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Political Community and the Highest Good

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INTRODUCTION

The *Nicomachean Ethics* announces itself as a treatise on the highest human good, the “end” (τέλος) of human life—namely, εὐδαιμονία or happiness. In the last chapter of the work (10.9) Aristotle makes it clear that the studies that he has by then carried out in investigating the human good leave his objectives in the treatise not yet completely achieved. The leading themes so far, he says in the opening lines of this chapter, have been the happy lives of philosophical contemplation and political leadership, the virtues (of character and thought), friendship, and pleasure. But in fact, he began the work by saying (1.1-2) that the study it contains is intended as a contribution to “political knowledge” (πολιτική ἐπιστήμη) or the political capacity or power (δύναμις).¹ Its work will not be complete, he now says, in book 10, until a successful reader (or hearer) has been brought actually to possess that knowledge or power—political knowledge. By that he means the fully accomplished capacity for expert political engagement in affairs of state. Before the aim announced at the beginning of the *Ethics* can be achieved, then—that is, before we can fully define and explain in the right sort of way the highest human good, or εὐδαιμονία (I’ll say more in just a moment about what this right sort of way is)—we need, as he puts it in *NE* 10.9 (1180a32 ff.), to become expert in the establishment of good laws (νομοθετική) and good constitutions (πολιτεῖαι, cf. 1181b14, 19, 21).

Now, one might certainly find this a surprising claim. As Aristotle himself is in no doubt, εὐδαιμονία is a feature of the lives of individual persons. On his account, it is an activity, or a unified set of activities of individual persons. It is the active and devoted employment of the

human virtues, organizing all one's other attachments and pursuits, in all the actions and activities of a person's mature lifetime. This commitment to the constant, active use of the human virtues determines one's overall preferences, one's choices and actions, thoughts and feelings, and all the pleasures taken in all the activities that make up one's life. But what does political knowledge—defined as expertise in the establishment of good laws and constitutions—have to do with defining and explaining this highest human good, and showing that it really is our highest good—this active employment by single individuals of their human virtues? One might easily enough see that these virtues might depend, in any number of ways, upon favorable political circumstances, including good laws and a good constitution, if any person is to employ the virtues in the way required in order to be fully happy in their life. Perhaps, too, if one wanted to bring happiness about for some group of other persons (not, or not just, oneself) one would need to know about good laws and constitutions, as necessary background conditions. So knowledge of politics certainly might reasonably be thought a valuable ancillary to knowing about the virtues and virtuous living.

But Aristotle goes further than that in book 10. He says that “we” (meaning his readers or hearers, including himself as studying alongside them as he lectures) need now to study laws and constitutions in order to be able, ourselves, to act in accordance with the virtues (1179b1-2)—i.e., to attain happiness and live happy lives. We won't be able to attain the virtues ourselves and live happily through making them the organizing principles of one's life, until we have acquired political science—the expert knowledge of laws and constitutions. So Aristotle seems to hold that in order to fully grasp, or define and explain—in the right way, at any rate—what the highest good for a human being is—this is the whole treatise's subject of study—we must conceive the happy activity itself somehow in political terms, terms investigated and explained in the *Politics*, and not simply in individual ones at all. It is only by understanding it in

that political way, he thinks, that one will be able to act fully and properly according to the virtues. In this paper I attempt to work out and explain what Aristotle intends by this essentially “political” orientation of the activity of virtue, that is, of the activity constituting human happiness.

PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE/UNDERSTANDING

Let us begin by considering the reasons Aristotle gives at the end of the *Ethics* for holding, as we have seen he does, that the controlling intention (προαίρεσις) in the treatise has not yet been completely fulfilled—even though as we will see they unfortunately raise more questions than they settle. The first thing Aristotle does is to remind us that where it is a question of things to be done (τὰ πρακτά)—actions and activities—our goal in our studies is not to develop theories (θεωρησάι) and to know (in that “contemplative” or theoretical way) about the various points concerned. Rather, our purpose is to come to act, ourselves, in all the relevant ways, by possessing and exercising the virtues (1179a35-b4). This echoes what he said back in book 2, as he began his discussion of the ethical virtues: “The present undertaking (πραγματεία) is not for the sake of developing theories as our other ones are (for we are not inquiring so as to know what virtue is, but so as to become good people). So we must inquire into the subjects relating to action, i.e. to how one should act” (2.2.1103b26-28). This itself echoes and expands what Aristotle said already in 1.3.1095a5-6: “the goal” in political studies “is not knowing but acting.” As these earlier passages from books 1 and 2 imply, Aristotle thinks that it is a necessary, or anyhow an especially effective, means to becoming a good person (that is, a fully good one, one who actually does fully possess the virtues and lives constantly on their basis) to engage for oneself in the philosophical thinking and argument involved in studying ethics with him, in the progression of discussions that make up the *Ethics*.² Following his lead in these three passages of books 10, 2, and 1, we can put the difference he

notes between moral philosophy and studies in metaphysics or philosophy of nature by saying that the understanding sought in moral philosophy is not a theoretical (or “contemplative”), but a practical, understanding—one that immediately or directly leads to one’s living virtuously. It is an understanding, which he thinks qualifies as a special sort of understanding, because of this immediate or direct connection to action. The purely theoretical studies in physics and metaphysics do not have such a connection. Nor indeed would a similar, purely contemplative study of human action itself, or of the virtues and human happiness.

We can begin to understand why Aristotle insists that the understanding sought in moral philosophy must be sharply distinguished from the understanding of other matters if we bear in mind that, as he frequently says, actions are always done for the sake of some good—in fact, some human good (as he explains in 1.6). The understanding being pursued in this case, but not the others, is of what is good for a human being, where what is good is understood as being good for them. One cannot attain, Aristotle thinks, an understanding of such good things as being of value for us just by knowing in a non-committal, “theoretical,” way what they are, or even what is good about them. Someone might perhaps be able to go through all the sound arguments and understand and explain, and defend with full articulateness, on their own behalf (and not just by repeating what some teacher has said), and thus actually grasp, all the reasons why, in fact, virtue and virtuous action are supremely good for a human being (i.e. for themselves, among others). But if they were left indifferent by knowing these reasons, they could not properly be said to understand the goodness of virtue. Anything entitled to be called an understanding of goods, as goods, including virtue itself, must include a motivation for becoming and being virtuous. Indeed, as we can see from what Aristotle says in the passages cited above, it must lead to constant and reliable action in accordance with virtue, on the basis of that motivation. For our immediate purposes, however, we need to focus first upon his claim

that this understanding does, necessarily, involve some motivation toward achieving or realizing any good so understood, that is, understood as being good.

It is important to see that for Aristotle this practical understanding of virtue really is understanding of it as good, and nothing more. It is a full, explicit, articulable grasp of what is good about virtue, about how that good relates as a value to other things also similarly grasped as good. This grasp, all by itself, he believes, moves us to embrace virtuous activity as our highest good, and to make it the organizing and controlling center of our whole lives. For Aristotle, there is no feeling of attraction to virtuous activity, as something separate from the understanding, that needs to be added, in order for the motivation provided directly in this understanding to be present and at work in one's psyche.³ This is a point that is often missed or misunderstood, since it flies in the face of modern philosophical and psychological assumptions about the separation between reason or rational understanding and desire or motivation. So it is worth both emphasizing and dwelling on briefly.

Aristotle holds that to assertively think of something as being good (for oneself) is to be moved thereby toward it: this being moved is part of or an immediate effect of that thought itself (it is what he calls a "rational desire," or "wish," a βούλησις).⁴ Because of the essential connection to motivation implied in the very act of understanding (and so, assertively thinking of) something good as good for oneself as a human being, this is a special sort of understanding. This understanding (when fully accomplished) is what Aristotle identifies as one of the "intellectual" virtues, or virtues of thought (διάνοια, cf. 1103a5), as opposed to the virtues of habituated states of feeling (ἦθος)—the ethical or moral virtues. When this understanding is fully accomplished, its motivations are so deep and strong that Aristotle holds that it not only motivates one who has it to act virtuously (as I mentioned above), but is sufficient to bring it about that they do act that way, constantly. This understanding comes in

degrees, of course. Still, any one who has it even less than completely is motivated by it toward virtuous action. Having the motivation is compatible with not acting on it, because, of course, for Aristotle there are other motivations as well, which might lead the agent to act on them instead. But when one understands fully that and why virtuous action is the highest human good, this knowledge is in fact the virtue of φρόνησις or practical wisdom, and it guarantees right action. By having acquired that complete understanding we become fully or simply or without qualification good and virtuous, on Aristotle's account—ἀπλῶς ἀγαθός (*NE* 6.13.1145a1). So, when Aristotle says in *NE* 10.9 that our purpose in going through the investigations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is to come to act in certain ways, that is virtuous ones, he is reminding us that the study just being completed is aimed at making us fully good people by giving us this sought-for practical understanding of virtue as our highest good.

Now, Aristotle notoriously insists that no one is to take part in the philosophical study of ethics and politics without having first acquired good habits of feeling through their earlier upbringing and education (1.3.1094b28-1095a11 and 4.1095a30-b13). Having achieved such habits of feeling enables people to go forward, if they are sufficiently gifted intellectually, so as to grasp the philosophical principles that ground the further virtue of practical wisdom. In fact, grasping those principles turns those early habits into fully virtuous states of character. These initial habits are sufficient, but sufficient only, to give people an intuitive attraction to proper behavior and to the values it serves, and an intuitive dislike of the opposites. This intuitive attraction is the love of τὸ καλόν (“the fine,” as recent translators have inadequately begun to translate it),⁵ that Aristotle makes a predisposition necessary for ever becoming virtuous. It is also the characteristic motivation of morally virtuous people insofar as they are, precisely, possessed of virtue of character, that is, possessed of good states of habituated feeling once those have been fully grounded in practical wisdom. Without such preliminary habits and

intuitive feelings, one is not open to grasping the reasons why the one sort of behavior (virtuous) is such a good thing for oneself, and the other (vicious) so bad: one won't listen if someone tries to explain these reasons, or won't understand if one does (10.9.1179b23-8). Only by having these habituated feelings is one now ready to pay attention to what reason and philosophy have to say. Thereby one can acquire the new, purely reason-based motivation for acting virtuously that I have described. In feeling the attraction to the fine, a young person is not led, as people not brought up to have good habits of feeling are, simply by the passions (especially those related to untutored immediate pleasure and dislike) that proper behavior places restrictions on. Their love of the fine provides a counterweight to the passions. Hence, as Aristotle says, acquiring the knowledge of philosophical ethics and politics, through attending lectures on ethics, would be of use to such a person. People already equipped with the love of the καλόν are in a position to be improved by this knowledge. These studies would advance them toward a full understanding—a practical understanding as I have just explained it, involving reasoned motivations—of what is good and what is bad for human beings, quite generally, and so of the consummate value of the virtues in giving shape to a human life, including, of course, one's own. In doing so, it would sharpen and deepen, and expand the scope of, those preliminary habits of feeling, by bringing to light new values, or new aspects of old ones, to be brought within the purview of one's emotional attachments and feelings of attraction or aversion.

DECENCY VS. FULL VIRTUE

It is very important to realize, as commentators often do not, or tend to forget, that neophytes who first come to the study of ethics equipped with the love of the fine, are, however, not good and virtuous people already—despite their habitual practice of (more or less) virtuous behavior, and their intuitive love of the values that such behavior constitutes and

promotes. For Aristotle, full virtue requires much more than simply firmly established habits of non-rational feelings and desires falling within a correct, intermediate range: it requires rationally developed understanding about the whole realm of human values. This understanding, then, both confirms as basically correct and, with reason's own innate desire for the good, directs the habituated non-rational feelings and desires so that they do conform fully to the rationally-determined standards for their correctness. These standards, in turn, become the basis for corrections to, and extensions of, the habits of feeling one has learned previously; the philosophical understanding of human values identifies subtle distinctions and somewhat new perspectives from which to enrich and reshape the already quite good results of childhood training toward the virtues. Thus, those who come to the study of ethics/politics are only basically decent, young adult, but still somewhat unformed people.⁶ Certainly, they are not, strictly speaking, morally virtuous yet. Indeed, they do not yet have well-settled characters at all. However, having made a good start through their upbringing and their experience of life so far, they may come to possess well-settled respectable characters, and so to be decent fully mature people, even without engaging in philosophical study of ethics and politics. A basically decent twenty-year-old with no philosophy could advance beyond this initial, still somewhat unformed moral state, so as both to refine the rather crude habits acquired from their upbringing, and, through experience and reflection, to come to grasp, to some extent, the true system of values that philosophy establishes as true.

