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## The tension between altruistic character and self-serving possession in a classical socio-political ethic

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### Abstract

Much of the *Nicomachean Ethics* treats egocentrism as an ineffectual and pernicious social vice out of which humans ought to be habituated. In the *Politics* self-centeredness is almost universally portrayed as a useful and enduring constituent of human psychology. The system of private property described in the *Politics* can hardly be a necessary social institution when Aristotle claims in the *Ethics* that the habituation process is capable of permanently fixing our attention upon public and altruistic fiscal ventures. This interpretive discrepancy between the two texts demonstrates that Aristotle's defense of private property is ineffectual in its attempt to preserve the social benefits of the common property systems it was intended to replace. Aristotle would have more convincingly defended institutionalized private property if he had couched his five arguments in terms of virtuous qualities that are more reconcilable with the personalist emphasis of his ethical theory.

The question of whether the methodological discrepancies between the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* are sufficient to warrant a full-fledged interpretive separation of the two works has been the subject of significant debate in recent Aristotelian scholarship. One of the *Ethics*' central moral commitments is that our states of character are almost always capable of being habituated out of one disposition and into another. One of the *Politics*' central economic commitments is that our material and social possessions are the natural manifestations of our egocentric propensities. A tension between the two positions lies in the fact that the vitality and flexibility of a theory of moral transformation is difficult to reconcile with the static fixation of a property system predicated on self-centered human dispositions. Much of the *Ethics* treats egocentrism as an ineffectual and pernicious social vice out of which humans ought to be habituated. In the *Politics* self-centeredness is almost universally portrayed as a useful and enduring constituent of human psychology. The system of private property described in the *Politics* can hardly be a necessary social institution when Aristotle claims in the *Ethics* that the habituation process is capable of permanently fixing our attention upon public and altruistic fiscal ventures.<sup>1</sup> The interpretive discrepancy between Aristotle's ethical psychology and economic commitments demonstrates that his defense of private property is ineffectual in its attempt to preserve the social benefits of the common property systems it was intended to replace. Aristotle would have more convincingly defended institutionalized private property if he had couched his five arguments in terms of virtuous qualities that are more closely related to the personalist emphasis of his ethical theory.

Early in the *Politics* Aristotle argues that a modified form of private possession and use is a more reasonable fiscal arrangement than an economic system built solely out of communal ownership and public social control.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle's commitment to the public employment of private property situates his social theory firmly outside of capitalistic paradigms that take the possession of private property to mean the private ownership and private distribution of the property's social benefits. His proposed fiscal arrangement is a hybrid scheme of private and public interests that integrates an institutionalized private property system with a philanthropic theory of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Politics* 4.1-4.2 1119b22-1123a33 (pp. 984-991) Henceforth all page numbers refer to: McKeon, Richard. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. New York, New York: Random House. 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Following Miller, I will take the Aristotelian definition of a right to private property to be that "X has a property right in P if, and only if, X possesses P in such a way that the use of P is up to X, and the alienation of P (giving P away or selling P) is up to X." Miller, Fred. *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1995. In Aristotle's own words, "The criterion of 'security' is the ownership of property in such places and under such conditions that the use of it is in our power; and it is 'our own' if it is in our power to dispose of it or keep it." (*Rhetoric* 1.5, 1361a18-22 (1341))

resource distribution. At the heart of the Aristotelian theory is the assumption that the dispositions of property owners will be benevolent enough to make their private holdings available for the general public.<sup>3</sup>

In the *Politics* Aristotle uses five arguments to defend the possession and use of private property as an alternative to classical Greece's public property systems. Private ownership and control is justified because it (1) promotes peace among the citizenry,<sup>4</sup> (2) improves the property's general upkeep,<sup>5</sup> (3) facilitates the development of friendships,<sup>6</sup> (4) maximizes the agent's natural pleasures,<sup>7</sup> and (5) fosters the public expression of virtues like temperance and liberality.<sup>8</sup> Implicit in at least four of Aristotle's five arguments for the privatization of property is an egocentric psychological account.<sup>9</sup>

