

# Aristotle's Manner of Writing and the Responsible Pursuit of Political Philosophy

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“Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action as well as choice, is held to aim at some good. Hence people have nobly declared that the good is that at which all things aim.”

—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* begins with this broad statement of a principle encompassing human action. Among other activities, this statement describes the inquiry, political philosophy, that Aristotle himself is engaged in when writing such works as the *Ethics*. What Aristotle fails to state here is the possibility that, in certain arts, inquiries, actions, and choices, one good may be sought at the expense of another. This conflict is made explicit in a less prominent place in the *Politics*, where Aristotle writes, “In general, all seek not the traditional but the good.”<sup>2</sup> This statement appears as part of his rejection of a proposal of Hippodamus, the first political philosopher, meant to encourage innovation in political affairs. Philosophy, when it is concerned with political matters, is guided by a concern for the good—a concern that may conflict with what is traditionally held to be true or preferable. But according to Aristotle, Hippodamus's institutionalization of innovation “is not safe, though it sounds appealing” (1268b25). Because politics is never perfect, appealing proposals will always be forthcoming. If the proposals of political philosophy were either always safe or always unappealing, or both, it would be an innocuous inquiry or activity. Aristotle's criticism of Hippodamus points to the specific problem that is central to political

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1 Aristotle, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins, 1094a1.

2 Aristotle, *The Politics*, translated by Carnes Lord, 1269a1 (hereafter cited in text).

philosophy: the potential for conflict between the good that it seeks and the traditions underpinning political associations.

Political philosophy has been described as the branch of philosophy that is “the attempt to replace opinion about the nature of political things by knowledge of the nature of political things.”<sup>3</sup> Strauss writes:

But opinion is the element of society; philosophy ... is therefore the attempt to dissolve the element in which society breathes, and thus it endangers society. Hence philosophy ... must remain the preserve of a small minority, and philosophers ... must respect the opinions on which society rests.<sup>4</sup>

Political philosophy is problematic, then, because it will be dangerous to society whenever it seeks to replace opinions, embodied in tradition, with knowledge that contradicts these opinions. Writings, such as Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*, constitute the public dissemination of a political philosopher's inquiries.<sup>5</sup> A responsible political philosopher, when he writes, must write in full awareness of this problem.

Is Aristotle a responsible political philosopher? Both the *Ethics* and *Politics* “appear to be addressed less to philosophers or students of philosophy than to educated and leisured men who are actual or potential wielders of political power,”<sup>6</sup> that is, those best positioned to act upon the sometimes unsafe proposals of political philosophy. Aristotle wrote the *Ethics* and the *Politics* as a “two-part ‘philosophy of human affairs’ ” that “form an extended whole.”<sup>7</sup> Aristotle's awareness of the potentially threatening or problematic nature of political philosophy is evident from his critique of Hippodamus. Yet by opening his ethical-political teaching with the opinion that all human activities “aim at some good,” Aristotle indicates his intention to improve politics despite the risks involved. Indeed, in his critique of Hippodamus, Aristotle reformulates this principle to show how politically threatening the inquiry of political philosophy can be. That Aristotle puts this reformulation—which is fundamental to the *Politics*—in a somewhat apologetic place indicates that he is taking

3 Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, 11–12.

4 *Ibid.*, 221.

5 For a discussion of the various audiences of Aristotle's ethical-political works, and the problems inherent in writing for difference audiences, see Aristide Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle's Ethics*, 9–20.

6 Lord, “Introduction,” 10. See also Tessitore, 15–20.

7 Bartlett and Collins, x; see *Ethics* 1181b15. See also *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Joe Sachs, 200n304.

responsibility for the risks peculiar to the political part of his “philosophy of human affairs.”