In that way their reason, even though untutored by the discipline of philosophy, would add its correctly, though incompletely, informed support for and direction of their habituated feelings and desires, by way of its "wishes." They would thus finally acquire, as mature adults, the fully settled character of decent, respectable people, who lead good but wholly ordinary lives, not enlightened by philosophy.⁷ But Aristotle's hearers in his lectures are presumed to

have incipient characters so disposed, and their intelligence is such, that they can acquire the understanding that philosophy provides. They can thereby become more than mature decent people. As the cope-stone to the development of their merely instinctual feelings into that condition of settled, fully adult decency, they can add, through philosophy, a cultivated and informed, argued and articulate, grasp of the whole realm of human values. Their practical reason, and its special motivations, can be brought in to clarify, adjust, and support their mature, merely intuitive feelings. Hence, when Aristotle says in the passage quoted above from book 2 that our undertaking in the philosophical study of the virtues aims at our becoming good people, he is taking for granted that anyone engaging in these studies is already a basically decent young adult, destined to become a decent fully mature person in the normal course of events. He is saying that by learning what philosophy has to teach us about ethics (and politics) we acquire the virtue of practical wisdom and become more than totally decent people. That is, we become fully good. Thereby, we come to live the fully and perfectly happy life.

Accordingly, when Aristotle says at the end of the *Ethics* that our goal is not yet completely achieved, he means that, because from the outset of the work (being already basically decent persons, with good habitual ways of feeling about proper behavior and the values it serves) our aim has been to become fully good ourselves, we need something beyond the studies already concluded (as he says) in outline form (τοις τύποις). At first Aristotle says, without mentioning specifically any further studies, simply (as I reported above) that “we need to try to possess and use the virtues—or however else we may become good people” (1179b3-4). One can indeed readily understand that, even if our philosophical studies have been carried out as efforts in acquiring practical knowledge, we might need time and effort—further practice—to entrench our newly established philosophical understanding in our minds and to bring it to bear in further habituating our feelings and in bringing them fully in line with our rea-

soned convictions as we act. Moreover, as I have mentioned, we can suppose that the philosophical understanding achieved through the practical knowledge that our studies so far have given us could very well lead to revisions in our practical attitudes of emotion and appetitive desire, as those existed in us when we began our studies. Our philosophical understanding of the various sorts of goods there are, and of the role of emotions and appetitive desires in our pursuit and use of them, as well as our grasp of just which states of these non-rational feelings are “fine” (καλόν)—and just what it means for them to have that character—will be clarified and deepened. This presumably would involve some revisions in our views of precisely or approximately just which feelings and actions really are the correct, and the “fine,” ones to feel and do habitually on various occasions and in various recurrent (or not recurrent) situations. So, to be sure, there might be further effort, of these two closely related sorts, to be made in “trying to possess and use the virtues,” even after we have thoroughly learned and become persuaded, as primarily an intellectual matter, of the correctness of Aristotle’s analyses and arguments in the *Ethics* about virtue and its place in a well-lived life. We need still to work at making what we have learned fully effective in our lives, before we can become fully good people ourselves.

NE-POLITICS AS HANDBOOK FOR POLITICAL LEADERS

But that is not at all how Aristotle continues. He launches immediately into a protracted discussion of how to make people decent (ἐπιεικεῖς), with his focus, apparently (but, I will argue, misleadingly), not on what is needed now, as a further something, to make us, who have been studying moral philosophy with him, fully good, but on what is needed to make most, i.e. ordinary people, at least decent in their behavior and in their lives. And that then leads him to specify further subjects of study that we need to undertake. He begins like this:

Now, if arguments (οἱ λόγοι—discourses of one sort or another) were sufficient by themselves to make people decent they'd win many fat fees, and rightly so, as Theognis says; arguments would be what had to be provided.⁸ But in fact, though they do appear strong enough to urge on and motivate young people who value being in charge of their own actions,⁹ and to make a character that's well-born and truly loves what is fine be possessed by virtue, they appear unable to urge most ordinary people on toward being refined and good (πρὸς καλοκάγαθίαν). (1179b4-10)

Now, in fact, we've heard all this before, in the passages of book 1 that I summarized above, concerning the need for a good upbringing before beginning philosophical studies of ethics. Hearing this again now is disconcerting, in two ways. For one thing, Aristotle grants here that arguments (such as his own treatise is full of) do have the strength to urge on and motivate people like us, his authorized hearers, and (as he says explicitly here) to make our characters be possessed by virtue. So if we've been attending properly to the arguments of the previous ten books, wouldn't we now already be possessed of virtue—or, at least, not in need of further study? We might still need, if anything, to get practice in (fully) virtuous thinking and acting, in a widish variety of circumstances, along the lines I just indicated, with adjustments in our habituated states of moral virtue, so as to feel emotionally the clarification and deepened insight that our increased practical understanding has effected for us. But why would we need any further study, any study of additional topics? Yet, as I indicated at the outset, in fact Aristotle is building up in this chapter to telling us we need to study about laws and constitutions.

On the other hand, Aristotle's proposal of such further studies certainly is relevant to the task of dealing with a whole population and doing what one can to improve them. It may well be that, as he says here, most people are not going to be improved at all in their behavior

by arguments and discourses (that is, by the only sort of thing that philosophy, even practical philosophy, provides). But perhaps they could be improved by having good coercive laws to guide them: this is what Aristotle's discussion of laws a bit further on makes clear. So that could be one reason why we readers and hearers of his *Ethics* might need to engage in further study—if we assume (I'll say more about this in a moment) that one thing Aristotle has been aiming at in his treatise, and one thing we've been studying with him for, is to learn how to improve ordinary people's lives. Still, how is that further study relevant, as the preceding context clearly implies Aristotle thinks it is, to the needs for self-improvement of the persons Aristotle is speaking to in writing the treatise?

These are puzzling questions. Alas, I do not think Aristotle's subsequent discussion in this final chapter of the *Ethics*, either implicitly or explicitly, does clearly give us the materials we need to resolve them. I do think, however, that we can work out a resolution if, as I shall do below (p. 26 ff.), we bring into our discussion fundamental aspects of Aristotle's theory of the political community in his *Politics*. In any event, what happens in this last chapter of the *Ethics* is this. Aristotle first raises the question of what he and we, his authorized, successful students, need, so as to complete our project of becoming fully good people through our philosophical studies. He then introduces, without explication, a second purpose that he now presupposes we and he have had in mind all along. This is the aim of using our practical knowledge and good characters in offering leadership in helping other, ordinary people to become at least decent and live good lives at the level of decency, a lower level than that of full virtue. This aim has not in fact been clearly announced heretofore, as we have seen the first purpose, of self-improvement, has been, in book 2. But it might be thought to be implied already in the opening discussion in book 1 which I began by referring to. 1.1-2, arguing for the

conclusion that our enterprise in the treatise is to be classified as belonging to political knowledge, conclude as follows:

For even if the good is the same for a single person and a city, the good of a city is evidently a greater and more final or end-like thing both to achieve and to preserve.

While it is gratifying to do this even for a single person alone, to do it for a people and for cities is a finer and more godlike thing. So, then, our course of study seeks these things, belonging as it does in a certain way to political knowledge. (1094b7-11)

Here Aristotle clearly suggests¹⁰ that the *Ethics* has as at least one of its ultimate goals to help its readers come to know (as an element of practical, not theoretical, knowledge) not only the highest good for a single individual (oneself, he obviously means) but (even more) the much larger and more complex highest good of a whole people or city.¹¹

Accordingly, in the last chapter of the *Ethics*, having begun his response to the question whether our work in studying the topics of the treatise is now complete by referring to the first of his and his readers' purposes (self-improvement), Aristotle shifts abruptly and confusingly to the second (achieving the good of whole cities). From that point onwards, he diverges into a discussion of the need for an appropriate civic constitution and system of laws if most people are to become at least decent and live decent lives.¹² Such a constitution and laws are needed, in the first instance, he goes on to argue, because the use or threat of painful punishment is necessary to bring most young people to accept and perform the actions they must perform regularly if they are to be habituated to decent practices, and thereby gradually to establish in themselves a decent outlook on life as adults. Most people when young (unlike the few whose natural characters, he says, make them love what is fine)¹³ cannot be moved by shame, but only by fear. They pursue pretty much only the pleasures of gratifying their passions, and only the

threat of countervailing immediate pains can deter them from pursuing them when it is not decent to do so (1179b11-16).

It is true, of course, as Aristotle says, that at this early stage of life a person's upbringing is largely in the hands of their parents and others in the household. But a parent's directives, unless backed up by fitting into legally established and required practices (and seen by the child to be so backed up), can lack the necessitating force required to bring the child into line. Children, as Aristotle says, tend to hate people who oppose their impulses, and they resent and rebel against what could reasonably seem to them to be the merely arbitrary orders of some single individual, even a parent (whose manifest good-will and natural connection from birth might have a countervailing effect; see 1180b4-7). When backed up by the law, however, the parent's directives obtain a different aura. The universality and wide acceptance of laws suggest, even to children, that they are based on good reasons. Laws present themselves as imposing a correct orderly regimen, one that there are good reasons to accept, even if those reasons may sometimes be less than fully evident to those subject to them. So children will not feel a parent's directives when backed by laws as arbitrary and burdensome, but will accept them as resting on good reasons and imposing proper standards of good order. They will act decently and even forego the immediate gratification of their passions willingly, as is necessary if they are to develop good habits of feeling and action, and acquire some sort of reasoned intelligence and sense of good order of their own, so as to become decent or (at a popular and non-philosophical level) what we call good people. (For all this, see 1180a14-24.)

Moreover, Aristotle argues (1180a1-5), it is not enough for most young people to receive a caring and correct upbringing. Having reached adulthood they also need to maintain the same habits of feeling and action as they learned as children. That, too, Aristotle says, requires law and the threat of punishment, now without the intervention of parental directives

as their intermediary. Most people, even when well brought up, are always more moved by fear and the threat of punishment than by the power of good reasons or by their sense of what is fine, when those oppose their immediate gratification. Hence anyone out to improve most people's lives needs to know about the correct system of laws for people as adults to be living under, and in general about the principles of politics. They need, in fact, to equip themselves so that they would at least be qualified to be political leaders—active politicians, concerned, through their possession of political knowledge, with the establishment, administration, and preservation of good laws in their own or others' cities.

If, then, one of Aristotle's purposes in the *Ethics* is to prepare intellectually well-endowed and well brought up young adults so that they will be able to provide the highest human good (so far as possible) for a whole city, it is clear that the course of study completed in the *Ethics* itself has not accomplished all its goals. From the beginning we were told that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is intended to convey political knowledge to its readers, as an item not of "contemplation" but practice. Part of this it has conveyed, namely the basic account of the human good, conceived so far, basically, in terms of single persons' lives led as separate individuals. But the reader needs also to study and learn about constitutions and systems of laws. They need to know which ones are needed for providing the human good for a given whole city (so far as possible—that is, by making all the citizens at least decent people). And they need to know how one brings those laws into existence, or preserves them, through political engagement and activities. Accordingly, Aristotle concludes 10.9, and the whole of the *Ethics*, by arguing (1180b28-1181b23), in effect, that only a fully systematic account, based on general first principles of politics and ethics, of just the sort we find in his own *Politics*, can suffice for completing the course of study initiated at the beginning of the *Ethics*.

NE-POLITICS AS AID TO SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Now, as I have said, all this concerns the achievement only of the second of the two potential objectives for the study of ethics that Aristotle distinguishes in the passage I quoted from *Ethics* 1.2, namely the highest human good for a people and cities. Might we however also find a connection between knowledge of politics and the first objective, the highest good of a single person (oneself)? One possibility immediately suggests itself. In the chapters of book 10 immediately preceding 10.9 Aristotle has distinguished two lives as being happiest ones (the second being happiest “in the second rank”). These are the life devoted to contemplative knowledge of the best kind as its highest goal, and the life devoted instead to the exercise of the virtues of character, which involve practical knowledge and practical thought as well as habituated feelings, but do not in themselves involve purely theoretical, i.e. contemplative thinking (1178a6-22). Though Aristotle does not explicitly say so there, it seems probable that with this second happy life he is thinking of the life of the political leader, actively engaged in the political direction of his city.¹⁴ This is what, near the beginning of the treatise, he calls “the political life,” and contrasts with the theoretical one.¹⁵ If this is right, then in speaking in 10.8 of a life of “the other virtues” as “happiest” (in the second rank), he is not referring to the life of a fully virtuous private citizen who does their political duty but keeps out of the political limelight. Surely, he does not think that the virtuous life of someone who kept out of active politics would not be a happy one; still, he does apparently think that the virtuous politician’s life is a supremely happy one of the same sort, viz. devoted to the exercise of the virtues of character and practical intellect as its actually achieved highest goal.¹⁶ Only it should count as second happiest. And, as T.H. Irwin has argued at length, there are indications in the *Politics* itself that this is Aristotle’s view.¹⁷ Apparently he thinks that what is good about the exercise of the virtues of character and practical intellect is most fully realized only in the context of an active

life of political leadership. In the political activities of this life these virtues receive their widest scope and are directed at the grandest of morally good goals—not just one’s own, but at the same time and in the same activities, all one’s fellow-citizens’ happiness as well, through their coming to live constantly, or nearly constantly, fully decent lives.