The first of Aristotle's five arguments opposes those philosophers who think that altering the social arrangements of the community will simultaneously alter the psychological constituents of the citizenry.<sup>10</sup> Whenever communities fail to distribute their social benefits in a manner that is commensurate with the contributions of their citizens, the felicitous social sentiments that their public property arrangements were expected to foster will undoubtedly fragment. This is just to say that human beings will always squabble with each other whenever they are situated within communal property arrangements. The conflict usually starts when a small percentage of the citizenry foregoes some of its social responsibilities in the mistaken assumption that the workload will be carried by the body politic. But their refusal to perform an amount of work that is commensurate with their abilities only ends up irritating their neighbors. The majority of the community's workers will quarrel with this small percentage for taking a greater share of the communal benefits than is warranted by the utility of its productive output.<sup>11</sup> Aristotle's claim in the first defense is that the institutionalization of private property admits the fact of human egocentrism and precludes the messy juridical conflicts that result from its denial in this and other cases.

Aristotle's second defense is that governments which support private ownership over public distributions are providing their citizens with stronger incentives to improve the property's material constituents.<sup>12</sup> Common citizens, Aristotle argues, have legitimate reasons not to devote their lives to the maintenance of publicly-owned properties. Their relationship to the material objects around them is, quite simply, too tied up in their own concerns to manifest a significant public interest. Human beings are not philanthropic creatures who will naturally place public responsibilities before their own interests. They are self-centered beings who will invariably promote their own goals whenever they are given the opportunity to do so.<sup>13</sup> As such, human beings will undoubtedly maximize their productive efficiency whenever they are capable of controlling the defense, cultivation, and distribution of their own possessions. A genuine attention to the needs of publicly-owned properties would probably not return to these citizens recompense commensurable with their labors anyway.

The egotism of Aristotle's final two defenses of private property is even more obvious than the milder and more implicit self-interest of the first and second defenses. The first of Aristotle's final two defenses is predicated on the assumption that there is an inherent worth in the 'natural pleasures' experienced by all human beings. Chief

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<sup>3</sup> But, as we shall see, this means benevolent in a self-serving way. *Politics* 2.5 1263a25-29, a38-40 (1151); *Politics* 2.5 1263a38-40 (1151)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 1263a8-21, 27-8, b23-7 (1150-51)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 1263a28-9 (1151)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 1263a29-40 (1151)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 1263a40-b5 (1151)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 1263b5-14 (1152)

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle's third argument for institutionalized private property (viz. that it facilitates the development of friendships) is neutral with respect to the conclusions of this paper. His definition of friendship is centered on a shared conception of the good and not on an unconditional feeling of altruism toward the other party. Aristotelian friendship is, however, closely related to the natural pleasures that one takes toward oneself. The love of the virtuous characteristics manifested in one's own life is an important intermediate stage on the way to appreciating the virtuous characteristics found in the lives of friends who are also pursuing good and noble social values. "Therefore, since each of these characteristics belongs to the good man in relation to himself, and he is related to his friend as to himself (for his friend is another self), friendship too is thought to be one of these attributes, and those who have these attributes to be friends." *Ethics* 9.4 1165a29-33 (1082)

<sup>10</sup> In a telling reference to dissensions over the allocation of property, Aristotle argues that "These evils, however, are due to... the wickedness of human nature." (*Politics* 2.5 1263b23-25 (1152))

<sup>11</sup> In other passages, Aristotle underscores these sentiments: "And those who have been wronged, or believe themselves to be wronged, are terrible; for they are always looking out for their opportunity." (*Rhetoric* 2.5 1382b12-13 (1390))

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Politics* 2.5 1263a8-21, 27-8, b23-7 (1152-1153)

