸ So much did Aristotle dislike commerce that if a people came together only to further prosperity, Aristotle refused to call such an association a *polis*, since a *polis* must have a higher goal than wealth.

But a state exists for the sake of a good life, and not for the sake of life only . . . Nor does a state exist for the sake of alliance and security from injustice, nor yet for the sake of exchange and mutual intercourse . . . Let us suppose that one man is a carpenter, another a farmer, another a shoemaker, and so on, and that their number is ten thousand: nevertheless, if they have nothing in common but exchange, alliance, and the like, that would not constitute a state.²⁹

Since Aristotle pictured the *polis* as friends who are seeking the good life together, and this pursuit of excellence is what they share and have in common, then a political order in which the primary purposes are the protection of property and the assurance of order so that people can pursue their private economic interests (and here one easily thinks of modern thinkers such as Locke and Smith) is not a *polis*, at least in the eyes of Aristotle, but merely an economic alliance or a commercial treaty. The tyrant is someone who, treating the *polis* as if it were a household, ignores the proper role of the *polis* and regards it instead as an economic alliance designed to produce wealth mainly for himself or herself. 'As of oligarchy so of tyranny, the end is wealth (for by wealth only can the tyrant maintain his guard and his luxury).' Like Plato, Aristotle pictured a tyrant as driven by desires for power, pleasure and wealth.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1257b38–1258a2. Also, 'It is slave-like to desire to live rather than to live well, to follow the opinions of the many instead of expecting the many to follow one's own, to seek money but to show no concern at all for what is noble.' Aristotle, *Fragments*, trans. Jonathan Barnes and Gavin Lawrence, F 52 R³, B 53.

²⁷ Finley, 'Aristotle and Economic Analysis'.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, trans. J. Solomon, 1215a26–32; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1258a38–1258b2. Also, Mulgan, *Aristotle's Political Theory*, p. 49.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1280a31–36 and 1280b20–24.

The tyrant's 'aim is pleasure, the aim of a king, honour . . . the tyrant accumulates riches, the king seeks what brings honour'.³⁰

Although such desire for riches tends to make tyrannies unstable and shortlived, tyrants, while they last, control their subjects to some extent by encouraging in them a similar love of wealth. A tyrant uses economic incentives to depoliticize their subjects. Tyrants play upon a love of wealth to confine people to their private affairs, thus leaving no time, opportunity or desire for them to attend to public matters. In his description of Pisistratus, Aristotle noted that he encouraged agriculture, in part because the people 'should have reasonable means of subsistence, and should concentrate on their private affairs and have neither the desire nor the leisure to take an interest in public affairs'. Pisistratus consolidated his power and won over the many 'by his help for their private concerns'. In another context, Aristotle suggested that tyrannies sometimes 'impoverish' their subjects so that 'the people, having to keep hard at work, are prevented from conspiring'.³¹ Ironically, both poverty, which compels people to work so hard that they have no time for political affairs, and affluence, which distracts people from political concerns, work to the advantage of the tyrant. In each case, a life of economic activity helps to subvert possible political opposition to the tyranny.

Whether a tyranny pacifies the population with material gratification or distracts people by encouraging them to busy themselves with private affairs, in each case tyranny misuses, or even eliminates, genuine leisure time. For Aristotle this was disastrous, because leisure time is a prerequisite for intellectual development, political activity and human excellence in general; as we saw above, the citizens who have been freed from the labour process occupy themselves with philosophy and politics. The best state, according to Aristotle, will not allow ordinary labourers and artisans to be citizens, because the word *citizen* can apply 'only to those who are freed from necessary services'.³² Although this seems harsh to our modern ears, Aristotle was arguing that leisure was essential to the development of intelligence and excellence, and a person who must labour from sunrise to sundown cannot have such leisure, remains dominated by necessity, and ultimately resembles a tool for labour or a beast of burden rather than a human being.³³ Human beings can attain their proper ends of a life of reason and citizenship only on the other side of necessity. In the best *polis*, 'the citizens must not lead the life of artisans or tradesmen, for such a life is ignoble and inimical to excellence. Neither must they be farmers, since leisure is necessary both for the development of excellence and the perform-

³⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1311a9–11; 1311a3–6.

³¹ Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, Ch. 16; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1313b19–21.

³² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1278a10–11; also, 1255b36–37.