If so, then we could, with a little work, find a connection between the first aspect of his project in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and Aristotle’s insistence in *NE* 10.9 that the aims of that treatise will not be finally achieved until we have learned the principles of politics. If the life aimed at practical virtue as the highest good that one is capable of achieving is most fully and richly accomplished in the political life, then Aristotle’s young adult students do need to have the knowledge of how to exercise their virtues as political leaders. And they will not know how to do that without learning the principles of politics. Thereby, or therein, they will acquire knowledge of laws and constitutions as the culmination and completion of the practical knowledge (practical wisdom) that they need in order to lead fully virtuous lives devoted to practically virtuous activity as their highest achieved good. It is only with that knowledge that a completely realized virtuous life of that sort, one with the widest and finest scope for the deployment of the practical virtues, can be shaped and led.¹⁸ Thus, if we consider solely the aim in studying the *Ethics* of becoming good oneself and thereby living happily, Aristotle’s hearers/readers need to continue their studies by listening to lectures about legislation and constitutions, because the further knowledge to be acquired therein is needed in order to be not only good and virtuous, but to exercise one’s virtues with their widest scope. Thereby one will live, not just a happy life, but the (second) happiest one possible.

However, by itself this suggestion is not satisfactory. If this were all Aristotle had in mind in saying that we now need to learn about constitutions and laws, one would expect him not to have been so indirect about it. In 10.9 he could easily and naturally have built explicitly

upon his argument in the immediately previous chapter. He could have said that since, as he has just argued, the happiest of lives devoted to the virtues of character and practical intellect is the virtuous politician's life, the project of helping his readers/hearers learn through their philosophical studies how to be fully good and happy is necessarily incomplete until he helps them acquire the knowledge needed for political leadership. Since he does not explicitly argue that way, I have had to fill in a considerable amount of background in order to construct this interpretation. Moreover, there is something unsatisfactory about this interpretation, taken on its own. It speaks as if for Aristotle one can distinguish some (non-political) knowledge of the virtues needed for living virtuously as an ordinary citizen, from the added political knowledge needed in order to live the more fully realized virtuous life of the virtuous political leader. It implies that the added knowledge is needed solely for enabling that fuller realization of virtue, and not at all for living the less happy life of virtue led by a virtuous private citizen. That sells Aristotle's claims for the political character of virtue very much too short (and see fn. 18). So we should feel encouraged to look for further and different background for linking Aristotle's claims in *NE* 10.9 concerning the need for knowledge of politics (in a narrow sense) if his readers are to become fully good and live happy lives.

We can find what we need if, as I suggested above, we bring into our discussion fundamental aspects of Aristotle's account of the political community in the *Politics*.¹⁹ When we do that, I will argue, we can see that on Aristotle's fully developed theory of the virtues of character and practical intellect, each and every exercise of them, if they are to be properly exercised at all, requires an orientation not just to one's own happiness (in exercising the virtues) but to the happiness (the virtuous living) of the others with whom one shares life in one's political community. On this view, virtuous activity when fully realized (even by someone leading a private, not politically fully active life) has to be a communal undertaking, something

engaged in by each virtuous (or even decent) person as his or her part of the single activity, engaged in in common with one's fellow citizens, of living according to the requirements of the virtues—that is, living that way as a shared, and mutually supportive, common way of living. This is something they all do together, in a sense that I will explain below. Whether in the context of active political leadership or not, therefore, each fully virtuous act, in being properly done, must be conceived as a contribution also to the virtuous life and happiness of the whole community, the community of all the virtuous or at least decent people in one's city. Each virtuous act, whether of a decent or a fully virtuous person, contributes, and is conceived by them as they do it as contributing, to the happiness of oneself together with all the others with whom one lives a good life in common. For this reason, even if we take up moral philosophy solely with a view to becoming good and virtuous individual people, and living happily as individuals or in our circle of family and personal friends, we nonetheless need to learn the principles of politics. Those are the principles for understanding, in a fully practical way, such a communal life of virtuous activity. We need to have, and put into effect in living our lives, a deep understanding of what a community is and of how the life of a political community is best organized and directed if the common life of the virtues is to be made the community's mutually understood overarching goal, and sustained as such through the appropriate political institutions and practices. We need that knowledge (a practical, not “contemplative” one) in order to actually know, for ourselves, how to engage properly in our own individual virtuous actions, whether ones performed as political leaders or in our private affairs and private lives. This whole community, as I have emphasized, includes lots of merely decent people, and of course they do not have or need this full understanding of politics or of the political orientation of their decently led lives: but they too must intuitively see their lives and their decent actions as part of an interlocking, mutually supporting communal undertaking aimed at virtuous living as

the highest good. That, any rate, is what I shall now argue. As I go along I will try to explain some of the intricacies of this view, which, if I am right, is Aristotle's fully developed account of the human virtues and human happiness.

In sum, then, I suggest that Aristotle has two connected but separable reasons for holding that even if we consider only his readers'/hearers' self-improvement, the project begun in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not completed until they have studied thoroughly also the principles of legislation and political constitutions. Each of these reasons presupposes a single (as it were) body of knowledge as constituting both political knowledge and practical wisdom (as Aristotle explains in *NE* 6.8). First, he wants his hearers to know what they need to know in order to be fully effective political leaders—and thereby to live the virtuous political life, the second happiest life according to *NE* 10.8. Thus, he has in mind here a first use for that single knowledge—a use connected to what I have referred to earlier as the second of the two potential objectives for the study of ethics that Aristotle distinguishes in *NE* 1.2. But secondly and indeed more fundamentally he wants his hearers to know what they need to know in order to live virtuous and happy lives as private citizens, outside the political limelight—including, for those capable of it, the very happiest life of all, that of a private citizen who makes the activity of philosophical contemplation and theory the highest achieved goal in living their life. Here we find a connection to the first of Aristotle's objectives mentioned in 1.2. The essential point is this: anyone who expects to be good and live virtuously at all needs to understand the principles of politics, and their application, because virtuous actions and activities, however much undertaken always by individuals, are essentially communal undertakings.

WHAT IS AN ARISTOTELIAN *KOINONIA* (“COMMUNITY”)?

One key but not well understood point in Aristotle's *Politics* concerns his understanding of what a *κοινωνία* (conventionally translated as “community”) is. He begins the *Politics* by

saying that because the polis,²⁰ is a κοινωνία, in fact the one that contains within itself and regulates all the others, it aims at some good (1252a1-7).²¹ The adjective from which this noun is formed, κοινόν, means “common,” in the sense of some common possession. A “koinonia” therefore (hereafter I will transliterate the Greek and use it as an adopted English word) is something shared by a group of people, as something that is theirs in common— not as a pooled sum of separate parts produced or maintained privately by each. It is a whole belonging in common as a whole to the whole group. What, however, is this thing—this koinonia—that is common in that sense to a group of people? What is it, in the case of a polis, and in the case of the other koinoniai of which Aristotle speaks here, that constitutes it as a koinonia?

The answer is implied by the reason he gives in this passage for saying that all koinoniai do aim at some good.²² He says that this is because “everyone does all their actions for the sake of what they take to be some good” (1252a2-3).²³ Taken strictly, as I propose we should take it, this clearly implies that, for Aristotle, a koinonia, at bottom, is some actions (in fact, some activities): all actions or activities, he is saying, including the ones that constitute koinoniai, aim at some good. Indeed, a koinonia is some activities that the individual people making up the group engage in in common, in the way I just explained. These are activities of theirs as individuals but not with each acting on their own merely in some coordinated way so as to produce some “common” product.²⁴ Rather, these activities are theirs as group members. They are activities of the whole group (in some way that needs explanation, which I provide below), at the same time that they are, more specifically, the immediate activity on each occasion of some one person, or some smaller group of members, acting in some way defined or regulated by the specific sort of koinonia in question.

On Aristotle's understanding, then, a *koinonia* is some set of group activities performed regularly and on a continuing basis by the individual members of some group—thus sustaining the *koinonia* in continuous existence. Of course, this is, as I said, only what fundamentally constitutes a *koinonia* as such. Other things than activities will belong to any *koinonia* as something common to the group, as well. In the case of a polis, this will include land and buildings and the contents of the public treasury, and also institutions and offices structuring its political life. These make up what the Greeks referred to as τὸ κοινόν of (that is, what is common to) the people of the given city.²⁵ However, these belong to the *koinonia* because of the ways they facilitate or help to structure the group activities that are its fundamental and defining elements. They are parts of the *koinonia* through their connection to those activities.

As for the specific *koinoniai* (the city, the household, etc.), the character of the *koinonia* itself—how it is constituted, what it is for—determines which are the common activities, and what is shared (and in precisely what ways) by the members of the group. Aristotle holds, as we see from the opening lines of the *Politics* just referred to, that the polis-*koinonia* contains within itself subordinate *koinoniai*, and in some sense controls and gives direction to them. Principal among these in theoretical importance are first, those of the household (the *koinonia* of father, mother and children,²⁶ and that of master and slave), and then that of the village, which contains the household *koinoniai* of its members, as it itself is contained in the polis-*koinonia* to which it belongs.²⁷ Our ultimate interest is in the polis, since it is there that, according to Aristotle, the activities of virtue as something to be regarded communally find their place. But given that, for Aristotle, a polis contains within itself the joint activities making up household and village, it will be useful, in considering which the group activities are that the polis consists of, and in what way it does consist of them, to begin by considering these subordinate *koinoniai* and their constituent activities.

MASTER-SLAVE, FAMILY, AND VILLAGE *KOINONIAI*

Before beginning (as Aristotle does) with the *koinonia* of master and slave, I should point out that in discussing it I am following Aristotle in describing it as it is “according to nature”: i.e., as it is when properly constituted and conducted, on both sides. Many actual master-slave relationships are perversions, and to those, naturally enough, what is said here about this *koinonia* will not fully apply. It could even be that all the master-slave *koinoniai* that have actually existed anywhere were perversions. It is important in order not unfairly to misunderstand Aristotle that he should be understood as approving slavery only as it is according to nature. In discussing the other *koinoniai*, of the family, the village and the polis, I should be understood similarly to be discussing these *koinoniai* as they are according to nature. It is to be taken for granted that most and even possibly all the actually existing such communities have been in greater or lesser degree perversions of this natural ideal. Nonetheless, Aristotle reasonably thinks, we learn something that can and ought to regulate our own ambitions as well as our basic self-conception as we approach our daily lives, in the defective communities in which we presumably all live, if we grasp and apply what these sorts of *koinoniai* are like when they exist and function according to nature (i.e. according to the nature of human beings, and the nature of the human good).²⁸

A slave for Aristotle is simply a laborer who, being stunted by birth, is capable of only a narrow range of human activities. Not only that: in doing them slaves (but not other adult people) require some more fully endowed human being to give them direction and keep them focused on what they are doing.²⁹ Aristotle says that slaves are living tools, and tools for action: namely, certain activities, primarily, of their masters.³⁰ Slave-activities, for example

sweeping the floor or plowing a field or preparing a meal, are, then, on Aristotle's analysis activities engaged in in common by the individual slaves and the master who directs them. We would think the slaves are the primary agents, if not in fact the only ones in these tasks, but Aristotle thinks the master is in fact the primary agent, because it is he who directs and (ultimately) is putting his mind to the tasks: actions, properly speaking, require to be done by beings possessed of, and using, reason. So, on Aristotle's view, the master sweeps the floor, and so on, using the slave as his living, self-moving tool. Both master and slave are active whenever the slave works as a slave, and the actions making up the slave's work are common activities of the two. As Aristotle conceives them, then, these activities have two agents; they are done by two people in each case: a slave and the master. And it is those joint activities that constitute the master-slave koinonia. Thus, that koinonia extends precisely, and only, so far as those activities do. It includes only that much of the activities that go to constitute the lives, respectively, of the master and the slave. The rest of both the slave's and the master's life are conducted outside this (very limited) koinonia. Notably, in this case the good aimed at in the koinonia is entirely the good of the master (and, derivatively, that of his family). The good of the slave is not at all aimed at, though incidentally the slave achieves important components of his or her good in doing their part in these common activities—to the extent that, being a stunted human being, they are capable of achieving a personal good at all.³¹ All the slave's work is aimed at making the daily lives of the master and his family go well, both by providing the materials and the material conditions needed by the family to sustain their lives, and by assisting them in engaging in some of the activities that make their own lives up, but in which slaves do not themselves engage jointly with them.