The precise manner in which Aristotle is a responsible political philosopher in the structure and rhetorical method of the *Politics* as a whole can be mapped out by following the leads provided in his discussion of Hippodamus in Book II. This discussion is more than a critique of a particular political philosopher; it serves to highlight the problem of political philosophy as such. In the course of his critique of Hippodamus, Aristotle alludes to the noble lie of Plato’s *Republic*, and he thereby suggests a connection to his confrontation with Socrates in Book V. Aristotle discusses Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws* extensively and prominently in Book II, but in Book V he returns to quarrel with Socrates about a new and more specific topic: regime-change. The *Republic*’s account of regime-change is itself a noble lie to the reader—one piece of Plato’s own strategy to practice political philosophy responsibly. Aristotle alludes to Socrates’s account of regime-change in order to contrast his own approach with Plato’s. In Book I, Aristotle fully exhibits his own distinctive approach. Book I’s “beautiful” and poetic inquiry provides a substitute for a pious deference to the traditional as the good, while its politically moderate content counters the deeper tendencies of the work as a whole toward Hippodamian innovation. Aristotle uses a balance of poetry and moderation to proceed responsibly in the activity of political philosophy and reform.

### I. HIPPODAMUS AS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHER

In Book II of the *Politics*, Aristotle critiques the regimes esteemed by common opinion, both those existing “in some of the cities that are said to be well managed” and those “spoken about by certain persons that are held to be in a fine condition” (1260a30). These are three theoretical regimes or political proposals made by philosophers, and the three actual regimes of Sparta, Crete, and Carthage. By proceeding in this manner, Aristotle counters both the hubris of the philosophers’ proposals and the complacent piety toward those regimes traditionally held to be the best. Aristotle’s moderate course, lying between philosophic hubris and complacency toward tradition, becomes evident near the center of these discussions in his treatment of the third philosopher: Hippodamus of Miletus.

Hippodamus receives far less attention and far less space than the first philosopher, Plato’s Socrates. But though Socrates may be a celebrity, Aristotle thinks of Hippodamus as the primary or the generic, that is,

the first and the foremost, political philosopher. This is not to suggest that Hippodamus is a superior political philosopher to Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle himself; rather, both his primacy in time and his distinctive qualities mark him out as the political philosopher whom it is important that Aristotle confront. That Hippodamus "wished to be learned with regard to nature as a whole" shows that he is a philosopher; in this wish, he resembles the young Socrates who once studied nature. His appearance and lifestyle (which, curiously, Aristotle goes out of his way to note and even to lampoon) is reminiscent of the peculiar status of the philosopher among the citizens, and perhaps even of the famed Socrates.<sup>8</sup> But what is most striking of all is that Hippodamus "was the first of those not engaged in politics to undertake to give an account of the best regime" (1267b27). Hippodamus's disengagement from politics likens him to Socrates and recalls Aristotle's own distinction between the political life and the philosophic life as the noble alternatives between which one must choose (1324a15).

Hippodamus is the first philosopher to concern himself with political matters, and thus the first political philosopher.<sup>9</sup> Hippodamus's error, more than the trial and death of Socrates, shows most clearly the problematic nature of political philosophy. Aristotle's extensive and prominent critique in Book II of Plato's Socrates does not treat the *Republic* and the *Laws* carefully as written works but only in so far as their discrete parts, taken out of context, are well-esteemed.<sup>10</sup> Aristotle might seem ahead of his time for an academic in his propensity to ignore the dramatic and dialogic nature of Plato's writings, but in fact he is not attempting to offer a serious interpretation of the dialogues. Rather, Aristotle confronts Plato's dialogues as they might be misread or commonly "held": as *treatises* expounding upon the best regime. Aristotle's confrontation with Hippodamus of Miletus as the generic political philosopher is far more precise.

8 For Hippodamus's inferiority to Socrates, see Mary P. Nichols, *Socrates and the Political Community*, 165–168. The connection between the two philosophers has been made, with reservations, by Peter Simpson, *A Philosophical Commentary on the Politics of Aristotle*, 104–105. See also Harry Jaffa, "Aristotle," 86. For a treatment of Aristotle's ridicule of Hippodamus and its relation to modern political science, see John Peterson, "Aristotle's Ridicule of Political Innovation." For a sympathetic analysis of Hippodamus as a political thinker, see John C. Hogan, "Hippodamus on the Best Form of Government and Law," 763, 766–773.

9 Contra Strauss, *The City and Man*, 19; see also Peterson, "Aristotle's Ridicule of Political Innovation," 123–124. Yet Strauss reads Hippodamus's appearance as indicating that "political philosophy is more questionable than philosophy as such" (18).