³³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 74.

ance of political duties.³⁴ Even though leisure may be necessary for the good life, it is hardly sufficient, since people with leisure must use it well, a task perhaps even more difficult, according to Aristotle, than attaining leisure in the first place. 'The first principle of all action is leisure . . . and therefore the question must be asked, what ought we to do when at leisure? Clearly we ought not to be amusing ourselves, for then amusement would be the end of life.'³⁵ Under a tyranny this is precisely what happens, because, while tyrants use leisure time to amuse themselves with coarse pleasures, most of their subjects busy themselves with commerce and, as this commerce becomes an end in itself, they deny themselves the opportunity for genuinely fruitful leisure. In a passage referred to above, Aristotle described Pisistratus as encouraging his subjects in their private affairs so that they would have neither desire nor 'leisure' to participate in political affairs.³⁶

Something much more serious is at issue here in Aristotle's analysis of the way tyranny misuses leisure. First of all, the elimination of leisure time threatens intellectual development, because Aristotle noted on several occasions that leisure was necessary for science and philosophy, that only after certain classes in society had conquered necessity did they turn to artistic and intellectual pursuits. 'Hence when all such inventions were already established, the sciences which do not aim at giving pleasure or at the necessities of life were discovered, and first in the places where men first began to have leisure.'³⁷ Second and more important, leisure is necessary to deliberation about what constitutes the good life. As a consequence, when tyrannies misuse or eliminate leisure, they simultaneously eliminate what Aristotle called practical questions or questions about how a society might attain the good life. With this elimination of all practical questions, all assume, from tyrant to the poorest subject, that the good life consists in the pleasures and amusements that preoccupy the ruling classes, that there is no alternative to the status quo. Closing off a discourse of practical questions is one of the most powerful buttresses of any tyranny.

Aristotle maintained that 'statecraft', by definition, must inquire into and 'speak about' the good life or what is best for human beings, and he defined a citizen as one who participated in these deliberations about how to achieve the best life. 'In the best state [a citizen] is one who is able and chooses to be

³⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1328b37–1329a2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1337b30–36. I have returned to the original Jowett translation, substituting 'amusement' for 'play'. Also, 'If it is disgraceful in men not to be able to use the goods of life, it is peculiarly disgraceful not to be able to use them in time of leisure — to show excellent qualities in action and war, and when they have peace and leisure to be no better than slaves.' Aristotle, *Politics*, 1334a36–39.

³⁶ Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, Ch. 16.

³⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 981b21–23; also 982b23–28.

governed and to govern with a view to the life of excellence.' At the beginning of the *Politics*, when he suggested that human beings are political animals who attain their perfection within a Greek *polis*, Aristotle attempted to prove this by citing the human capacity for speech. Because nature does nothing in vain, and because human beings are the only animals endowed with speech, then nature intended for human beings to live in political societies and to use 'the power of speech . . . to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust'. In other words, human beings can attain their proper end of excellence only if they can deliberate, as citizens of a *polis*, about the good life and how to achieve it. Not only did he applaud the fact that 'assemblies meet, sit in judgment, deliberate, and decide',³⁸ but he thought such action was indispensable to the development of human potential, and he wanted such assemblies to deliberate about the most serious moral and practical questions. What we both attain and apply in such political deliberation is what Aristotle called *practical wisdom (phronesis)*. 'Now it is thought to be a mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well . . . about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general.'³⁹

If citizens in a good *polis* both develop and also apply practical wisdom through their deliberations, then a tyranny again by definition can have no practical wisdom, although a tyrant might well have technical wisdom (*techné*) in regard to how best to preserve the tyranny. Obviously a tyrant and most likely his subjects are ignorant of the good life, but Aristotle was saying something more important. The subjects of a tyranny have lost the ability to ask practical questions, to deliberate about the good life and how they might attain it. Cicero recorded a fragment of Aristotle that supports this conclusion. 'Eloquence is the companion of peace, the ally of leisure, and, so to say, the offspring of a well-ordered state. And for this reason, Aristotle says, it was when the tyrants in Sicily had been removed' that Sicilians could develop the art of eloquence,⁴⁰ that is, in the absence of tyranny, citizens could finally turn to the practical questions they had previously been unable to ask. The subjects of a tyranny are unable to ask these questions not only because such questions would threaten the privileged position of the tyrant and any ruling class, but also because the entire *polis* has accepted, according to Aristotle, the idea that the good life

³⁸ Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, trans. St.G. Stock, 1183a3–8; 1183a34–35; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1284a1–3; 1253a7–18; 1286a26–27. Even if *Magna Moralia* is not by Aristotle, I do not think this hurts my overall argument.

³⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross and revised by J.O. Urmson, 1140a25–28. For good discussions of *phronesis*, see W.F.R. Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 234–5; Mulgan, *Aristotle's Political Theory*, pp. 9–10; and Peter Simpson, 'Contemporary Virtue: Ethics and Aristotle', *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 45 (1992), pp. 503–24, esp. pp. 510–20.

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Fragments*, F 137 R³.

consists in attaining power, wealth and pleasure. A tyrant who has eliminated all deliberations about the good life, who has managed to rule over a populace unable to question if there is a better life or an alternative to the status quo, has found one of the most powerful weapons any tyrant can wield in the interest of stability and longevity. Such a tyrant has defined and limited the discourse of the *polis*.