The common activities constituting the koinonia of husband, wife and children are importantly different. Psychologically they go much deeper. In addition to being done by more

than one agent, as with the master-slave activities, all of these are aimed at a good common to all the participants. In fact, this good includes goods common to the participants at two levels or in two different ways, as I will explain below. The result is that the common activities of family members living together in a household are activities done by them in common in a much deeper way than the activities common to slaves with their masters.

Aristotle says that female and male form a couple for the sake of procreation.³² They do so not by deliberate choice (not that in most cases there wouldn't have been one) but out of the desire arising naturally in human beings as in other animals to leave behind offspring like themselves. What then are the common activities of the resulting family members that make up such a *koinonia*? The common activities of the couple, as a couple, will include their sexual activities as marriage partners, and all the activities of raising and educating the children, even if those are performed primarily by only one of the parents at any time (in some instances with the use of slaves). Raising and educating their children is a common project, undertaken by the parents together. When the mother, say, is helping a young child to learn to play fairly and with due consideration of the other children he is playing with, it is an essential component of what she is doing, implicit though not normally self-conscious, that this is part of a whole series and set of activities that fit together to constitute a larger and more extended activity she and the father are engaged in together over many years, of raising the child to adulthood. Some of the components of this single activity are performed in the first instance not by her but by the father; and all of these, whichever the primary agent may be, are endorsed and actively supported by both parents.

Other activities, too, are included in the husband-wife-children *koinonia* of the family: all the activities of daily life together within the household, the meals taken together, the conversations, the games played, and, of course, with particular emphasis, those of these into

which the moral virtues (as Aristotle understands them) are integrated, since those are the center and substance, for him, of a well-lived human life. (I return to this moral component in a moment.) It would not be easy to specify more exactly which the activities are that constitute this *koinonia*.³³ Still, they clearly make up still only a relatively small part of the activities of its individual members that make up the totality of the daily life within the household. Each of the family members spends most of their time in activities of a private and personal sort that though taking place within the household are not done as common activities joined to the activities of the other family members in the way I have indicated.³⁴ Hence, the *koinonia* of the family, like that of master and slave with which it is joined in the household, is one of severely limited scope.

All the activities that do form part of the family-*koinonia*, however, aim at the good of all the participants, and at a good held in common by them all. As noted above, this marks a significant departure from the common activities of master and slave. There are two dimensions to this community of good. First, the activities themselves are good, because well-conceived and well carried out (remember: we are discussing a family according to nature). This good, the good of the activities themselves, as such, belongs to and is achieved by both or all of the participants simply in doing them. It is furthermore an indissolubly common good, consisting not (or not only) of a pooled sum of individual goods achieved separately in the actions of the separate agents. It is a single good belonging in equal measure to each of the participants, because it is a good achieved by the pair or group of participants acting together. In this sense, the mealtimes, and the conversations, are taken up with an activity that the family all engage in together, as a common undertaking—well-conceived and well-carried out by each of the members in their own individual ways, each doing something different which fits together with and is (at least implicitly) understood by them all to be a contribution to some activity they

are engaging in in common, of which each individual contribution is a constituent part. The good therein achieved is a good common to them all. The good of or in the well-conducted conversation or meal taken together, for example, is a single good accruing equally to them all.

Many of these activities are also, of course, aimed at goods external to the activities themselves. This is a second level or way that there are common goods aimed at in the activities. The meals are aimed, among other things, at obtaining daily sustenance. Relaxation and stimulation are further external goods provided at mealtime, as well as through conversations at other times, and games and other pastimes. These external goods may, and mostly will, be distributed individually to the individual members, and will not be something indissolubly common, as the good of the common activities, as such, is. In this case, to say that the good is a “common” good means only that the provision of these respective separate shares to all is part of what the activity consists in, what it is for. The relaxation and stimulation of games and daily social interactions, as well as the sustenance provided at meals, are for all the members of the group—but one by one. There are, however, some such external goods that are aimed at as common goods in a stronger sense, instead. Most notably, the parents’ activities in raising the children aim (as an external objective) at making them good human beings and enabling them to live good human lives as adults. But one’s children being good and living well, as good human beings, when adult is part of the good of any parent.³⁵ So in this case even the external good is something that belongs, when it is achieved at all, to the parents in common, not in a divided way—just as with the common good achieved in the doing of the common activities.

When we turn to the village-koinonia we find that Aristotle says extremely little about it. Almost all he says is that, whereas the household is “naturally constituted for the everyday,” the first koinonia (in the analysis of a polis from the simpler to the more complex) “constituted

for the sake of other than everyday needs” is the village, itself constituted out of some number of households.³⁶ I take the reference here to “other than everyday needs” to mean the following. Villages make possible a social life, with a wider and more interesting range for conversation and other leisure-time interaction, than single households do. By introducing local cults with priesthoods, and festivals (with poetry readings and drama-performances), and the like, they also expand the range of human activities. These new human activities belong specifically to village-koinonai, and are not possible within a separated household. They satisfy other than everyday needs—other than needs to do with sustenance, reproduction, basic security and bodily comforts, including minimally necessary clothing and implements for maintaining human life with basic needs satisfied. With the reciprocal exchange of surplus production, however, that villages introduce, villages also make possible satisfying these everyday needs more easily than life in an isolated family could, and more satisfactorily, too, because of the resulting greater variety and higher quality of materials and material goods they make available for consumption and use.

We should also take account of the fact that, for Aristotle, village-koinonai are made up of household ones, as I mentioned. This means that (as I have just implied) the common activities constituting the household receive a wider context that makes them involve the pursuit of a wider common good than just that of a single family. Parents are raising children to live well not just in their own households but in the villages of which their households are parts, just as the householder is directing his agricultural slaves and his farm animals for sustaining the life not only of his own household, but in part also (reciprocally) that of the other households in the village. Thus the life-activities defintory of the household will, in general, also become, in this expanded form, activities of the village-koinonia as well, since the life of the family and its household can now be seen as part of the life of the whole village. These activities, focused in

the first instance on the common good of some single family's members, are implicitly conceived also as part of a wider common enterprise engaged in together with the members of other village families: one aimed, both in terms of everyday and other needs of life, at living well as a whole village. Thus not only the religious and cultural and expanded economic activities I referred to, but also the more local ones of everyday household life, can be seen as engaged in in social union with all the neighbors making up the other households of one's village.

THE *KOINONIA* OF THE POLIS: THE MORAL LIFE AS COMMUNAL PRODUCT

Finally, we reach the *koinonia* of the polis. Aristotle says that the polis “has reached the limit of total self-sufficiency” for human life. It makes possible, and itself actively supports, a life for its citizens in which human nature becomes fully developed and human capacities for action are completely fulfilled. Beyond this he says very little—less in fact, surprisingly, than he does about the much simpler *koinoniai* of the household. So in this case, the crucial one for us, we will have to think through for ourselves, without significant textual clues, in what the communal character of this *koinonia* and its activities consists.

To his remark about total self-sufficiency Aristotle famously adds: “It comes to be for the sake of living, but it remains in existence for the sake of living well.”³⁷ “For the sake of living well” (τοῦ εἶ ζῆν χάριν) here means not for the sake of living at a high economic standard, or even that plus the provision of a rich array of cultural expressions to appreciate and participate in. All such considerations belong to (mere) life at a high level, not to “living well,” as Aristotle intends that expression here. The “living well” aimed at in a polis means, specifically, having its citizens live a life that is governed by their possessing the human virtues, each to some significant degree, though presumably more fully in some citizens than in others (I say more about this below).³⁸ They aim together through their lives in the polis at decency and virtue as their highest good, their fullest natural self-realization. The citizens of a polis that is

“according to nature” all place the highest value on virtue and virtuous action, and they possess the virtues of habituated feeling and action (and that of practical understanding too) as nearly fully, individual by individual, as is realistically to be hoped for in any polis-sized human population. They are all, at a minimum, decent people, according to Aristotle’s account of decency in his discussion in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.9, as explained above.³⁹ This means that the citizens structure their lives through exercising their virtues, as a matter of individual independent judgment, on a constant and regular basis in all that they do.

Thus, according to Aristotle the polis, as an institution, comes into being through the union of a number of villages in some self-contained territory that possesses a city-center, external trade relations, and large-scale cultural and religious institutions. Hence the (so to speak) mere life (as opposed to the life of virtue) that the polis makes possible is far richer and more interesting, more completely fulfilling of human natural capacities, than that of an isolated village—in just the ways that I said above that village life is richer than an isolated household’s could be. This enrichment consists not only in new aspects of life belonging explicitly to the level of the city and carried out in the city-center (most notably overtly political institutions and activities), but also in an expansion and enriched content of the activities definitory of household and village *koinoniai* that result from their being fit into this new context. It is the needs felt by people living in households and villages for the richest possible such mere life that, as Aristotle implies, explains the coming into being of cities. They come to be for the sake of the higher standard of living and richer cultural and social life they enable. But when led now in the context of a polis-life, the mere life of villagers comes to include, as was the case with the village, completely new activities as well, most notably, as just remarked, the activities of the shared self-government of the citizens, through specifically political institutions and activities. Included also are all the wider social, religious, and cultural activities, plus the wider range of

work opportunities and interesting personal relationships that come from the foreign trade and larger-scale economic activities the polis makes possible for its citizens.

The enrichments I have mentioned so far concern only the “mere” life that a polis makes possible. But, as we have seen, the polis-koinonia once formed exists for the sake of a life lived by the individual citizens that is governed by their human virtues. These are, in the first instance, the practical virtues, those of character and practical intellect—at whatever level and in whatever degree they individually may possess them (see n. 39). They will all be at least decent people. Some will possess these practical virtues to the fullest—including the virtue of practical wisdom, based, as we saw above, on practical knowledge of all that Aristotle tries to bring the readers and hearers of his *Ethics* and *Politics* to know about the human good. And, among those, some will be the political leaders, living the “second happiest” life of *NE* 10.8 (see above, p. 20-1). Yet others will even lead the happiest life without qualification: the life of full practical virtue, but devoted to philosophical knowledge and theory as their actually achieved highest good.⁴⁰ These varied levels of virtue and types of happy life among the people of a polis according to nature will become important below, but for now we can set them aside, and focus simply upon what it means that all the citizens of this “natural” polis are virtuous people (at a level at least of decency), and together succeed in living well, and thus achieve that for which poleis exist.

It is crucially important to notice that when Aristotle says the polis-koinonia is for the sake of living well, he is conceiving living well (i.e., virtuously) as the central common activity of the citizens of a polis (that is, one that is constituted and functions according to nature). As we have seen, for him, a koinonia simply is at bottom a set of common activities. When he declares that a polis is for the sake of living well he makes virtuous activity the central common activity defining the polis-koinonia. Living virtuously corresponds for the polis to a family’s

shared daily activities in the household and the other than daily ones shared in the koinonia of the village—the local religious and cultural and social and economic activities of the village. But in this case, as part of its total self-sufficiency for human life, all the actions and activities of the polis-members are included in the resulting koinonia, since virtue itself (at any rate practical virtue of character) provides the motivation that is expressed in and causes the doing of all of its possessors' actions. The life of virtue that the polis aims at and makes possible is thus a person's total life (insofar as that consists of actions and activities they freely engage in). In this it differs from the lesser koinoniai of household and village. In the latter, selected common activities take place within a larger context that includes many private activities of each participant that are not, or need not be, shared with others. This consequence follows from Aristotle's conception of the practical virtues as governing the whole of one's life: it governs all one's preferences, the relative evaluations of all other goods besides the good of virtue itself, and in consequence the basis for all one's decisions and actions. Thus, the shared life of virtue that Aristotle maintains the polis is for includes all of their shared household and village activities, now conducted throughout in accordance with the virtues of character and practical intellect—or, in the case of the merely decent citizens among them, at least with good habits of non-rational feeling, including an active love of the fine, and some rational motivation (βούλησις) inclining them to do the actions required by the practical virtues. But it includes many new activities too, including explicitly political ones—and much more, as well. It is all-encompassing.