10 "Socrates does not make his reservations against the city in speech explicit, and the *Republic's* political proposals are more accessible to readers than its qualifications of them through Socrates' deeds" (Nichols, *Socrates and the Political Community*, 168).

Aristotle's particular critique of Hippodamus culminates in a discussion prompted by the latter's effort to encourage innovation in the laws of the city by honoring "those who discover something useful to the city" (1268a7). Hippodamus's proposal is representative of political philosophy as such, and thus resembles Aristotle's own activity as the author of works such as the *Politics*. Just as Aristotle is in Book II investigating the regimes that are held to be good so that he might then "study the sort of political partnership that is superior to all for those capable of living as far as possible in the manner one would pray for" (1260a25), Hippodamus sought to improve the laws and so create a better city. Hippodamus's error arises from a failure to understand the nature of the law and the nature of human behavior. Aristotle argues that law derives its power from habit; the city "will not be benefited as much from changing [bad laws] as it will be harmed through being habituated to disobey the rulers" (1269a14–18). Hippodamus's failure to understand the natures of law and of the human was not for lack of trying, for he wished to be learned with regard to nature as a whole—no less, is it for us to say, than did Aristotle, Plato, or Socrates. The error in Hippodamus's thought is evident in an "argument from the example of the arts" (1269a19) that Aristotle shows to be fallacious. Nevertheless, it is reminiscent of the kind of arguments made by Plato's Socrates and Aristotle himself. Insofar as Hippodamus of Miletus is the generic political philosopher, his activity and his error hang over the heads of even his illustrious Athenian successors.<sup>11</sup>

Hippodamus's proposal to honor those who propose innovation in the laws is dangerous insofar as it is political philosophy because "it is not safe, though it sounds appealing" (1268b25). Its effect would be to undermine obedience to the law; but it intends the best and is appealing because it is a device for improving the city. Aristotle indicates the full danger of Hippodamus's proposal by reformulating the general principle that he reported at the beginning of the *Ethics*:

In general, all seek not the traditional but the good. The first [human beings], whether they were earthborn or preserved from a cataclysm,

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<sup>11</sup> Aristotle's discussion of Hippodamus, especially in light of his characterization of Hippodamus as "extraordinary," should be compared with *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.7–8, especially his allusion to the imprudence of the pre-Socratic philosophers (1141b3–10) and his use of Euripides' *Philoctetes* to illustrate the danger of ambition (1142a1–11), and 6.10–11, where he suggests the importance of *sunesis*, standing between the *sophia* of the pre-Socratic natural philosophers and the *phronēsis* of the politicians, for the activity of the political philosopher.

are likely to have been similar to average or even simpleminded persons [today], as indeed is said of the earthborn, so it would be odd to abide by the opinions they hold (1269a1).

The first sentence is the explicit statement of the problematic principle, including now the stark terms of philosophic activity: the questioning of the traditional because it is not necessarily the good. Aristotle makes this statement after having been compelled to enter into "a different investigation," namely, "whether it is harmful or advantageous for cities to change traditional laws, if some other one should be better" (1268b27), and before he has reached its condemnatory conclusion. But though Aristotle will imply that the traditional *is good for the city*, that is, for humans insofar as they are political animals, he at no time either retracts or qualifies the statement that the traditional is not the good for man *per se*. To do so would be to doom Aristotle's own endeavor and his activity in writing the *Politics* and the *Ethics*: he would thereby abandon his quest for truth in favor of the comfortably traditional. Aristotle must find a way to preserve political philosophy while still pursuing it responsibly.

The second sentence in the above quotation indicates the way in which he does so. The myth of the cataclysm may allude to a number of Platonic dialogues.<sup>12</sup> The reference to "the earthborn" recalls in particular the discussion of the noble lie in the *Republic*, the single work of any author that receives the most attention in the *Politics*. The lie that the *Republic's* interlocutors discuss is that all the citizens were born out of the earth and that, while they were under the earth, the god sprinkled into their souls various metals determining their caste within the city.<sup>13</sup> To teach the citizens of the divine and chthonic nature of the city's social order is, implicitly, to teach that the traditional is the good. We turn now to this connection to the *Republic*, noting first the certainty of the reasoning in Aristotle's statement: that, *if* the first human beings were of lesser intelligence than us, "as indeed is said," *undoubtedly* "it would be odd to abide by the opinions they hold." The certainty of this reasoning, which Aristotle offers in his own name, makes for a sharp contrast with the opinion Aristotle reports at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that "the good is that at which all things aim."