Tyranny and the Disappearance of Community

When Aristotle outlined the development of the *polis* he said that the *polis* was an association of families, but he had already described the family as an association so, in a sense, a *polis* is an association of associations.⁴¹ The Greek word that we sometimes translate as 'association' is *koinonia*, but our word *association* cannot capture the richness of the original word. While the word *association* suggests some degree of passivity in belonging to a group (for example, the National Association of Manufacturers), the word *koinonia* suggests active participation, and while *association* may well connote hierarchy, *koinonia* implies a greater degree of equality. Indeed, *koinonia* suggests to us words such as *community* and *sharing*, and probably the best translation is *partnership*, because this conveys the quality of active participation by equals in some common enterprise.⁴² When we say that a *polis* is a community and a partnership, we immediately sense citizens actively embarking upon some common undertaking together, and that is probably the picture Aristotle wanted us to have of a *polis*. The *polis*, said Aristotle, 'is a community of families and aggregations of families in well-being, for the sake of a perfect and self-sufficing life'. Aristotle maintained that a community or partnership must have two other characteristics — justice and friendship — and indeed the more perfect the community, the more perfect will be the justice and friendship in that community. 'For in every community there is thought to be some form of justice, and friendship too; . . . And the extent of their association is the extent of their friendship, as it is the extent to which justice exists between them. And the proverb "what friends have is common property" expresses the truth; for friendship depends on community.'⁴³

Aristotle might just as well have turned this around, however, and said that community depends on friendship, because he repeatedly declared that the best *polis* is a community or partnership among friends and that 'friendship

⁴¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252b10–1253a2.

⁴² Mulgan, *Aristotle's Political Theory*, p. 13. Elsewhere Jowett translates Aristotle as saying a state is a 'partnership of citizens'. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1276b1–2.

⁴³ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1280b33–35; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1159b27–32.

seems . . . to hold states together'.⁴⁴ When Aristotle said 'without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods', he was indicating not only that friendship is a key component of a good life, but also that friendship is of supreme importance to any community, including the *polis*, because 'there is nothing so characteristic of friends as living together'. On the one hand, Aristotle meant by this that nature intends human beings to live together in a *polis* and that we can neither become happy nor attain excellence alone. 'For no one would choose to possess all good things on condition of being alone, since man is a political creature and one whose nature is to live with others.' Human beings naturally live in communities based on friendship, communities that overcome loneliness and help to develop human excellence.⁴⁵ On the other hand, however, Aristotle simply meant that friendship is one of the most enduring sources of human joy. 'Further, men believe a friend to be among the greatest of goods, and friendlessness and solitude to be most terrible.' If we have friends, we naturally want to enjoy their company, and thus Aristotle suggested that friends 'contemplate in common and feast in common', as well as drink together, play dice together, and study philosophy together, 'for since they wish to live with their friends, they do and share in those things as far as they can'.⁴⁶ He might just as well have added that friends go to the assembly together and even go to battle together, because these too are consistent with the picture he gave of a good *polis* as a partnership or community, distinguished most of all by friends acting in common.

In a tyranny, however, the relationships among individuals are despotic, that is, they resemble the relationship of a master to household servants and, by definition, this is not a relationship involving friendship.

But in the deviation-forms [of government], as justice hardly exists, so too does friendship. It exists least in the worst form; in tyranny there is little or no friendship. For where there is nothing common to ruler and ruled, there is not friendship either, since there is not justice; e.g. between craftsman and tool, soul and body, master and slave . . . For there is nothing

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155a21–22; also Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1242b21–37; and Abraham Edel, *Aristotle and His Philosophy* (Chapel Hill, 1982), p. 311. The Greek word *philia*, which we translate as 'friendship', has a broader range of meanings than our word, including, for example, relations among family members. For our purposes, 'civic friendship' or friendship among equals is most important. See John M. Cooper, 'Aristotle on Friendship', in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Rorty, pp. 301–40, esp. pp. 301–3.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155a5–6; 1157b19–20; 1169b17–19; Cooper, 'Aristotle on Friendship', pp. 321–30.

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1234b32–1235a1; 1245b4–5; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 172a1–8.

common to the two parties; the slave is a living tool and the tool a lifeless slave.⁴⁷

It would be a mistake to conclude that Aristotle is simply depicting tyranny as an unfriendly place to live, for his picture is far gloomier than that. Because a tyranny is a political order that has lost all sense of community, all sense that people must work together towards the common goal of a good life, then the relationships in tyranny are marked by selfishness, exploitation, enmity, suspicion and ultimately loneliness, which both Tocqueville and Arendt much later saw as key components of tyranny. If by definition we wish a friend well and share our prosperity with him or her, then in a tyranny we look upon another only as someone to be used for selfish advantage.