Just like the activities making up the household and village koinoniai, then, Aristotle conceives these activities of the virtues, central to the life of a polis, as common ones, engaged in by the citizens in common. The activities of virtue in the polis, though most of them will be the work of some single individual, constitute a common enterprise pursued, in the first instance, as with village and household activities, for the sake of the good inherent in those very

activities (in this case, the activities of exercising the virtues). These are to be conceived, somehow, as a common good for all the participants, and not a divided one, of which each citizen would get only a private share, separate for each.⁴¹ In the polis as it is according to nature the citizens conceive of themselves as each pursuing (and, indeed achieving) his or her own personal good (the highest good of living constantly in the exercise of the virtues in all their individual actions, choices, practical judgments and attitudes), but only through pursuing that good as a part of the common pursuit, along with all the other citizens, of the virtuous life of the polis itself, i.e. the virtuous life of all the citizens. Aristotle is conceiving this common good, of which the good realized by each in their own virtuous actions is a part, as achieved by all of them acting together. Since it is achieved by all of them acting together (somehow), the whole of it—the good of the city, i.e. the citizens—becomes a single good achieved by them all.

So much is implied by the idea, which I have developed above in discussing the common activities making up the lesser *koinoniai* contained within the polis, of how activities constitute *koinoniai*. The citizens' activities of virtue are the common ones constituting this overarching *koinonia*, the one that is sufficient for the complete development of the capacities belonging to human nature, and so for the human good, and a happy life, for all—at whatever level and in whatever degree they possess the virtues that make a happy life possible. But how are we to understand that the virtue and virtuous activity of all are in fact to be pursued by each as common goods—goods in which all share? How does one do one's virtuous actions and live one's virtuous life as part of some common good shared by oneself and all one's fellow citizens? Are we to understand that (as with the common activities of master and slave) in some way each virtuous action of any individual citizen is itself an accomplishment, not of that single person alone, but of the whole moral community of the polis? Is each citizen somehow a co-agent with each other one in the doing of their virtuous actions? Or is it simply (as with the common good

pursued in the activities of child-rearing and daily conversation and other interactions in the family) that each does their own actions in such a way as to interlock with those of others and thereby constitute a larger good, that of the whole community's living virtuously? In short, when Aristotle maintains that we should see the lives of virtue led by the citizens of a polis that is constituted according to nature, as consisting of virtuous actions undertaken somehow in common, as shared actions of them all, how are we to understand this? There are two connected questions here. What does it mean for all to be involved in the doing of the actions of each? What does it mean for each, as a result, to share in the good achieved by his fellow citizens, one by one, in the good achieved in their actions?

We can begin to answer these questions by noting that each of the citizens, in participating in this koinonia, thinks of his or her own scheme of values, contained in the virtuous outlook on life with its assignments of relative and comparative value to all the goods available to a human being, including virtuous activity itself, as something he or she shares with their fellow-citizens. This scheme of values, they think, is not just something each has come to understand as correct through one's own personal experience and education—as a matter of one's private moral insight. They and their fellow citizens have made a common and mutually agreed decision to support this scheme of values. It is something they all, individually and collectively, have come to understand (to some degree: fully, by some of them, less than completely by others) as the correct one for human beings to live by. It forms the basis of their city's legal system, and of their agreed and common conception of what is just and unjust in the designing and implementation of institutions of self-government. It governs their system of public education and their criminal law and its administration. In living according to their scheme of values each conceives that scheme as a common, mutually agreed and understood, basis for

all of them, together, to be living. It is on that basis, and with that implicitly in mind, that each does all their particular acts of virtue.

Moreover, one's fellow-citizens not just espouse as correct one's own scheme of values but can be seen themselves actually to live according to it. So, with the increased strength of commitment that comes from seeing one's values actively affirmed by one's neighbors, in a common way of life, one can be assured (as assured as any human being could ever be) of the truth of one's own moral beliefs. Other human beings not only say they see things the same way, but show they believe it by the way they live. That widespread agreement in practice is strong evidence that these beliefs, and this scheme of values, does derive from a correct use of reason itself, and is not some merely arbitrary social invention or some other aberration. With that assurance, they can count on themselves, as they might well not otherwise be able to do (on this see further below), to carry out unwaveringly their commitment to acting always virtuously, whatever the difficulties or pressures of circumstances might be. They see their own views as not something private to themselves and a few other people like them, or something merely a matter of how "we" in a certain family or of a certain class live and pride ourselves on living. These are a whole polis-sized population's shared reflective judgment about human life. By manifesting in their own actions and steady way of life their common moral convictions, therefore, each of them lends support to each of the others when that person's own efforts in the common enterprise require some significant personal cost, or loss. Each of them, implicitly at least, sees their own virtuous actions, especially when undertaken under significant pressure of circumstances, as part of a mutually supportive system for sustaining the similar actions of all the others. They recognize the moral benefits to themselves along with the others in thus seeing their own virtuous actions as undertaken in this spirit of a common and shared way of life.

In this way, they can think of their own, and the others', acceptance of and commitment to, and their ability to sustain, a life of moral virtue as something to which all of them contribute equally. In each virtuous action done by any of them there is a strong psychological background of support coming from the regular behavior of all the others in which they evince their shared commitment to this way of life and the scheme of values it rests upon. Each virtuous action done by any of them has part of its own causation in the regular virtuous actions of the others. Thus, each one is right to think that the good they achieve for themselves in their own virtuous actions is also the product of a joint effort together with the others, aimed at the common good for all of a virtuous life led by them all.⁴² There is (most often) a single agent when any virtuous action is done, but that agent in so acting is drawing upon support coming from the common and visibly shared commitment of all to this way of life and to its supreme value for a human being. In that way, both the act itself and the good that it achieves (in being an act of virtue) is shared in by all the others as well. The act and the good are legitimately seen, and felt, by the agent, and by everyone else who knows of it, as a common accomplishment. As a result, the good each achieves in his own virtuous actions is not limited to the good in those actions themselves, but expands to include shares in the further moral good that it helps to bring about in the actions of all the others.

Education in this system of values and in living according to it begins, of course, in the home, in the daily life of the household, as children are being raised by their parents to be morally well-functioning adults. But, as Aristotle once says,⁴³ children and others in a household must be educated "with an eye to the constitution." Whatever virtues they acquire in their household life, and learn to exercise there, must be calibrated to the larger life they will lead as members of the political community of which the household is the smallest and, in one way, basic part. This is one important aspect of what Aristotle means by saying at the outset of the

Politics that the polis-koinonia contains within itself and controls or regulates the other koinoniai. The household has as one of its necessary functions to provide a proper context for children to receive training in the virtues. But this must not be seen as directed merely toward the proper regulation of the goods of daily life with one's intimates in an extended family. That life is indeed the essential province of the household-koinonia. All the educational activities of the household must be carried out as activities taking place, no doubt, within the household—but as belonging to the life of the specifically political community of the polis itself, not life in a household wrench ed for purposes of theory out of that wider context. They are an education for conceiving of the decent way of life the children are being habituated to want to live, both inside and outside the confines of the household, as a communal undertaking, in which each person in all their own decent behavior is also giving support to, and reciprocally receiving support from, the decent behavior of others.

This, then, is how I propose we should understand Aristotle's admittedly brief and quite unelaborated account of the polis as a koinonia. We can see now how Aristotle's theory of the polis-koinonia proposes for its citizens a common good larger than the good each could have achieved simply by living a socially and psychologically isolated life of virtue. Each participates, as a sort of co-agent, in the good consisting of all the other citizens' virtuous activities, as well, of course, more directly and intimately, as agent of their own. They participate in this larger good, and can claim a share of it, not, or not merely, because they act upon a mutually shared system of values, in which each does their part in helping to achieve the good belonging to some common project, in the way that participants in an interesting conversation or other cooperative activity, such as a well-played game, do. They mutually give each other significant support, drawn on by each as they do their individual virtuous actions, through the commitment to those values that each exhibits in their turn through their fine actions, and through the

motivation for and understanding of the virtuous life as the human good that they display in doing them. This support does not make each a full co-agent in the virtuous actions of others, as with the master in relation to the slave's work. But it does mean that each is implicated in all the actions of all the others, as an approving and supportive partner, much as in the interactions of a mother and father in their cooperative activities of childrearing, or in a good conversation (despite the differences, noted above, n. 42, between moral activities and the results of these other cooperations). And the common good it makes possible is not, like the goods of these other cooperative activities, some encompassing new activity, or set of activities, to which the different activities of each of the participating agents contribute and together constitute; it is the very same good, namely the good of virtuous activity, but now a good belonging to others than the single primary agent him- or herself.⁴⁴

POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE/UNDERSTANDING AS NECESSARY FOR SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Let us now return to Aristotle's argument in *NE* 10.9. There he argues that the approved hearers of his lectures on ethics need to continue their studies through hearing lectures on politics. As we saw, he clearly implies that they need that further study, in major part, in order to become fully good and virtuous people, and so, to be able to live completely fulfilled and happy lives. This is the first reason he gives. But we saw a second reason, too, one not clearly stated as such, but apparent to us on reflection: they also need it because they (or most of them) are expecting, and he is expecting them, to become political leaders in their communities. In that role (and, possibly, as adviser to other communities, or to monarchs or other dynasts), they will have to have and apply this further knowledge if they are to succeed, as they will wish to, in improving the ordinary citizens' lives, whether of their own or other cities. We have now seen that on Aristotle's account of the moral or practical virtues, as it unfolds in the *Politics*, living the life of virtue in a polis-koinonia (its natural home) is in fact a

joint project, in which all one's individual virtuous actions are understood, and conceived as one does them, as parts of a larger common project, with one's fellow citizens, in living virtuously as a whole community. The polis is the self-sufficient koinonia, whose *raison d'être* is to make possible (and actual), if it is organized and lived according to nature, the fully good human life. There, it is a life of virtue lived in common, in the way I have sketched.

We need now to examine the bearing of this conception of virtuous living as a communal undertaking on the first of these two reasons that Aristotle gives in *NE* 10.9 why those studying ethics with him need to complete their studies through investigating with him the first principles of politics. Aristotle says this is needed if one is actually to live virtuously. How are we to understand that claim? We can begin by setting aside as irrelevant the possibility that, due to a combination of lucky circumstances, someone might acquire the virtues through being brought up in an excellent family and, due to unusual native insight and strength of character, be able as adults to live a full life of virtue even in an isolated location, or in a thoroughly corrupt polity where there exists no sufficient body of like-minded others with whom to form the kind of community Aristotle presupposes in his account of a polis according to nature. Aristotle's claim should be taken to relate not to what might or might not happen if someone is extraordinarily lucky. Rather, it concerns what happens in the nature of things, given human nature (even when perfected through natural processes—but not lucky ones), and the natural world at large (including what can naturally be expected to hold among a normally diverse human population). Our question then is: why does Aristotle think anyone who is going to live a life of virtue (practical virtue, in at least the first instance) needs to grasp the first principles of politics, and their application to the social and political organization of life in a polis?

In addressing this question we need to bear in mind that, as I indicated in my account of the common life of virtue led by all the citizens together of a polis according to nature, there

are significant differences of level and extent of virtue characterizing different ones among the citizens.⁴⁵ They all share the same conception of the human good as consisting in virtuous living, and they all live virtuously and so happily—but some at the level of mere decency, others at that of full virtue; among the latter, some are political leaders, others not; and among these others, some lead private lives devoted to the pursuit and practice of philosophical knowledge, at its deepest, while the rest lead more normal private lives devoted to family, friends, socially productive work and cultural activities of a less rarefied kind, and the like. These differences will affect how one answers this question in relation to the different sorts of person and life.

We can start by considering the political leaders.⁴⁶ These, as I have said, live the secondarily happiest “political life” of *NE* 10.8. I have mentioned just above that these people need to know political science (πολιτική ἐπιστήμη) in order to do their chosen work properly, that of leading their cities well (as well as offering advice to those outside who need it). It is true, also, that they have to have and exercise in their leaders’ activities the full practical virtues, of character and intellect. The knowledge they need for the task of political leadership is not some merely theoretical grasp of political science. It has to be a practical knowledge; indeed, as we have seen, Aristotle holds it is nothing other than the same knowledge that constitutes practical wisdom, and in having practical wisdom, as Aristotle argues, they will also have to have, and will have, the full virtues of character too. And possessing these virtues leads them to want to take a leadership role—not only because of the good that, being virtuous, they want to do their fellow-citizens, but more especially because, as this knowledge makes them realize, the exercise of their virtues as political leaders provides the widest and deepest scope for exercising them. As Aristotle says, the good of a city is “a greater and more final or end-like thing” and “finer and more godlike” to achieve than one’s own happiness alone (*NE* 1.2.1094b8-10). And these are consummate lovers of the fine.