## II. ARISTOTLE'S SOCRATES

The phrase "noble lie" originates in the *Republic*; there it is referred to as

12 Lord suggests the *Statesman*, *Menexenus*, and *Laws*, 251n57.

13 Plato, *Republic*, 414b–415c.

“one of those lies that come into being in case of need” and as a “noble lie to persuade, in the best case, even the rulers, but if not them, the rest of the city.”<sup>14</sup> Socrates and his interlocutors discuss their lie openly among each other and agree that it is a needful measure for their “city in speech”; the reader of Plato’s *Republic* witnesses their discussion and is himself not lied to in it. Aristotle does not discuss the noble lie in the *Politics*, spending his time in Book II critiquing Socrates on a number of specific errors he seems to have made in arranging the best regime. But in Book V of the *Politics*, Aristotle again confronts Socrates, here on the subject of regime change. This is the more substantial of the two confrontations with the *Republic*’s Socrates that occur after the formal critique in Book II.<sup>15</sup> By criticizing the principle that stands behind the Socratic account of regime change, Aristotle calls attention to his own way of pursuing political philosophy responsibly.

Having discussed the varieties of regimes in Book IV of the *Politics*, Aristotle in Book V discusses how regime-change occurs. After giving his own extensive description of the phenomenon, Aristotle disagrees with Socrates’s account of regime-change in the final chapter of Book V. The differences between Aristotle’s account, on the one hand, and Socrates’s discussion in the *Republic* as Aristotle relates it to his own readers, on the other, are stark. Aristotle has described in great detail, with many examples, the ways regimes change, noting that each regime can change into a variety of other regimes as the result of a number of different factors. Factional conflict comes about through a whole host of reasons, arising “not over small things but from small things,” and indeed regime-change can occur without factional conflict at all (1302b1, 1303b17, 1303a14). Aristotle recognizes a general historical trend from kingship to democracy, attributing it to exigencies such as the size of population (1286b7–21). Socrates’s account of regime-change in the *Republic* as reported by Aristotle, by contrast, is strict and by necessity. The best regime occurs first, and regime-change occurs in a one-way regression to the worst, with each new regime more inferior than the last. In sum, “according to [Socrates] it should be in the direction of the first and best, for in this way there would be a continuous cycle” (1316a29). For Aristotle,

14 *Republic*, 414c.

15 Book II contains the first of three confrontations with the *Republic*’s Socrates. Aristotle’s other confrontation—by which I mean the mention, by name, of the *Republic* and of Socrates—after Book II occurs in Book IV, Chapter 4, in which Aristotle contends that what Socrates says concerning the parts of the city “though sophisticated, is not adequate” (1291a11–32). It is shorter than the confrontation regarding regime-change in Book V and seems of lesser interest to Aristotle, given the space he dedicates to the discussion of the preservation and destruction of regimes in the *Politics*.

regime-change is not ordained by the hierarchy of regimes, while for Socrates the cycle of regimes corresponds to their fineness.

It is odd that Aristotle confronts Socrates after, rather than before, giving his own account of regime change. Aristotle's normal procedure—which he follows in Book II—is to review extant opinions before composing his own argument. Aristotle's discussion of the Socratic account stands prominently at the end of Book V, after he has given his own exhaustive treatment of the preservation and destruction of regimes, and before he turns to the distinct subjects of Book VI. There may be some difficulties with the text,<sup>16</sup> but the length and the placement of the confrontation suggest that Aristotle meant for this passage to stand out.