In such a world we see only conflict among rich and poor, the former ruling despotically and the latter only knowing how to obey like slaves. 'Thus arises a city, not of freemen, but of masters and slaves, the one despising, the other envying; and nothing can be more fatal to friendship and good fellowship in states than this.'⁴⁸ Aristotle maintained that tyrannies benefit from modest class conflict and, as long as such conflict does not break into violence, tyrannies will try to foster divisions between rich and poor. 'Another art of the tyrant is to sow quarrels among the citizens; friends should be embroiled with friends, the people with the notables, and the rich with one another.' Encouraging class conflict is a dangerous game for tyrants, however, because such conflict eventually leads to revolution. 'Love of gain in the ruling classes was always tending to diminish their number, and so to strengthen the masses, who in the end set upon their masters and established democracies.' In general, tyrannies must find ways to please both classes, to pretend to be the benefactor of each class and to appear to be ruling to the advantage of each class, and because this too is a dangerous game, it demonstrates that it is not easy to establish and maintain a lasting tyranny. When Aristotle advised tyrants to 'win the notables by companionship, and the multitude by flattery', he was very consciously giving advice that corresponded to the practices of Pisistratus, whom Aristotle described as winning over 'the notables by his friendly dealings with them, and the people by his help for their private concerns'.⁴⁹

In arguing that tyrannies benefit from quarrels among classes, and in noting that one finds little friendship and a great deal of animosity in a tyranny, Aristotle was suggesting that tyrannies are lasting to the extent that they create and maintain divisions among their subjects. Divide and conquer remains a time-honoured maxim for all tyrannies, and Aristotle knew this well. Aristotle

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1161a30–1161b4.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1295b21–26.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1313b17–19; 1286b16–18; 1315b3–4; Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, Ch. 16.

noted at the beginning of the *Politics* that in pre-political villages families live 'dispersedly', in contrast to the *polis* where people establish a vibrant community; and, in a sense, tyrannies try to return to this pre-political state of dispersal, confining people to their private affairs and to the household and depriving them of all opportunity for public and political action. After Aristotle, no theorist of tyranny could overlook this isolation in the private world as the single most essential characteristic of tyranny and, without question, this is Aristotle's most important contribution to theories of tyranny.

After Pisistratus seized power by deceiving people into surrendering their arms, wrote Aristotle, he told the people that 'they should not be startled or disheartened but should go and attend to their private affairs, and that he would take care of all public affairs'. Aristotle also observed that Pisistratus isolated people from one another by encouraging them in agriculture, which took them out of the city where they might organize themselves politically and scattered them across the countryside, a common practice of tyrannies. 'Both [tyrannies and oligarchies] agree too in injuring the people and driving them out of the city and dispersing them.'⁵⁰ It was Aristotle who established that this practice of isolating citizens from each other is a central feature of any tyranny. Indeed, when Aristotle used his political science, which we will examine more closely in the next section, to determine how tyrannies might make themselves more stable and more lasting, he suggested most of all a number of ways tyrannies might perpetuate divisions among the people. For example, tyrants should use spies and informers which divide people because frightened and suspicious individuals cannot speak honestly with each other; they should divide families by encouraging women and slaves to inform against the head of the household; they should 'sow quarrels among the citizens', separating citizens and breaking apart friendships; they 'must not allow common meals, clubs, education' or any 'meetings', because these activities might bring people together; they should 'take every means to prevent people from knowing one another (for acquaintance begets mutual confidence)'; and finally, tyrants should create 'mistrust among [their subjects]; for a tyrant is not overthrown until men begin to have confidence in one another'.⁵¹ Two consequences of all this are immediately striking. First, if subjects are isolated from each other and mistrustful of each other, if suspicion and animosity have destroyed all friendship, then these subjects will be powerless to act politically in opposition to the tyranny. 'The tyrant desires that his subjects shall be incapable of action, for no one attempts what is impossible, and they will not attempt to overthrow a tyranny if they are

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, Ch. 15; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1311a12–14. Pisistratus encouraged his subjects in agriculture, 'so that they should spend their time not in the city but scattered about the countryside'. Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, Ch. 16.

⁵¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1313b10–17; 1313b33–38; 1313b17–19; 1313a41–1313b3; 1313b4–6; 1314a17–18.

powerless.'⁵² Second, such divisions among citizens signify the complete destruction of the partnership or community that should constitute a *polis* and, once again, tyranny not only dominates and exploits, but it also destroys the political culture that is essential for the natural unfolding of human excellence.