So far, however, this sounds rather formalistic. Yes, Aristotle is committed to all these doctrines, about political knowledge and practical wisdom having the same content, and being practical not theoretical, and about the mutual presupposition between practical wisdom and virtue of character. And these do commit him to holding that in order to live virtuously and happily the citizens capable of and suited for political leadership will learn the principles of politics, if they can, and use them both in doing their political work and (in the form of practical wisdom) in leading their whole lives (not just in doing that work). And Aristotle's claim that citizens of the polis according to nature (including these leaders) live their life of virtue as a common project in shared virtuous activity implies that the leaders will intend all their virtuous activities, both the leadership ones and the rest, as their own contribution to the common life, and the common good, brought about by all, in part by these virtuous actions of which they alone are the primary agents. But what is it about virtue and virtuous living that requires of them that they see things that way? Nothing in their role as political leaders, bent on making the life of their city as happy as possible, and so as virtuous as possible, and therein aiming to attain their own happiness, seems to require that they do that. They might care deeply about virtue, their own and that of others (virtue, to be sure, in the latter case, mostly merely at the level of decency), but as essentially two separate concerns. They could conceive virtue as a private possession by each one who has it, opening up to him or her the good of virtuous activity, where that good is a personal and private accomplishment of each. They might exercise their own virtues on that basis, in the expanded and deep way that only using them in activities of political leadership makes possible, without conceiving of themselves as joined with the rest of their fellow-citizens in a common project of sustaining a common and shared life of moral virtue for all, and a common good provided to them all through that means. In their virtuous activities of leadership they could be aiming at the good of their fellow-citizens entirely

as an external objective of their actions, while at the same time aiming, as a separate, internal or constituent end, at their own good, simply in acting virtuously, both in those leadership activities and in all the others making up their life.

What reason do they see, then, for going the one step further demanded by Aristotle's theory of the virtuous life as a common one lived together with one's fellow-citizens? Here again one must speculate a bit. Two things come to mind. First is something not so much a matter simply of the nature of virtue itself, or of normal human nature as what needs to be perfected by virtue, but rather a significant and interesting consequence for human beings of regarding virtue in the communal way. Even though these leaders can have the satisfaction and achieve through their actions the fineness of seeing their city flourish in moral terms under their leadership without making their actions part of a common life of virtue in union with their fellow-citizens, that leaves the good of and in the other citizens' lives an external good for them, something they bring about but do not participate in. They do not get that good as something personal to them, in the way that the people doing the virtuous actions themselves do. It is something they can take credit for, it is a good for them, but still, it is the same rank of good as the other good achievements they attain through the use of their virtues in other aspects of their lives. (It is a good at the second level, as described above, p. 37-8.) But when they pursue their life of virtue as part of a common enterprise, sustained externally through their efforts as leaders in directing the educational and other institutions of their city—an enterprise engaged in also in their own ways by the others, including ones less politically and morally well accomplished than they—they come, as I have explained, to share directly and internally, and not in that mere external, productive way, in the good consisting in all those other virtuous activities. That expands and deepens the range of good that they directly participate in, by expanding the virtuous activity in which their own virtue gets expressed. Their

virtue now expresses itself also in the virtuous activities of the others with whom they live this common life of virtue. As noted already, they exercise their virtues in this communal way not only in their private lives, but also in their actions in directing the city's life. This combination gives them the widest possible scope for virtuous living. Through this doubly direct, personal, participation in all the good that the virtuous activity of the whole polis constitutes, brings with it a final, complete, absolutely fully perfect, life of virtue—in fact, as Aristotle says in *NE* 10.8, the happiest life possible of practical virtue.

I think that is one powerfully effective consideration these leaders will see, giving rational support to the life of shared virtuous living to which they will in any event have been brought up. Furthermore, this life would be, and have to be, grounded in the full knowledge of political science. This is obviously so for their leadership activities (it would be required even if they did not regard those as parts of a system of shared activities in pursuit of a communal end). Less obviously, and apparently less extensively, this same knowledge would ground all their other actions, as private persons and in their private lives. This is something, as we have seen, that Aristotle commits himself to when he adopts the position that political science and practical wisdom are the same body of knowledge. Practical wisdom provides, and reasonably so, on Aristotle's theory, the fundamentally necessary grounding for action that is fully good, fully in conformance with the requirements for virtue of character. But now we can see why Aristotle may be right to insist on that identity. If all the leaders' virtuous actions—including their daily lives as private persons, with their families and friends—are to be conceived (in part) as their particular contributions to a common activity of living virtuously, undertaken and supported by all the citizens, they need at least a deep knowledge of the basic principles of political science in order to carry them out properly. (This is something, it would seem, they would not need if they did not regard their virtues and their virtuous activity in this communal way, but only as

their personal possessions and goods.) That knowledge contains the full account of what it means that human beings are polis-living creatures (“political animals”), of how a koinonia is constituted—how the different groups that a polis needs to have in it relate to one another in their contributions to and shares of the good consisting in this common enterprise. This they clearly need, in order to do virtuous actions in this communal way.

Required also, at least in general terms, is knowledge about the varieties of political constitution and their merits and demerits, and about the one that would be best under optimal, at least in principle naturally available, circumstances.⁴⁷ Of course, these latter, more or less “technical,” details are not needed in any specific way in many or most of their private activities. Nonetheless it is reasonable of Aristotle to hold that this whole, complete, body of knowledge, extending to all the technical details, must pervade their every virtuous action, providing a constant framework of understanding in which each action of virtue would be seen as falling into its proper place. If this complete knowledge of human nature and the human good were lacking in an agent—whether a political leader or not—as the intellectual grounding of their actions, they themselves and those actions could not claim the full perfection of human nature that, properly conceived, virtue expresses. And Aristotle’s reasonable demand is that the political leaders of a polis existing according to nature should be fully virtuous persons.

That, then, is a first consideration helping us to see the political leaders’ reasons in taking the step of conceiving their own virtuous lives as parts of a common project of living virtuously as a whole community. There is a second consideration as well, this time a matter simply of the nature of virtue itself and of normal human nature as what needs to be perfected by virtue. This applies not only to the political leaders but to all the other citizens as well: the fully virtuous ones who do not choose lives focused on government and public service, including as a subset the fully virtuous ones who live lives of philosophical inquiry and knowledge, plus the

rest (the bulk) of the population, who are at best fully decent people committed to a life of virtue at the level of decency. It has to do with the essential psychological fragility, belonging to human nature as such, of any human being's commitment to the moral life.

As we can see from what he says in *NE* 10.9, as discussed above,⁴⁸ Aristotle thinks that most human beings, however well-developed in the virtues, retain the human tendency to act for immediate pleasure or to avoid short-term discomfort—the tendency that training in virtue seeks to overcome. He proposes publicly promulgated laws as one remedy. This liability is found particularly among the young, but also among Aristotle's "many" (the unregenerate mass of human beings). But as he explains there (1180a1-4) he thinks it applies even to one who has acquired both good habits and sufficient practical knowledge and understanding of the human good to be living a committed decent life. Hence, even decent people, if left entirely to guidance by their private judgment, would inevitably sometimes lapse. They would fall away into unvirtuous choices and acts. However, their personal and private virtues can be expanded so as to become part of the psychological basis for a communal life devoted to virtuous activities by all, as a shared undertaking, as I have described it above. In that case, they would experience the support from the community that I mentioned (p. 46-8 above)—deriving not just from the abstract knowledge that others agree with one in supporting the same basic system of values, but from the shared and felt participation in a common commitment to those values in an interlocking common pursuit of them in all one's own, and their, virtuous actions. This would give them the added psychological boost they would need in order to more nearly overcome this apparently permanent tendency of human beings to yield to the attractions of immediate pleasure, even when it is not decent to do so. When facing such attractions they would feel not only their own rational wishes against indulging, but also the force of the whole community's decision, in which they participate, against doing so. They would also wish to continue

supporting the resolve of others through their own action's resolve. They would fall away into unvirtuous actions less often and less disastrously. Hence, a life of virtue led in that communal way would be a less defective way of living virtuously than if one led it thinking of oneself only as a single person aiming at one's own single happiness through living virtuously. It would be a psychologically more secure one, and therefore also one with fewer lapses from virtuous action. Hence, Aristotle seems to suggest, this communal life of virtue would bring with it for the political leaders too individual lives that were more completely virtuous than they could otherwise achieve.

Now, to be sure, fully virtuous people, such as the political leaders, are not nearly so much in need of psychological support through seeing their attitudes about virtue shared by others, as these more ordinary, less completely virtuous persons. It seems possible that Aristotle thinks that his authorized hearers might even reach a point in their ethical-political development where they were no longer subject to any attractions of immediate pleasure in circumstances where acting as it would incline them to would lead them to depart from virtuous action. This could happen either because they would not find any pleasure in acting that way then or because their inner psychology is sufficient to reliably give them strong enough other motivations so that they never do depart from virtuous action, even if they did sometimes feel it. Certainly, that is the ideal view Aristotle takes in describing fully virtuous persons. On the other hand, at *Politics* 3.16.1287a30-2 Aristotle says that “appetite is like a beast, and spirit (θυμός) corrupts rulers, even if they are the best men”—which is why “law [rule by which is better than by absolute rulers] is understanding without desire,” i.e. understanding without the possible corruption due to appetite or spirit which individual persons are subject to, and which haunts rule by them. That even the best men in ruling are subject to corruption (and so, to give way to vicious action in some circumstances) suggests that even the political leaders of the

best city will remain actively vulnerable to being carried away by appetite or spirit into acting unvirtuously.⁴⁹ The ideal of the *Ethics* may be too ideal: actual, normal human nature, even when perfected, may not allow single individuals, considered singly rather than as members of a community, to achieve this immunity or near-immunity from moral contraventions.

Now, presumably, Aristotle thinks that this reveals a feature of full moral virtue in itself, independently of whether the virtuous person in question is a political leader. He is saying that, for human nature as it is even at its most perfected, in actual human beings in expectable and normal circumstances of life, we find this moral fragility. His point would be that not only the leaders but all fully virtuous persons in the polis—all the fully virtuous people in the city according to nature, including those leading lives of philosophy, and the others, as well, who do not opt for the political life—are subject to this psychological frailty. If so, then the moral support given to decent people, by living a fundamentally communal decent life, would be needed and would have its salutary effects also in giving any and all fully virtuous persons reasons for making their own life of virtue part of a shared undertaking of all the citizens for virtuous living. They too could not consistently and constantly engage in virtuous activity without that moral support, and so without joining their lives with those of the others (including the merely decent people) in their polis-koinonia, by making the virtuous life of the whole community an internal objective in their pursuit of their own good through virtuous activity (both in their private affairs and in discharging their public responsibilities). Hence, we could infer a second reason the political leaders could see for taking the further step Aristotle demands of them. They would thereby make their lives more securely and completely virtuous—and so, happier too.

So much, then for the political leaders. They need to know both the first principles and all the details of political science, as Aristotle investigates those in the *Politics*, not only because

they need them in giving direction to the educational, social, and political activities of their city, with a view to helping others to live as virtuously and happily as they individually are capable of living. They need them also in order to be virtuous (fully virtuous, as Aristotle says at *NE* 10.9.1179b2-4) themselves, and lead the happiest lives that they, individually, are capable of living—the political life in which the highest good they achieve is found in their virtuous activities of political leadership. Furthermore, they need them even in order to have and exercise—consistently, reliably, and with full and unremitting commitment—the virtues in the rest of their lives, as private persons, as well. It seems true that they will not actually use much of the detailed knowledge of political regimes, their varieties, strengths and weaknesses, etc., in this part of their lives. Nonetheless, they certainly will use—constantly—the basic principles of politics and the essential political aspects of the human good in living their lives as virtuous persons. In fact, simply qua virtuous, they will have to possess a fully expanded knowledge of these political matters, since having that knowledge is one of the human perfections in which being (fully) virtuous consists. Even if the detailed knowledge is not being applied directly in many situations when they act virtuously, the whole body of knowledge does stand behind and get expressed in each of their virtuous actions, whether in their role as political leaders or not.