As in his initial critique of the *Republic*, Aristotle seems to do Plato an injustice through a somewhat violent reading of his dialogue. Here, Aristotle ignores the individual or psychological component of Socrates's description that has been entangled with the political throughout the *Republic* due to the city-soul analogy. Aristotle criticizes Socrates's account as if Socrates meant to establish general principles for the degeneration of real cities in historical time—a distortion of the *Republic* that a careful reader would only make intentionally.<sup>17</sup> Yet the fact that Socrates's account of regime-change is accepted with enthusiasm and without question by Glaucon and Adeimantus makes that account closer to a principle found in a political treatise than to a statement caught in the context and complexity of dramatic dialogue.<sup>18</sup> The unanimity of the dialogue at this moment prevents the guiding principle of Socrates's account of regime-change from being discussed; and since this principle goes unstated, it goes unchallenged. This principle is that the ancient or, what is the same, the traditional is the good: in the beginning was the best regime, and there can be no movement from the best that is not a degeneration. The account of regime-change in the *Republic* stands, as it comes to the reader of the *Republic*, with this principle embedded within it. But if the traditional is *not* the good, then, in presenting Socrates's account of regime-change, Plato himself has told a noble lie, this one to his reader: that the traditional

16 See Lord, 264n126.

17 This is not to say that Aristotle's characterization is an utter distortion of Plato's Socrates. Rather, Aristotle confronts the principle that is in fact embedded in the discussion of the *Republic*. As one commentator has described it, Socrates's account of regime-change "diverges from common sense" in that the example of Plato's *Republic* itself suggests that the best regime is "not first but necessarily last in time," for it is "the result of a great and recent progress in understanding, the discovery of philosophy" (Allan Bloom, "Interpretive Essay," 416).

18 Plato, *Republic*, 545c ff. See Bloom, 414–417, for a discussion of the dramatic purpose of this account.

is the good.<sup>19</sup>

Aristotle does not here draw the implications of his departure from Plato to the surface. But he points to this departure by placing his confrontation with Socrates prominently at the end of Book V, and through his earlier allusion to the “earthborn” in connection with the general principle that “all seek not the traditional but the good” in Book II. In this passage, which takes Plato’s *Republic* more seriously on its own terms than any other in the *Politics*, Aristotle indicates that he is aware of the noble lie Plato tells his readers by means of Socrates’s account of regime-change. In light of the attention Aristotle pays to the problem of political philosophy in his discussion of Hippodamus, it seems that Aristotle is particularly aware of this lie as one device a political philosopher may use to moderate his inquiry’s necessary risks. By conveying to the reader that the traditional is the good while pursuing the good in spite of the traditional, Plato inspires reverence for the laws while simultaneously engaging in the questioning and questionable activity of philosophy. The good is more appealing than the traditional; indeed, Aristotle chooses to begin his ethical–political teaching by reporting the opinion that “the good is that at which all things aim,” and confirms this point in his criticism of Hippodamus, asserting in his own voice that “all seek not the traditional but the good.” Does Aristotle adopt Plato’s solution for pursuing political philosophy responsibly, or does he find another?

### III. ARISTOTLE’S POETIC AND MODERATE PROEM: BOOK I OF THE *POLITICS*

19 This lie depends upon the ambiguity of the city–soul analogy and therefore upon a potential (but by no means unlikely) misreading of the *Republic*. The *Republic*, because it discusses a radical alternative to real politics, certainly comes off as a revolutionary work, especially when compared to Aristotle’s *Politics* (see, for example, Stanley Rosen, *Plato’s Republic: A Study*, 6). It is only at the end of Book 9 that Glaucon is finally disabused of the notion that the city in speech might become a city on earth, and is lead to believe that the *noetic* man concerns himself only with the “city within himself” based upon the pattern (*paradeigma*) that he perceives in heaven (592a–b; see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6.1096b35–1097a6). This apolitical or antipolitical characterization of the *noetic* man is contradicted by the activity of Socrates (in entering into conversation and in retelling the conversation of the *Republic* in Athens the following day). Yet this characterization of the *noetic* man harmonizes with the principle of Socrates’s account of regime-change—that the traditional is the good—which is itself a universalization of one component of the noble lie for the city in speech. As universalized, it applies to all humans, and as such, it speaks to all its readers as individuals, regardless of their nationality or citizenship. Thus, it is both conservative and cosmopolitan; it instills a general reverence by suggesting that history is regressive, yet it does not bind an individual to his own particular city or regime. In this way, it, and the teaching that the *noetic* man is not concerned with the politics of “his fatherland,” might be representative of the ancient philosophical view, at least as regarded by Machiavelli (see *Discourses on Livy* I.Pref.2, II.Pref.2, III.1.1; *Florentine Histories* V.1). Aristotle’s own approach might be a small step toward the modern reconception of history and the philosopher.