Aristotle's Science of Tyranny

Aristotle was, of course, the ancient world's most outstanding natural scientist, a tireless observer of the natural world and one who devoted much of a lifetime to gathering facts from these empirical observations.⁵³ As we have seen already, Aristotle saw great continuity between his studies of the physical and biological worlds and his studies of the political world, because he saw the *polis* as designed to develop the capacities of these human beings as natural, even demanded, biologically. Aristotle's science strikes our century as unusual, because he thought he could use his science to discover not only facts but also moral imperatives; once we know that the natural end or purpose of human development is a life of reason and citizenship, and once we know that human beings develop these potentials within a *polis*, then our scientific investigation has yielded moral and political knowledge and tells us how we ought to act to promote human excellence. It is, as we indicated, a science much like medicine that knows health is good and how to bring it about. Despite the fact that his science is not exactly like the political science of the twentieth century, Aristotle's scientific respect for empiricism sets him apart from Plato. In recounting Plato's analysis that the republic will pass from timocracy to oligarchy to democracy and ultimately end in tyranny, Aristotle refuted him with empirical evidence! Borrowing from his empirical studies of a variety of states, Aristotle suggested that democracy is more likely to pass into oligarchy than into tyranny. When he sought the origin of tyrannies, he offered not a theoretical (or even psychological) analysis, but historical example. Tyrants have generally been chosen by the people purportedly to protect the people from the outrages of the notables; 'history shows that almost all tyrants have been demagogues who gained the favour of the people by their accusation of the notables'.⁵⁴

Aristotle's political science sought to know four things: the ideal or best government in the abstract, the best *possible* government (a not so subtle criticism of Plato), the best government relative to a nation's given circum-

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1314a22–25.

⁵³ Jonathan Barnes, *Aristotle* (New York, 1982), pp. 14–17.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1310b15–16; also, Bk. V, ch. 12; and see Raymond Weil, 'Aristotle's View of History', in *Articles on Aristotle*, ed. Barnes *et al.*, pp. 202–17, esp. p. 209; and Kurt Von Fritz, 'Aristotle's Contribution to the Practice and Theory of Historiography', *University of California Publications in Philosophy*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1958), pp. 113–38, esp. p. 137.

stances and, finally, how statesmen might form a government and preserve it.⁵⁵ This latter goal, how best to make a government both stable and lasting, led him to analyse how one might preserve a tyranny. Although this analysis is somewhat startling to us, since he seemed to be offering advice to benefit tyrants, Aristotle's prodigious curiosity simply led him to ask a technical question in regard to what makes a tyranny lasting, much as a physician might wonder under what conditions disease will spread most rapidly. He even likened his study to a medical investigation. 'For as healthy bodies and ships well provided with sailors may undergo many mishaps and survive them, whereas sickly constitutions and rotten ill-manned ships are ruined by the very least mistake, so do the worst forms of government require the greatest care.'⁵⁶

In attempting to group together Aristotle's specific advice for stabilizing tyrannies, I find four broad recommendations, two of which we have already seen in preceding sections of this article. First, Aristotle recommended, in a variety of specific ways, that tyrants depoliticize their populations. Not only will citizens then busy themselves with their private economic concerns, but they will also forego asking practical questions about alternatives to the status quo. Second, as we saw in the previous section, Aristotle gave a host of detailed suggestions about how a tyrant might divide citizens to prevent them from organizing politically against the tyranny. In this, the effective tyrant will try to destroy community and friendship, isolating people from each other in an attempt to render them powerless. Two other broad recommendations emerge from Aristotle's writings: tyrants must know how to use violence, and they must be adept at deception.

On three different occasions Aristotle either related or referred to a story about Periander, a tyrant of Corinth, who, when asked advice, 'said nothing, but only cut off the tallest ears of corn till he had brought the field to a level', a symbolic gesture indicating that a tyrant must use violence against all the outstanding individuals who threaten his or her power. Although Aristotle would prefer to see a tyrant use ostracism to eliminate potentially powerful opponents, he readily admitted that an effective tyrant must be capable of violence. 'The tyrant should lop off those who are too high; he must put to death men of spirit.'⁵⁷ Add to this violence the use of spies and informers, and it is easy to see that Aristotle thought that tyrants needed both fear and violence to maintain their rule. The problem is especially acute for those who inherit tyrannical power, for 'most of those who have acquired, have retained their

⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. IV, ch. 1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1320b34–37.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1284a29–31; also 1311a20–22 and 1313a39–41. On ostracism, see *ibid.*, Bk. III, ch. 13. Here Aristotle acknowledged that both democracies and oligarchies must also know how and when to use violence.

power, but those who have inherited, have lost it, almost at once; for, living in luxurious ease, they have become contemptible'. Whereas Pisistratus was a model of moderation, his sons became more violent as their tyranny became more unstable. All tyrannies, however, engage in violence, frequently when there is no pressing need. After the Thirty Tyrants of Athens had consolidated their rule by pretending to be moderate, they 'put to death those who were outstanding for their wealth, birth or reputation, cunningly removing those whom they had cause to fear and whose property they wanted to plunder. Within a short space of time they had killed no fewer than fifteen hundred.' This is an extraordinary number of people for a city-state numbering perhaps 250,000, and it belies Aristotle's suggestion that the forceful and violent means of tyrants are merely 'Persian and barbaric arts'.⁵⁸