As we have seen, however, Aristotle does not say in *NE* 10.9 merely that this political knowledge is needed by political leaders. It is true that in the *Politics* Aristotle does seem often (for example when he speaks, as he very often does, of what “the statesman” or political leader, ὁ πολιτικός, or “the legislator” will need to take into account or do)⁵⁰ to address himself most particularly to those of his readers/hearers who are preparing themselves for political lives.⁵¹ But he means to make the same claim about anyone who is to acquire the full moral virtues and live a life successfully guided by the recognition of virtue as the highest human good. In terms of the citizenship of Aristotle’s city according to nature, these will include as many others,

besides the political leaders, as possess the full virtues of character and practical intellect, and, most particularly, the contemplative philosophers among them who (ideally anyhow) live Aristotle's absolutely happiest life. It obviously does not include the large body of citizens who are merely good, in the sense of committed, decent people: such people, almost by definition, do not possess any developed knowledge of practical matters, or political either. Being decent and living decently, on Aristotle's view, does not require knowledge at all. However, as Aristotle says, decent people do "have a share in" virtue (10.9.1179b19-20), and this suggests that if anyone who succeeds in being fully virtuous and living fully virtuously must possess and use political science in living their lives, then something parallel must hold for decent people. Aristotle must think that they need some unsystematic and perhaps only intuitive, but real, grasp of at least the basic principles of political science in order even to be committed, decent people. And from what I have said already about the life of virtue conceived as a common project of all the citizens of a polis organized and lived according to nature, one can see why he might think this. That unsystematic grasp of the principles of politics, where politics is conceived Aristotle's way, is something one might reasonably think needed for decent people to do their part in contributing to this common life, through conceiving their own decent lives as parts of a larger common enterprise in morally good living by all.

In fact, of course, as Aristotle himself clearly recognizes,⁵² the citizens of any city will be, morally speaking, a very mixed bunch. This applies also to a polis that exists according to nature, an idealization in which all the citizens will be virtuous people at one level or degree or other, living virtuous lives of one sort or another.⁵³ Hence we should treat these categories—the merely decent, the fully virtuous who are political leaders, the fully virtuous who devote themselves to philosophical study and knowledge, the fully virtuous who live neither political nor contemplative lives—only as establishing benchmarks for theoretical evaluation and judgment.

We need to bear this clearly in mind in considering how Aristotle may think his claim of the need for political knowledge if one is to become good applies to others than the political leaders. We need to think of the “decent” people, or again the “fully virtuous” ones of different categories, as specifying a complex range of types of person in each case.

The “merely decent” must be taken to include people who may have done little or nothing in their moral self-formation in adulthood than reflect on and accept their (in fact) more or less correct moral upbringing, so that they come to “wish” regularly for and decide on virtuous actions, on the basis of an established, though entirely vague and quite unargued, intellectual sense that virtue is the highest human good⁵⁴—but to include also many who have gone deeper in their thinking, perhaps by studying moral philosophy, and in any event with the result that they have a more articulate and intellectually robust grasp on some of the true reasons why that does actually constitute the highest good. They count as merely decent, however, because they do not possess the full knowledge that Aristotle himself aspires for and attempts to help his authorized readers and hearers in the *Ethics* to achieve: that is, as we have seen, the virtue of practical wisdom. Furthermore, there is no clearly marked or even easily definable line to draw between such a more seriously thoughtful decent person and, on the other side, the (so to speak) least complete true possessor of the practical knowledge that Aristotle counts as practical wisdom: we must recognize a range of accomplishment there too, in the true grasp of the philosophical principles that establish human virtue as our highest good. Presumably the political leaders in the polis as it exists in according to nature will themselves occupy a range of more or less fully good persons, not all of whom would on an acutely narrow conception count as having complete and perfect practical wisdom.

First, then, about the merely decent. It is reasonable for Aristotle to hold, as I have suggested above, that these people need some degree of—if not knowledge, then—intuitive

grasp of at least the basic principles of politics, because that grasp is surely the minimum necessary for them to be able to join in the common activity of living according to moral virtue that constitutes the polis-koinonia in which they participate. The same considerations apply in their case, as with the political leaders, for developing and seeing their virtues in this communal way. The good consisting in the virtuous activities of all the other citizens (including those of the leaders and the other fully virtuous people) become thereby internal objectives of their own virtuous actions. In that way they come to participate actively and have a share in the good of the actions of those others. That is one way in which by living their virtues in this communal way, and not as a merely personal and private matter, they expand their virtues themselves, and enrich and make more complete as virtuous activity the activity of virtue in their lives. As I mentioned already, they also obtain the benefits of psychological support in sustaining their own virtuous commitments commented on above. In that way the place of virtuous activity in their lives, being more deeply entrenched in their minds and characters, is made more secure and constant than it would be if it were instead only some private and personal pursuit. Their lives become more complete lives of virtue, wherever on the range of decency their lives may fall. In order to live that way they need to understand the polis as an overarching koinonia possessing and regulating villages and households, with their different structures and functions, as constituent sub-koinoniai; they will need to bear in mind, as they go about their daily lives, some basic reasons why the correct form of polis to live in is one that treats virtuous living for all its citizens as its organizing goal. Only so will they have a sufficiently live sense of their virtuous actions as forming part of the common life of the polis. Beyond these very general ideas they will not need to go, of course. They do not know—even at a level of intuitive grasp—and do not need to know detailed points concerning the failings, or needs, of other types of polis, or

anything about intricacies of policy-formation, of the sort that Aristotle investigates at length in his *Politics*.

The non-political fully virtuous fall into two relevant groups: those who live the contemplative life (for Aristotle, one higher and better than even the political life), and those who forego the political life instead for the practice of practical virtue alone, but at a level less expansive than that of the political life, with other work and other occupations than either philosophical or political ones. Let us first consider this second group, leaving the contemplatives aside for now, since their situation raises interesting additional questions.⁵⁵ About these we can be brief. It is true that, like the merely decent, they will not need political knowledge for the first reason that the political leaders will need it: for giving direction to the city's political affairs and decisions. But like the political leaders, and for the same reasons, they will need to have and even, in a background way, make use of, a full political knowledge (including all the detailed points) even in their private and daily lives (see above, p. 64).

Let us turn finally to the contemplative philosophers. What function does political science have for them in leading their lives? What need do they have of this knowledge, in order to be fully good and live fully good and happy lives? One of Aristotle's firm doctrines in ethical theory is that one who achieves the virtues belonging to and perfecting theoretical thinking must also have acquired (so to speak, first) the practical ones (see *NE* 10.8.1178b5-6; 6.13.1145a6-9). This is not the place to inquire into his reasons for thinking so, or to consider fully the plausibility of this view. However, we should bear in mind the following points. To pursue and achieve the good that exists in the activity of theoretical understanding is not merely to possess and exercise some information grounded in some theoretical reasons one grasps. It is to exercise the virtues of and for theorizing in acquiring and activating that understanding. The good here in question consists in the activity of those virtues in that

understanding. Aristotle holds that acquiring and exercising those virtues presupposes the possession (and, in their proper sphere, the regular and constant exercise) by the person in question of practical wisdom and the (full) ethical virtues. We might, ourselves, think of the acquisition and use of the two sets of virtues as entirely independent and unrelated, even if we could agree with Aristotle in thinking of the full perfection of a whole human person as including both. One reason why he disagrees with us, and insists on the close interconnection of the two, with practical wisdom seen as enabling and supporting the virtues of theory, is the following.

A person's practical wisdom does not, of course, direct the activities of contemplation when he or she engages in them: σοφία or theoretical wisdom does that. It is through σοφία that one experiences the good of those activities. But practical wisdom (not σοφία) is the virtue on the basis of which one knows the value of that activity, in relation to the values of other goods, both good activities and their good products or accomplishments, and good relationships with others and good experiences undergone. This good—the good of “theorizing”—is one among the first-order goods that the second-order good of practically virtuous activity oversees and organizes into a properly virtuous overall life. Even when engaging in excellent contemplative activity, if that good, on that occasion, is to form part of a well-lived life, one must also be exercising one's practical understanding of the way that what one is doing is good, and how that goodness compares with and relates to the other goods of human life. Lacking that (though it might seem a bit paradoxical to say this) one would not in fact achieve in one's activity the good itself that (otherwise) it would contain. It would be flawed as an activity of contemplative thought however, so to speak, technically competent it might be. And since it belongs to practical wisdom to know about the perfection of the whole human person, anyone who possesses that virtue will necessarily not think that obtaining the good of theorizing at just any and every moment when it might be available to us (despite its

being the very best single good) would make for a well-lived life. The cost in neglect of the legitimate social, bodily, and other goods, of concern to any whole human person, however lesser they may be taken one by one, would be prohibitive.

In any event, it is clear that Aristotle does hold that the contemplative philosophers in his city are practically virtuous people, as well as theoretically so. Hence, they need the knowledge of political science in just the same ways as I explained three paragraphs back; I won't repeat them again here. From the present point of view, the contemplative philosophers live in just the same way as the other fully virtuous non-political leaders of a city. Since they all live their moral lives on the communal basis I have outlined, they will experience their practical virtues as having the wider effects that go along with seeing them as parts of a common basis for living, shared also with the other citizens. Their practice of virtuous actions is aimed not just at their personal good in acting virtuously but at the good of virtuous action also when done by others sharing this common objective and this common practice. And as we have seen, Aristotle reasonably thinks that that way of common living is impossible without the possession and use of the full knowledge of political science. It is true, of course, that, unlike the political leaders, the contemplatives do not use their virtue and their practical knowledge in directing the life of the whole community through its political institutions. Hence they will not act within that wider and finer context for the exercise of their virtues, which the political leaders enjoy. However, they are much more than equally compensated through the consummate goodness of their theoretically excellent activities of contemplative thought and study, which the political leaders correspondingly miss altogether. They also receive, to the small extent that it may be needed, the support in their practice of the virtues that comes from seeing others joined with them in the active affirmation of the supreme human value of virtue.

There is one final point to notice about the lives of the contemplative philosophers, unique to them. I said above that in their case their practical wisdom oversees not just their morally virtuous activities, as with the rest of the citizens, but also their activities of theoretically excellent thinking and understanding. Not only is it the function of their practical wisdom to know about excellent theoretical understanding that it is the highest good for a human being (that holds equally for any other fully good person: both the political leaders and the other non-political fully good citizens discussed above). In their case, practical wisdom is exercised constantly in each particular activity of theoretically excellent thinking and understanding: such activities are in each case, in different ways, the products of both of the two sorts of virtues of thought, practical and theoretical. Since all the citizens agree with one another in the common pursuit, together, of the virtuous and happy lives of the whole community, the good these philosophers achieve in their activities of contemplation takes its place, alongside the good of their morally virtuous activity, as a contribution to the good aimed at in common with all their fellow-citizens. Hence, through the cooperative and common virtuous activities of their fellow-citizens that support the philosophers in their philosophical endeavors, especially the activities of political engagement aimed in part at sustaining the presence in the polis of philosophical inquiry, this good becomes a common good for all the citizens. The other citizens do not engage in philosophical inquiry themselves, but through their virtuous political support for its presence among them, they come to share in the good that it contributes to the common life led by the polis itself, that is, by all the citizens together. In this way, the life of the polis, i.e., the life lived in common by its citizens, becomes one in which the fundamental human goods inherent in that life, the goods of virtuous activity—excellent contemplative thought and study, as well as morally or practically virtuous activity—are, to

some degree, shared by them all. It is not merely a common life, but a common life in which all participate in all the fundamental goods that human nature makes available to human beings.

In this final section I have undertaken to understand Aristotle's reasons for his claim in *NE* 10.9 that no one can become fully good without possessing and using the full knowledge of political science, including the knowledge of constitutions and legislation that he himself investigates in the *Politics*. I have argued that Aristotle recognizes in actual human beings, even ones who achieve the perfection of human nature that possession of the human virtues constitutes, a continuing openness to being drawn to indulge in pleasure or "spirited" satisfactions even when it is wrong to do so. We can overcome this weakness, inherent in human nature, under normal and naturally attainable circumstances, to the extent that it can be overcome at all, only by joining together with other like-minded people in a common pursuit of virtuous living as a joint project and effort. His account in the *Politics* of the polis "as it exists according to nature" describes such a community. The need for political knowledge as a basis for virtuous living can be understood and even justified if we accept these rather plausible further Aristotelian ideas and theories. In presenting and elaborating this interpretation I have gone considerably beyond anything Aristotle himself says explicitly, or, in part, even clearly suggests, either in the *NE* or the *Politics*. I hope that I will at least have shown some of the moral and philosophical resources, and the considerable interest, of Aristotelian ethics and politics.⁵⁶

¹ See 1094b10-11, where Aristotle says that his course of study (μέθοδος) in the *Ethics* is in a certain way a political one; just before, at 1094a26, he says that this study is aimed at acquiring or conveying the knowledge (in outline) of the highest good and that the “knowledge or capacity” in question belongs to the “most controlling or most architectonic” science. He identifies that as “political” science.