<sup>13</sup> After all, "Every one thinks chiefly of his own, hardly at all of the common interest..." (*Politics* 2.3 1261b33-34 (1148))

among the natural pleasures is self-love, by which is meant the glowing sentiment of personal recognition and self-esteem that accompanies pleasant actions undertaken in accordance with the exercise of a human being's decision-making capacities.<sup>14</sup> One of the primary causes of natural pleasure and self-love is the fulsome sense of internal satisfaction associated with the defense, possession, and use of private property.<sup>15</sup> More than anything else, it is property ownership which gives human beings a concrete and socially-acknowledged manifestation of the natural pleasures they take in the exercise of their characteristic faculties. Aristotle's claim is that if human beings find some of their greatest natural pleasures in the protection, control, and employment of their own possessions, then they will probably be incapable of finding a corresponding amount of natural pleasure in public property arrangements that are unable to provide a comparable material extension of their decision-making capacities.<sup>16</sup>

With similarly egotistical reasoning, Aristotle's last defense of institutionalized private property argues that property arrangements which simultaneously preserve both private ownership and public use provide the citizenry with a more productive and self-interested venue for exercising the moral virtue of magnanimity. The high-minded citizens who are capable of appreciating their virtuous dispositions for what they are will stand undoubtedly in need of a public outlet for their naturally generous sentiments. But before a philanthropic system can be established for the public dispersal of these high-minded citizens' properties, there must have existed a period of time prior to the act of donation during which the property was exclusively their own. So without a disciplined and enforceable system of private property rights, noble character states would be incapable of giving a perceptibly philanthropic public expression to the private virtues they know and cherish in themselves. The high-minded recognition of one's own virtuous character state, along with control of property rights and social distributions, is the prerequisite for altruistic manifestations of civic sentiment.

The appeal to psychological egotism that is such a central component of these five defenses of private property seems overblown and difficult to reconcile with the communal allegiances that are so characteristic of the virtuous dispositions developed in the *Ethics*. Whereas the *Ethics*' regimen of character formation views the excessive self-centeredness associated with the overt pursuit of personal gain as an inconvenient and even malevolent social quality (and one out of which the citizenry ought to be habituated), the *Politics*' theory of communal organization treats the self-conscious pursuit of personal gain as a beneficial social force that is valuable enough to merit its own distributive arrangement plan.

It will become easier to see the scholarly significance of this discrepancy between the two texts after we have taken a brief look at the *Ethics*' explication of the merits of civic liberality. In the *Ethics* children and youth are depicted as not yet being capable of manifesting the munificent fiscal and civic virtues.<sup>17</sup> At birth human beings are ill-natured and selfish creatures who possess nothing more than the potential to eventually participate in socially productive patterns of civic reflection and action.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, however, a structured habituation process involving the repetition of the same or similar set of altruistic actions will transform their latent natural capacities into virtuous and socially responsible dispositions.<sup>19</sup> Mature citizens are those special persons who have been trained to no longer see themselves as self-interested individuals, but as valued participants in a community devoted to the collective pursuit of the good and noble life. One of the most distinguishing signs of an individual citizen's maturity is her ability to wisely and efficiently spend large sums of wealth on the social goods that promote the future prospects of

<sup>14</sup> "...for surely the love of self is a feeling implanted by nature and not given in vain..." Cf. *Politics* 2.5 1263b1-b3 (1151) Cf. *Rhetoric* 1371b12-23: "...everyone necessarily is a lover of self, more or less." Shortly thereafter, Aristotle qualifies his endorsement of self-interest: "...although selfishness is rightly censured; this, however, is not the mere love of self, but the love of self in excess, like the miser's love of money..." (*Politics* 2.5 1263b1-b3 (1151)) Note that in the *Ethics* Aristotle is careful to distinguish between general human magnanimity and the excessive self-centeredness exhibited by only a few particularly vicious persons. This distinction is based on the idea that virtue is a mean between two extremes. The virtuous disposition is proper pride. The vice of excess is selfishness, while the vice of deficiency is humility.