That all seek the good is a discovery of philosophy and is the root of Aristotle's inquiry into the ethical life. It is also the source of the danger posed by philosophy when it becomes political. Aristotle's de-emphasis of this principle in the *Politics*, despite its primacy in the prefatory *Ethics*, is strongly indicated by the character of the opening book of the *Politics*. Aristotle defers his treatment of particular philosophers—and his confrontation with Hippodamus, in which he shows the great appeal of innovation—to Book II, and uses Book I to balance the appeal of innovation that arises out of political philosophy. In fact, Book I of the *Politics* is Aristotle's version of Plato's noble lie, that the traditional is the good. This balance is accomplished by the poetic tone and politically moderate content of Book I.<sup>20</sup>

Aristotle sets the tone of Book I by stating that "it is by looking at how things develop naturally from the beginning that one may best study them" (1252a25). "Best" translates *kallist'*, the superlative of *to kalon*. This may be better translated as "most beautifully," for it seems to mark Aristotle's departure from his "normal sort of inquiry" (1252a16), which he will only return to in Book II. For though this departure into a "beautiful" sort of study may at first glance seem to be limited to the second chapter,<sup>21</sup> Aristotle sustains a poetic mode throughout Book I, as is visible even from the sources he cites. The first authorities quoted are poets—Euripides and Hesiod (1252b7, 11)—and when Aristotle cites Solon, it is Solon as a poet rather than as a statesman or lawgiver (1256b30). Only in the final chapter, a transition to Book II, does Aristotle name Socrates.<sup>22</sup> Other references to philosophers and politicians in Book I have the character of instructive fables: a fable of the first philosopher Thales and the tyrant Dionysus

20 As Nichols writes, "At the end of the *Ethics*, ... [Aristotle] omits all reference to Book I [of the *Politics*]: 'First we will attempt to review whatever worthwhile our predecessors have said [on the subject]' (1181b15–17). The contents of Book II are an obvious starting point for inquiry" (*Citizens and Statesmen*, 191n48). Unlike the *Metaphysics*, *Physics*, and *De Anima*, "[t]he *Politics* ... begins with the thoughts of others only after treating the subpolitical associations originating in necessity and in which thought plays a minimal role. Aristotle's new beginning originates in choice" (35). I suggest that Aristotle departs from his scientific works not only in the subjects he treats in Book I (the naturalness of the city and what Nichols calls "the origin of the city in the body," 19) but also in its tone and teaching. In the *Politics*, Aristotle takes care to establish reverence through poetic authority and to instill a political moderation before embarking upon a more critical and philosophic examination of political opinions and phenomena.

21 Aristotle explicitly returns to his "normal sort of inquiry" in Book I, Chapter 8 (1256a1), though his analysis from the beginning of Chapter 3 (1253b1) seems also to be of the normal sort; see Lord 257n3.

22 The theme of Chapter 13 is the question of virtue, which is the topic of Plato's *Meno*; Aristotle alludes to the *Meno* (Lord 259n33) and mentions Socrates to discard his view in favor of Gorgias's (1260a22–28).

(1259a5–36), and one of the ancient Egyptian king Amasis (1259b9). This preponderance of poetry in Book I stands in contrast to the later books, which chiefly call upon philosophic authorities and political data. Homer in particular, the poetic and indeed the *ancient* authority *par excellence* of Aristotle's Greece, appears in a series of substantial references that touch upon the vital themes in Book I. Aristotle quotes Homer with regards to the origins of the city and the latent conflict between the law of the household and that of the city (1252b22); to illustrate that man is by nature a political animal (1253a5); to explain the necessity of slaves and subordinates (1253b36); and to show that rule over children, unlike rule among equals, is kingly (1259b12). Aristotle's reliance upon poetic authority in Book I—particularly visible in the central role of Homer—reflects a fundamentally conservative or reverent rather than philosophic and critical attitude. Only after this solid basis of poetic heritage is established does Aristotle move into Book II, in which the identity of the traditional with the good is challenged.