If tyrants must wield violence against their subjects, they must make sure that they have a monopoly on the means of violence, which first of all means that they must 'deprive [their subjects] of their arms'. Pisistratus began one of his reigns of tyranny by tricking the people into giving up their arms; after he pretended that they all must go to the Acropolis to hear him speak, the citizens appropriately left their weapons outside, whereupon followers of Pisistratus simply collected them.⁵⁹ While it is fine to have a monopoly of arms, a tyrant must also have men willing to use them, and thus one of the first steps of any tyrant lies in establishing a bodyguard or paramilitary force. Pisistratus convinced the Athenians that, because he was in danger, he needed a bodyguard, and then he promptly 'took the men called club-bearers, and with their aid rose against the people and seized the Acropolis'. In distinguishing between a king and a tyrant, Aristotle noted that 'kings rule according to law over voluntary subjects, but tyrants over involuntary; and the one are guarded by their fellow-citizens, the others are guarded against them', and he mentioned later that 'the guards of a king are citizens, but of a tyrant mercenaries'.⁶⁰ As general advice to all regimes, Aristotle suggested that rulers 'invent terrors' and 'bring distant dangers near' so that 'citizens may be on their guard, and, like sentinels in a nightwatch, never relax their attention'. In advice directed more specifically at tyrants, he observed that 'the tyrant is also fond of making war in order that his subjects may have something to do and be always in want of a leader'.⁶¹ Despite the fact that he did not explain exactly how a tyrant organizes an army, or even a personal bodyguard, all of Aristotle's advice has a sadly familiar ring to it well into the twentieth century, although we, unlike Aristotle, have gained insight

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1312b21–251; Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, Chs. 19 and 35; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1313b10.

⁵⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1311a11–12; Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, Ch. 15.

⁶⁰ Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, Ch. 14; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1285a26–28; 1311a6–7. Aristotle also noted that tyrants like to keep company with foreigners. *Ibid.*, 1314a9–11.

⁶¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1308a28–31; 131b28–30.

from Machiavelli's warnings about the dangers of relying on mercenaries and foreigners to oppress citizens.

Aristotle regarded violence as inevitably necessary for a tyrant, but also as a sign of instability, and he certainly regarded deception as a more effective means to make a tyranny lasting. Aristotle seemed genuinely fond of relating stories involving deception. Not only did Pisistratus trick the citizens of Athens into giving up their weapons but, in order to convince them that he needed a bodyguard, he wounded himself! Another tyrant, faced with a demand from Persia for tribute, assembled his subjects and asked them for money; having planted certain subjects in the crowd who promised to pay generously, he tricked the wealthiest into paying even more.⁶² On more general and important matters, Aristotle's persistent advice to tyrants was that they maintain the appearance of constitutionality even as they rule arbitrarily, that they maintain the appearance of generosity even as they tax voraciously, and so on; the sort of advice we almost automatically associate with Machiavelli. The Thirty Tyrants, to take another case, at first 'pretended that their aim was the traditional constitution', and even when they moved with violence against the population, they first introduced and passed new laws, all to sustain the appearance of legality. Just as tyrants must make bows towards legality, they must use religion while they appear religious. Pisistratus once even pretended that Athena was reinstating him, he found a 'tall and impressive' Thracian woman, rode into the city with the woman at his side, and 'the people in the city worshipped and received him with awe'.⁶³ If this story sounds to us farfetched and difficult to believe, it illustrates Aristotle's suggestion that tyrants must make use of religion. A tyrant 'should appear to be particularly earnest in the service of the gods; for if men think that a ruler is religious and has a reverence for the gods, . . . they are less disposed to conspire against him, because they believe him to have the very gods fighting on his side'. In terms of keeping up appearances, flatterers and rhetoricians are useful to the tyrant to the extent that the former convince the tyrant that he is ruling well, while the latter convince the populace.⁶⁴

Aristotle's ultimate advice to the tyrant was to maintain his power by appearing to rule like a king. 'But though power must be retained as the

⁶² Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, Chs. 14–15; Aristotle, *Economics*, trans. E.S. Forster and G.C. Armstrong, 1348a4–11; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1292b17–21. There is some doubt as to whether Aristotle wrote the treatise *Economics*, but I don't think this affects my overall argument.

⁶³ Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, Chs. 35–7, 14; Dionysius of Syracuse fooled the people by claiming Demeter appeared before him, requesting that all women bring to the temple their jewellery, which of course Dionysius promptly collected himself. Aristotle, *Economics*, 1349a14–24.