<sup>15</sup> "Again, how immeasurably greater is the pleasure, when a man feels a thing to be his own..." (*Politics* 2.5 1263a40-41 (1151))

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 1263a43-b1 (1151)

<sup>17</sup> Rather, the fiscal and civic virtues arise from the habituation of our latent potentialities: "Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit." Cf. *Ethics* 2.1 1103a23-25 (952)

<sup>18</sup> This point is also made in the *Politics*, but it is not treated as a social vice. Cf. *Politics* 7.17 1337a2-3 (1305); "Every man should be responsible to others, nor should any one be allowed to do just as he pleases; for where absolute freedom is allowed there is nothing to restrain the evil which is inherent in every man." (*Politics* 6.4 1318b37-1319a1 (1268-69)). Also, "...most men tend to be bad...[As] a rule men do wrong to others whenever they have the power to do it." (*Rhetoric* 2.5 1382b4-10 (1390))

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Ethics* 2.1 1103b7-9 (952-953)

the community, and to do so not primarily as a way of manifesting her psychological satisfaction with the state of her personal character, but for the sake of the real benefits it brings the public.<sup>20</sup>

Herein is the crux of the matter. This urgent desire to promote the common good, which is so important to the virtuous dispositions described in the *Ethics*, plays only a derivative role in the *Politics*' treatment of private property. The self-centered hierarchy of social values endorsed by the citizenry described in the *Politics* makes it highly unlikely that any one of them would ever voluntarily forego the fulfillment of her own interests to bring about the greater material or mental prosperity of her neighbors. We have already seen that three of the five Aristotelian defenses all but assume that citizens are mutually disinterested parties without an extensive set of altruistic allegiances. The last of Aristotle's defenses of private property only comes to value philanthropic ventures after it has first placed an even higher value on the high-mindedness of the philanthropic agent. So the egotisms implicit in all five of the Aristotelian defenses of private property are defined in terms of a common set of objective criteria that is foreign to the virtuous dispositions of the *Ethics*.

The more overtly perceptible of these criteria are shared by all five of the Aristotelian defenses. They all involve a public display of self-interest that takes place amid conditions of material scarcity and social rivalry. The first of the five defenses is predicated on the idea that each citizen is a self-interested competitor with respect to every other citizen. Everyone in society is fighting everyone else for a finite amount of personal remuneration. It is only by an agreement of the whole citizenry that the first defense's social competitions can be kept from overwhelming the normalcy of the community's interpersonal relations (i.e. everyone agrees to work together for the common good through a complex system of private property, role specialization, and economic compensation). The condition for the public manifestation of a self-centered disposition is, in the first Aristotelian defense, a scarcity of the relevant material resources.

The egotism of the second Aristotelian defenses is predicated on a self-centered disposition that is both methodologically and ideologically similar to the first. It too requires a finite and publicly available object (viz. the maintenance of material property) to serve as the external locus for each citizen's self-serving attentions. Part and parcel of the second defense's scarcity condition is the existence of economic and political rivals – characters that do not appear in the *Ethics*' explication of virtue. Without opponents who are actively competing to maintain for the same set of material goods, it would be far more difficult for citizens to give a meaningful public expression to their self-serving interests.

The driving idea behind the fourth defense is, likewise, that the natural pleasure the virtuous citizen takes in her own disposition can only be given an adequate external manifestation in the possession and use of private property for her own sake, not for the sake of the common good. In the fifth Aristotelian defense, the existence of private property is taken to be the sine qua non for the first-personal social agenda promoted by the generosity of the wealthy citizen. But the self-centered donations of the *Politics*' wealthy citizen bear only a practical resemblance to the more recognizably altruistic and public feelings of the virtuous dispositions developed in the *Ethics*.

Even in the uncharacteristic moment in which the *Politics* briefly proposes a scheme for limiting the material acquisition of a certain segment of the populace, it does so by appealing to the self-interested and first-personal welfare of the involved citizens. In *Politics* 1.8 and 1.9 Aristotle steps out of character and argues that the civic authorities ought to limit the amount of private property available for citizen acquisition. He deems that this remarkable case of public interference is justified not only by the fiscal and social profit it brings to the community, but also, and much more importantly, by the first-personal psychological benefits it bestows upon the overly acquisitive property owners.<sup>21</sup> Let necessary wealth acquisition be the accumulation of things for the sake of their intended purpose, and let unnecessary wealth acquisition be the accumulation of things for the sheer sake of the accumulation.<sup>22</sup> The zeal with which some overly acquisitive citizens increase their personal fortunes is indicative, Aristotle thinks, of their confusion between the necessary and unnecessary forms of wealth acquisition. All too often