Book I also balances the appeal of the philosopher's innovation by its politically moderate content, which anticipates Aristotle's subsequent discussion of regimes. Book III, in which Aristotle turns to the fundamental concern of his inquiry by addressing questions of citizenship and political justice, contains a dialogue of sorts between a democrat and an oligarch.<sup>23</sup> Aristotle speaks of six regimes, three "correct" and three "defective"; but democracy and oligarchy—rule of the impoverished many and rule of the wealthy few—are, in a sense, the two most important regimes in the *Politics* by virtue of their contemporary prevalence. Both are defective regimes (they seek the private advantage of those who rule, rather than the advantage of all), and each regime is improved by moderating it—the democracy ought to become more oligarchic, and the oligarchy ought to become more democratic (1309a15–30). While there is no proper discussion of regimes in Book I, and of regimes kingship is the only one explicitly mentioned, Aristotle anticipates his later focus on democracy and oligarchy by laying the ground for the claims of each and thus preparing the reader to prefer a moderated version of one or the other.

The democratic claim to rule stems from the assumption that equality in one respect (mere humanity) indicates equality in every respect, hence rule of the many; while that of the oligarch is that inequality

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23 See III.10–11 (1281a11–1282b13). Strauss writes that "the most fundamental discussion of the *Politics* includes what is almost a dialogue between the oligarch and the democrat," citing especially the invocations of Zeus at 1281a16 and b18. "It is equally characteristic however that that dialogue does not occur at the beginning of the *Politics*" (*The City and Man*, 21).

in one respect (typically wealth) indicates inequality in every respect, hence rule of the few (1280a10–25). Aristotle shows the natural root of both these claims in Book I; he moderates each claim by opposing it to the other, as well as by showing how each claim can arise out of either root. On the one hand, there is a fundamental equality among humans simply by virtue of their humanity, more specifically in that “man is by nature a political animal” because “man alone among the animals has *logos* [speech or reason]” (1253a3, 9). The authority of Homer seems to sanction this democratic claim: Aristotle quotes the venerable Nestor’s condemnation of the factious man, who shall be “out of all brotherhood, outlawed, homeless,”<sup>24</sup> and concludes, “one who is incapable of participating or who is in need of nothing through being self-sufficient is no part of a city, and so is either a beast or a god” (1253a29). This legitimizes the practice of ostracizing the preeminent from democracies (1284a20); but since ostracism is not specifically democratic and since Homer himself is a preeminent authority, the quote may aid the oligarch’s cause as well (1284a35).

The claim of the oligarch to rule rests upon a natural inequality among humans. In Aristotle’s discussion of the most extreme form of inequality conceivable, he seems either to argue that there is a natural form of slavery or to “intentionally fail to demonstrate” this proposition, in a fairly roundabout manner.<sup>25</sup> Aristotle’s demonstration of a natural hierarchy in the family, on the other hand, is clear; he writes, “by nature the king should be different [than the people he rules], but he should be of the same stock; and this is the case of the elder in relation to the younger and the one who generates to the child” (1259b15). Human inequality obviously exists among the different ages and generations; the oligarch might deduce from this that human inequality exists more broadly speaking. But, again, while this passage supports the oligarch’s claim to rule it also appeals to the democrat’s. For it immediately follows a reference to the story of Amasis, a commoner elevated to kingship in ancient Egypt who because of his origins sought “to establish difference in external appearance, forms of address, and prerogatives” while recognizing that he came to rule over his equals only by sheer happenstance (1259b7).<sup>26</sup> Political hierarchy is revealed to be primarily a matter of necessity rather than of nature; those who happen to rule ought not to forget their fundamental equality with