⁶⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1314b38–1315a4; 1292a22; 1305a7–16.

foundation, in all else the tyrant should act or appear to act in the character of a king.⁶⁵ Although it is difficult to know whether Aristotle was merely giving the time-honoured, and usually fruitless, advice to a tyrant that his or her regime will be lasting if he or she becomes more just and moderate, or whether Aristotle was really counselling, as it seems, that appearing to rule like a king is simply the final and most effective deception, in either case he was suggesting that both some moderation and also the appearance of even more moderation were in the best interests of the tyrant. Such advice seems to fall into clear categories. First, tyrants should 'appear, not harsh, but dignified', and should wish that their subjects looked upon them not with fear but with reverence. Aristotle acknowledged that this might entail deception when he observed that 'at least [the tyrant] should maintain the character of a great soldier, and produce the impression that he is one'.⁶⁶ Second, tyrants should be moderate in their desires, 'or at any rate should not parade his vices to the world', and should not offend the modesty of modest women or the honour of honourable men. Third, as we saw above, they should appear religious, even if they are not. Fourth, a tyrant 'should pretend concern for the public revenues', use tax money only for public purposes, not waste money on extravagance or presents for favourites, keep a good account of revenues and expenditures, and 'adorn and improve his city, as though he were not a tyrant, but the guardian of the state'. In general, the tyrant should 'seem to be a steward of the public' and should 'make himself the guardian and treasurer of [tax monies], as if they belonged, not to him, but to the public'.⁶⁷ Fifth, tyrants should distribute honours themselves but make lesser officials incur hatred for inflicting punishments, make certain to 'honor men of merit', make these people believe that no free government would give them as much distinction, raise up to distinction not one person who might offer the tyrant opposition but 'two or more' so that they watch each other, and avoid not only elevating to positions of power individuals of 'bold spirit' but also avoid depriving a person of power suddenly rather than gradually.⁶⁸ Finally, tyrants should appear to rule to the advantage of both rich and poor, make each class think its security depends upon the tyrant, and ally themselves with the strongest of the two classes, which will obviate the necessity of disarming the citizens.⁶⁹ Aristotle ended this section with a general summary of his advice to tyrants who have an enlightened sense of their own self-interest.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1314a38–40.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1314b19–24; 1314b24–36; 1315a14–20.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1314b1; 1314b14–15; 1314b1–5; 1314b5–6; 1314b37–38; 1314b6–7; 1314b16–19.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1315a5–7; 1315a4–5; 1315a8–10; 1315a10–14.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1315a31–40.

He ought to show himself to his subjects in the light, not of a tyrant, but of a steward and a king. He should not appropriate what is theirs, but should be their guardian; he should be moderate, not extravagant in his way of life; he should win the notables by companionship, and the multitude by flattery. For then his rule will of necessity be nobler and happier, because he will rule over better men whose spirits are not crushed, and who do not hate and fear him. His power too will be more lasting. His disposition will be virtuous, or at least half virtuous; and he will not be wicked, but half wicked only.⁷⁰

Because it is difficult to believe that any tyrant who followed this advice would remain a tyrant, it is possible that Aristotle himself sought to entice or to deceive a tyrant into becoming a king. His hope that tyrants would prudently become kings might explain why Aristotle gives such fine advice for the promulgation of evil. It is also possible that he had Pisistratus in mind, whom Aristotle regarded as 'humane' and 'mild' and, once in power, 'administered the city's affairs moderately, and more like a citizen than like a tyrant'.⁷¹ In many details, Aristotle's description of Pisistratus resembles his advice to the tyrant who would appear to rule as a king.

Aristotle did not pretend that his political science could be as empirically accurate and verifiable as mathematics, astronomy or physics. We can see that either his science of tyranny resembles the prudence or common sense gathered by a brilliant person with long experience in the political world, or perhaps, as we noted earlier, it resembles that blend of art and science that we call medicine. If it resembles the latter, we are not at all sure, of course, that we want the physician to cure the tyrannical patient. At any rate, with his political science, Aristotle moved some distance away from Platonic moralizing and towards an objective analysis of this phenomenon of tyranny.

Aristotle's Contribution to Theories of Tyranny

It is not exaggerating to say that Aristotle laid the groundwork for all subsequent theories of tyranny. But problems and questions remain. To begin with, we encounter the problem of defining tyranny. Although it seemed rather simple for Aristotle to say that a tyrant is one who rules in his or her own interest, it turned out to be very complicated, because to discover what Aristotle regarded as the proper 'interests' of human beings, we had to swim up and down the stream of Aristotle's entire philosophy. Ultimately, Aristotle defined a tyranny as the political order that makes human beings the least healthy or, to put it another way, the political order that most denies human beings their

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1315a40–1315b10.

⁷¹ Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, Ch. 16.

highest psychic and biological needs. Are we satisfied that Aristotle's investigations have established these needs? Can modern science and social science perhaps do a better job?⁷² If we could rank human needs as Maslow tried to do, then we could categorize the severity of tyrannies by the kinds of needs they deny, but we leave Aristotle feeling we are a long way from such an intriguing goal.