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<sup>20</sup> "Magnificence is an attribute of expenditures of the kind which we call honorable, e.g. those connected with the gods...and similarly with any form of religious worship, and all those that are proper objects of public spirited ambition..." *Ethics* 4.2 1122b18-24 (989)

<sup>21</sup> I owe this insight to Fred Miller (i.e. the fact that an example Aristotle intended as a point about excessive money-making is indicative of self-centeredness): "...Aristotle's arguments in *Politics* 1.8 and 1.9, for a limit [to the acquisition of property] are based upon self-regarding considerations: excessive acquisition will prevent the *agent* from achieving the good life." Miller. 1995. p. 321. (brackets mine) Cf. *Politics* 1.8 1256b31-32 (1137)

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Politics* 1.8 1256b34-36 (1137); Also, with reference to necessary and unnecessary wealth acquisition, "[I]n either [case], the instrument is the same, although the use is different, and so they pass into one another; for each is a use of the same property, but with a difference: accumulation is the end in the one case, but there is a further end in the other." (*Politics* 1.9 1257b35-37 (1139)) (brackets mine)

citizens intent on amassing wealth for its own sake concentrate so heavily on the material foundation of the good life (viz. the unnecessary forms of wealth acquisition) that they end up failing to find the first-personal fulfillment that accompanies the good life itself. For this reason, Aristotle argues that the reigning civic authorities ought to keep some of the more avaricious segments of the populace from pursuing wealth for its own sake. A rigorous plan of public moral coercion will more likely than not keep this percentage of the citizenry from rendering themselves unable to live the good life.

Thus it seems accurate to conclude, at the very least, that a concern for first-personal and egotistical moral ends grounds even Aristotle's program for the distributive restriction of the community's material resources. But why should we stop at such a small interpretive conclusion? Part and parcel of the habituation process described in the *Ethics* is the inculcation of altruistic civic feelings into citizens who would otherwise be inclined to favor their personal projects over the goods of the community. The *Ethics* rightly advertises itself as a manual for transforming moral character and for elevating the populace out of the egotistical limitations of the natural human condition. But we have seen from Aristotle's five defenses of private property that the *Politics* is written with significantly different intentions. In it Aristotle justifies governmental distributive interference by appealing to the fact of a static and self-centered human disposition. The *Ethics* is self-consciously designed to cultivate a life-altering personal and social moral code, while the property distribution arguments in the *Politics* are at the very least predicated on the assumption that the vast majority of people will never be habituated out of their natural character state (viz. a state of natural selfishness). The *Politics* purports to resolve the social problems that arise from any large-scale forms of civic association, not to transform the basic constituents of human character itself.

Let me put my cards on the table. It has become popular in recent years to claim that the *Ethics* and the *Politics* are simply two volumes of the same text of classical socio-political theory, and that the primary difference between them is one of scholarly emphasis. Our brief foray into Aristotle's defense of private property has shown, however, that there are significant differences between the two texts' underlying ideological assumptions, not only with respect to the benefits of psychological conditioning, but also with respect to the best political and manifestations of internal dispositional sentiments, and even perhaps with respect to human nature itself. It would, of course, be uncharitable to pretend that the Aristotelian social ethic is as ideologically systematic as modern political theories. Nevertheless, we have seen that the egocentric defenses of private property found in the *Politics* are both theoretically and practically inconsistent with the strong sense of communal attachment felt by the virtuous citizens described in the *Ethics*. The long-term scholarly significance of the interpretive discrepancy between Aristotle's ethical and political (viz. economic) commitments depends upon the extent of the opposition between his altruistic and egocentric depictions of the human disposition. What the discrepancy means in the short term, however, is that scholars should be more careful in endorsing the currently fashionable claim that the *Ethics* and the *Politics* are to be treated as a seamless treatise of socio-political theory.

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