24 Homer, *Iliad*, 9.63.

25 For a persuasive argument for the latter see Nichols, “The Good Life, Slavery, and Acquisition.”

26 Aristotle’s reference is to a passage in Herodotus, *The History*, 2.173.

those who happen to be ruled.<sup>27</sup>

By alluding to the claims of the democrat and the oligarch, Aristotle lowers the expectations of the philosopher or the would-be philosopher, which might have been raised by a less-than-thorough reading of Plato's *Republic*. Because democracy and oligarchy are the most prevalent regimes of Aristotle's times, they are the implicit subject of Book I. In neither an oligarchy nor a democracy do the philosophers rule. It seems more likely that a philosopher would rule in an aristocracy or in a kingship; but the claims of the aristocracy to rule are largely absent from Book I, and the only kingships discussed are those of ancient times, in contrast to the philosopher-kingship entertained in the *Republic*. Furthermore, by balancing the claims of the oligarch and the democrat, Aristotle lowers the expectation of the potential and actual *politikoi* whom he is addressing. Those who would innovate in politics while seeking the good over the traditional are discouraged not only by the poetic authority of Book I, but also by the prevalence of and balance between the claims of the democrat and the oligarch that appear there. Aristotle's first book of the *Politics* thus benefits and defends both philosophy and the city. By moderating the ambitions of political philosophers, Aristotle protects his own activity, political philosophy, from its potential excesses. In counseling political moderation to whoever reads the *Politics*, and in invoking the traditional authority of poetry for his foundational arguments, Aristotle protects the city. Having read Book I, the philosopher will not impose philosophy upon the city in ignorance of the nature of political things, and the politician will not think that one party (democratic or oligarchic) has the exclusive natural right to rule. Aristotle tempers the theoretical hubris of the philosopher and the practical hubris of the politician, for the sake of both philosophy and politics.

## CONCLUSION

Aristotle wrote his *Politics* in the shadow of his teacher Plato's dialogues, and in the *Politics* Aristotle re-presents and modifies Plato's approach to politics. Nevertheless, a careful reading of the *Politics* indicates that Aristotle proposed Hippodamus, not Socrates or Plato, as peculiarly

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<sup>27</sup> From the beginning of the *Politics*, Aristotle is at pains to establish the notion of "political rule" as distinct from kingly rule, household management, and mastery over slaves (see 1.1.1252a7ff.). Political rule, in Aristotle's conception, seems to require a recognition of the limitation of politics. Although man's political nature is based in his possession of *logos*, political rule is rightly limited because of the fact that humans are not *only* animals with *logos*. The factual inequality of humans with respect to *logos*, which Aristotle does not discuss explicitly, is moderated by his discouragement of political innovation or the despotism of philosophy over politics.

representative of the problematic character of political philosophy. Philosophy must not neglect the habits and customs that are the basis for obedience to law, and the city must not simply replace the traditional with the good. Further, the figure of Hippodamus exemplifies the problem that every political philosopher faces as an author, and thus sheds light on Aristotle's relationship to Plato. Whatever a close reading of the *Republic* may reveal, the dialogue's apparent teaching is a radical condemnation of politics as it exists and a blueprint for a wholly new "best regime" ruled by philosopher-kings. In his discussion of regime-change, Aristotle calls the reader's attention to the principle of Socrates's unanimously-accepted account of regime-change: that the traditional is the good. In light of his criticism of Hippodamus, Aristotle's confrontation with Socrates raises the question of whether, and how, the political philosopher can write responsibly. When Aristotle came to write his "philosophy of human affairs," he found a manner of writing responsibly without abandoning the critical project of political philosophy.

Aristotle's manner of writing is an alternative to the noble lie of the cycle of regimes, and is an alternative especially fitting for a treatment of politics in a treatise rather than a dialogue. Aristotle's manner is twofold. First, he states the tension between philosophy and politics clearly and starkly. The traditional and the good are not simply one, though the traditional *is* good for the city (in opposition to Hippodamus's disregard for habit in matters of law). Aristotle clearly maintains that this disjunction between the limited goodness of the traditional and the principle that humans "seek not the traditional but the good" is and will be a perennial problem for politics. But he makes these claims in a prudent or cautious manner—somewhat obscurely rather than prominently (as he does in the less-political treatise, the *Ethics*). Simultaneously, Aristotle counsels caution with respect to change, a counsel he seems to have found insufficiently emphasized in Plato's works. Aristotle makes an explicit warning in his critique of Hippodamus, and himself displays the appropriate caution in Book I's prominent appeals to poetical authority and political moderation. The contrast between this use of poetry and the *Republic's* criticisms of poetry suggests that, in this respect too, Aristotle deliberately departed from the *Republic* when he wrote the *Politics*. Aristotle, in the composition of his *Politics*, offers his own solution to the problem faced by all who follow in the footsteps of Hippodamus and hope to avoid his error.

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