While we feel very much at home when Aristotle talks of the political and economic foundations of tyranny, his definition of tyranny sounds strange to our modern ears, because we want to speak of tyrannies as denying natural rights, violating agreements or contracts, and suspending democratic institutions. We tend to define tyranny implicitly as a country that denies basic 'democratic rights and freedoms'. But Aristotle would have tremendous difficulty in talking about such democratic rights and freedoms. He would not see freedom as the companion to democracy, and he certainly would not see democracy as the opposite of tyranny. For Aristotle, the opposite of tyranny is not a political order that protects rights and allows voting, but rather a political order that creates virtue and excellence in individuals. Whereas we want to talk about protecting rights, Aristotle focuses on engendering excellence in individuals. It is immediately apparent how far from us is Greek political discourse, and how much we learn that is new and provocatively puzzling by seeing tyranny through Aristotle's eyes.

A second problem emerges. Why did Aristotle define and confine tyranny to rule by one person? As an admirer of Pisistratus, he may have assumed such a definition almost unthinkingly, again accepting common Greek political discourse as his starting point. But would a ruthless oligarchy not rule tyrannically? Would such an oligarchy not use all the means of depoliticizing a population that a tyranny does — the violence of spies and paramilitary forces, deception, isolating individuals by banning groups, and so forth? Aristotle here betrays his own very sophisticated class analysis, falling back on the notion that for power to be tyrannical it must be in the hands of one person. A variety of thinkers in the modern world will seek to escape the confines of this definition and look at a variety of tyrannies — class based tyrannies, military juntas, faceless bureaucracies, and so on.

Aristotle's analysis helps us to identify a third problem that all tyrannies face. Although his advice to a tyrant seems terrifyingly effective, it becomes apparent, as we read it, that it is not easy to establish and maintain a lasting tyranny, and it is no wonder that Aristotle said 'no forms of government are so shortlived

⁷² To see the difficulty in establishing objectively some set of human needs, see the excellent overview discussion by Patricia Springborg, *The Problem of Human Needs and the Critique of Civilisation* (London, 1981). Also, Garret Thompson, *Needs* (London, 1987).

as oligarchy and tyranny'.⁷³ Seemingly countless problems surface. If tyrants attempt to pacify their populations with prosperity, will prosperity not lead to the leisure necessary for political activity? If tyrants disarm their subjects, how will they control both their private paramilitary forces and the general army? How reliable are mercenaries? Aristotle admitted that insults to honourable men are dangerous, because such people might be led by passion or anger to attempt an assassination, with no concern for their own survival,⁷⁴ but how can any tyrant avoid insulting honourable men? How does a tyrant with arbitrary power keep up appearances of, say, legality? How does a tyrant make use of religious authorities without yielding to them significant power? Finally, how can a tyrant please the rich, the middle classes and the poor all at once? If the tyrant pleases the poor, will the rich not threaten the tyranny? If the tyrant pleases the rich and middle classes, will their newly found economic power not endanger the tyrant's political power? How long can a tyrant stave off rebellion by the oppressed poor? While it seems, to the outside observer, as if the tyrant's life is an easy one, Aristotle began to make a good case that the tyrant's life is a juggling act in which at least one of the balls in the air must finally fall.

All of these questions should obscure neither the brilliance of Aristotle's analysis nor the often striking familiarity this ancient analysis brings to any modern reader. Without trying to summarize an entire article, I see several major characteristics of tyranny that certainly apply to our own century. First, Aristotle, of all ancient thinkers, most dramatically drew the distinction between the public, political realm and the private, economic sphere, between the *polis* and the household. One cannot be a citizen and one cannot organize opposition if one is confined to and isolated in the private sphere, and thus tyrants try to transform citizens into subjects by eliminating public and political life. (In other words, tyranny reduces male citizens to the status of women and servants, and in Aristotle's opinion, despotic rule was appropriate for the latter.)

Second, tyrannies fill leisure time with amusements, so people will not focus on political matters. Third, tyrannies eliminate practical questions, that is, speculative deliberation about what constitutes the good life, until people cannot even raise questions about alternatives to the status quo. Fourth, tyrannies monopolize the means of violence and are willing to use this violence to serve their purposes. Finally, tyrannies maintain appearances, for example of legality or of being religious, even when they betray both. One reads Aristotle's analysis sadly, for it is easy to conclude that, since the tyrannies he analysed so carefully still haunt us in one form or another today, then a tyranny is a monstrous species of rule that will perhaps never become extinct. To any

⁷³ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1315b12.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1315a25–31.

modern reader with only passing acquaintance of Hitler's Germany, one passage must stand out as horrifyingly prophetic and appropriate to our own age. An evil man might be safer and wiser, suggested Aristotle, if he committed 'crimes so great and terrible that no man living could be suspected of them: here too no precautions are taken. For all men guard against ordinary offences, just as they guard against ordinary diseases; but no one takes precautions against an offence that nobody has ever yet committed.'⁷⁵

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⁷⁵ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1372a25–29.