² Being fully good means possessing all the human virtues for action, including practical wisdom. Aristotle implies in the 2.2 passage that, even if it might be possible (for all he says there) to become practically wise (and therefore fully good) without philosophical study, the study of ethics that he is engaging his readers in aims at that goal. See *NE* 6.13.1145a1, referred to below.

³ This is not to deny that in virtuous people there will also be some additional feeling of attraction for virtuous activity, something emotional in character, as we could say; my point is only that for Aristotle practical understanding of values, as values, in and of itself provides its own, separate, sort of motivating push or pull toward virtuous activity. On the additional feeling, see below, on the “love of the fine” about which Aristotle speaks in this connection. This love is just such an emotional attraction, and all virtuous people experience it, in addition to the purely rational motivation provided by the understanding itself in grasping the value of virtuous activity.

⁴ See John M. Cooper, “Some Remarks on Aristotle’s Moral Psychology,” *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). As for texts of Aristotle, see especially *De Motu Animalium* 7.701a7-14, where one must note carefully that Aristotle is saying that whenever

one thinks (i.e., thinks as assertions one is making in thinking them) together, as one assertive thought, the two premises of a syllogism, whether in theoretical or in practical thinking, then one psychologically must (in the one case) go on to think (assert) the conclusion, and (in the other case) to act. (One must add, in the latter case, that action might be prevented by a countervailing motivation, such as excessive appetite or anger.) His claim is that rational beings are subject to this pair of psychological necessities. In the practical case the thought of the two premises, together as one, constitutes what Aristotle only later, 701b1, calls a βούλησις. This special motivation belongs to reason itself: simply holding, on some basis of thought, that something is good, and thinking of it as being good, includes a motivation toward having or achieving that good thing.

⁵ Old translations tend to use “the noble” or “honorable” or (morally) “beautiful.” “Fine” probably strikes a better note in British ears (the recent translators have mostly been British) than in American. But there seems to be no translation that captures well the force and nuances of the Greek term. It connotes balance, harmony, order, and the attractiveness inherent in anything with those qualities for any rational being. If our modern understanding of beauty better highlighted that basis of attractiveness one might opt for the translation “beautiful.” So, though I greatly dislike its archaic overtone, I will continue to use ‘the fine’.

⁶ At 1.3.1095a2-4 Aristotle emphasizes that adolescent boys (who might be ready for other philosophical studies) are not suitable students of ethics and politics, in part because this study presupposes considerable experience of life. So those who come to study ethics with him are past the stage of adolescence and have begun to have, as young adults, the additional

qualifications in experience of life that Aristotle requires for the effective study of philosophical ethics. Only adult people have all the qualifications he requires.

⁷ In this sketch of “decent” people I am offering an expanded interpretation of what Aristotle understands the people to be like that he refers to at *NE* 10.9.1179b5 and not infrequently elsewhere as ἐπιεικεῖς (see below, pp. 000 ff). Sometimes he calls them μέτριοι (4.1.1121b6; see also 1125b13, 5.12.1136b20, and *EE* 2.5.1222a34); and often the context suggests that even when speaking of people as σπουδαῖοι he means not (as he sometimes does) the fully virtuous—possessed of virtues both of character and practical intellect—but these lesser, more ordinary, good people possessed of that basic decency that approximates to the virtues of character alone. As my discussion below, I hope, shows, this category of good moral agents plays a much larger role in Aristotle’s ethical and political theory than commentators have generally recognized.

⁸ I follow Rowe here (S. Broadie and C. Rowe, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, Translation, Introduction, and Commentary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002) in taking τούτους to refer not to μισθούς (fees), as e.g. Ross and Irwin do, but to λόγοι at the beginning of the sentence. Taken the other way the clause does little more than just repeat what was already said with δικαίως (justly). Taking it Rowe’s way makes better sense, in context, too.

⁹ I.e., the ἐλευθέριοι, lit. the free: I cannot think of a single English adjective that could capture what I take the meaning here to be. Ross’ “generous-minded” and Irwin’s and Rowe’s “civilized” are no good.

¹⁰ He would say this explicitly if, with Irwin in a bracketed explanation in his translation of “these things” in the last sentence, we glossed them as “these goods, for an individual and for a community.” But Burnet (n. *ad loc.*) seems more right to take “these things” to mean “to secure and preserve the good for man.” It only results from special facts about what the good for a human being—as an individual—is, and how it is to be achieved and preserved, that (as I argue below) in knowing it one also has to know the highest good for a people and for cities. Hence the most Aristotle says explicitly here is that we need to learn what the human good is, and how to secure and preserve it, through our studies in ethics to follow; he leaves it unspecified whether we will do this for the sake of securing our own good individually or (also) that of cities and peoples. It is true, of course, that by describing the latter goal as finer and more godlike he suggests that we should be pursuing the latter goal as well as the former one in our study of ethics. But he does not say that outright.

¹¹ We are indebted to R. Bodéus (see *Le philosophe et la cité*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1982; English translation, *The Political Dimensions of Aristotle's Ethics*, tr. by Jan Edward Garrett, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) for forcefully drawing attention to this political dimension of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. According to Bodéus Aristotle gave these lectures exclusively to persons who came to hear them as ambitious aspirants to political leadership in their cities, not as aspiring philosophers, or laymen wishing to get what benefit they could from philosophical understanding for leading their private lives; Aristotle's lectures on *Ethics* teach them what they need to know about human happiness (and related topics) as a first step toward learning, further, through Aristotelian lectures on political systems and systems of laws, how to design and direct political institutions with a view to bringing about good order in their cities. This benefits the ordinary citizens by making their lives be as happy

as is possible for them, but equally or more important, it prevents them from interfering inappropriately and damagingly in the philosophers' freedom to do their esoteric philosophical work and undermine the civic support needed for living their even happier lives. Bodéus' unfortunately one-sided account of *NE* 10.9 (see his chapter 2, pp. 47-68 of the Eng. tr.), on which much of his overall view rests, overlooks altogether the implications of the opening of the chapter, where Aristotle speaks of what "we" need to do to become good people (he nowhere in his book even alludes to the opening lines of *NE* 2.2). He also naively misunderstands Aristotle's theory as assigning the ethical virtues to people solely and sufficiently on the basis of habituation in decent ways of feeling and acting (see pp. 2, 51, among other places). In fact, as I have emphasized already and will emphasize still more below, for Aristotle one cannot become a fully good person without a developed understanding of basic truths about human nature and communal human life. Bodéus misses altogether the intended role of Aristotle's lectures in both *Ethics* and *Politics* in educating their hearers (and readers) for that most fully realized possession of the ethical virtues. It is a serious error to suppose, as he does, that the education of students who intend to function as (semi-)professional political leaders is Aristotle's sole or even his leading purpose in his lectures. It is one, but only one, of two principal ones. (See further in my text below.)

¹² One of the provisions of a good constitution will be systems of laws specifying and encouraging decent, and discouraging, even punishing, indecent behavior. However, other provisions will establish philosophy and philosophical instruction in the city—at any rate, I take this to be a somewhat underexplicit provision of the city that "satisfies our dreams" sketched in books 7 and 8 of the *Politics*. Hence, Aristotle may be suggesting in *NE* 10.9 a further purpose to be achieved by having his students learn about constitutions. At least some of them, by

going on after completing their studies to function as active political leaders, will use their political knowledge in instituting philosophical study in their cities. They will thus provide the conditions needed if people like some others, and the most intellectually gifted, of their fellow-students can be raised and educated so as to live not only fully virtuous lives, but completely happy ones—not just happiest in the second rank, but happiest, period. On the distinction between second happiest and absolutely happiest lives, see further below, p. 20-1.

¹³ Among these few, of course, are to be found all Aristotle's prospects for the effective study of ethics—once they have acquired sufficient experience of life.

¹⁴ See Gabriel Richardson Lear, *Happy Lives and the Highest Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 177 ff.

¹⁵ In 1.5 Aristotle distinguishes three conceptions of the happy life as particularly worthy of note (see 1095b17-19): the life of gross pleasure (which is worthy of note only because it's the way most people live), the contemplative life, and the life thought to be devoted to public honor and esteem, the "political life" led by political leaders (ὁ πολιτικὸς βίος). In that chapter Aristotle drops the life of pleasure from consideration. The two surviving ones resurface in book 10.7-8.

¹⁶ Or, more precisely, as the highest activity actually achieved in it. Aristotle seems to think that even in this second happiest life excellent contemplation serves somehow as a goal of and for the practically virtuous activities it is centered round, though an unachieved one. See Richardson Lear (2004) and J. M. Cooper "Plato and Aristotle on 'Finality' and '(Self-)Sufficiency'," in *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good* (Princeton University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ See his “The Good of Political Activity,” in G. Patzig, ed., *Aristoteles’ “Politik”* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1990).

¹⁸ See Aristotle’s discussion of political knowledge in *NE* 6.8, starting with the assertion that “political science and practical wisdom are the same state of mind, but their being is not the same” (1141b23-4). Their being differs, Aristotle explains, because we use the name “political knowledge/science” for the same state of mind “as it relates to the polis,” while as it “relates to oneself as an individual” it is given the name “practical wisdom.” As it relates to the polis, he goes on to say, it is knowledge of legislation and political administration; as it relates to oneself as an individual it includes knowledge of household management. Clearly, on Aristotle’s view, one cannot have either political knowledge or practical wisdom without having both: they are precisely the same knowledge, knowledge of (so to speak) the same body of knowledge. Strictly speaking, according to what Aristotle says in 6.8, one will call the knowledge being exercised “political knowledge” only when it is being employed in the way an expert active politician does, for achieving the good of cities through providing the means for as good and happy a life for its citizens as is possible; whereas, for a person who regularly applies that same knowledgeable state of mind only in living their individual life, the correct name to use is “practical wisdom.” However, as I explain below, the identity of the underlying state of mind means that the knowledge being used to direct one’s own life (whether as a fully virtuous political leader or a virtuous private citizen) makes essential use of the political orientation given in this passage for this body of knowledge. Aristotle here declares that body of knowledge to be the intellectual content of that practical understanding which, as we have seen, he aims to convey (but only in part) in his lectures on ethics. From what Aristotle says in this chapter it is manifest that if he intends the successful, approved hearers of his complete series of lectures on politics (what he

gives us in the *Ethics* plus the *Politics*) to acquire political knowledge thereby (as he plainly and explicitly does), he equally intends that they acquire (completed) practical wisdom by the same means. This supports my claim above that the *Ethics* aims to help us become fully good by providing, in the content of its lectures, the essential basis of that practical understanding that constitutes the virtue of practical wisdom.

¹⁹ Aristotle could hardly, of course, have done this explicitly himself in writing the last chapter of the *NE*. That would be to presuppose crucial results of the studies he is only suggesting the further need for. This fact must explain Aristotle's indirection in drawing on his views (*NE* 10.8) about the political life as second happiest one in justifying his claim that we need to study legislation and constitutions in order finally to become fully good people ourselves. It also allows us, his interpreters, quite reasonably to draw on the theories of the *Politics* as what must, in addition, have been in his mind in making that claim. He was thinking about both connections.

²⁰ I leave the Greek word for "city" untranslated, or adopt it into English, because of the special features of an ancient city, which occupy so significant a place in Aristotle's work: its sovereignty and wide territorial bounds.

²¹ In what follows I discuss only the three subordinate *κοινωνία* that Aristotle himself discusses explicitly (those of master and slave, parents and children, and the village), in addition to that of the polis itself. But Aristotle clearly holds that all of what in contemporary political philosophy are discussed as voluntary "associations" of different groups of citizens in clubs, religions, professional organizations, and the like, are similarly subordinate to the polis-*κοινωνία* and "regulated" by it in the ways I go on to explain for these other *κοινωνία*. It is clear, I think, that

Aristotle's conception of how common activities constitute *κοινωνία*, and what it means for these activities to be common, applies equally to these associations. I leave this important application of Aristotle's theory to one side, however. It involves complications that, though interesting in themselves, would take us too far away from the more fundamental matters I am concerned with in this paper. (I have benefited from discussion with Gabriel Richardson Lear on these matters.)

²² Strictly speaking, what Aristotle says is only that every *κοινωνία* "stands constituted" (*συνεστηκεάν*) for the sake of some good. When he adds in support of this that all everyone's actions aim at what they take to be some good he could be pointing to the actions of people in setting up such entities, and not (also) to actions of heirs of which the *κοινωνία* itself consists. However, even so, the entity itself must be (thought by those who set it up to be) some good for themselves as human beings. And this good must, for Aristotle, consist in or include some activities, since on Aristotle's own views about the nature of the human good, activities of virtue are its core and *sine qua non*. Thus, for him, the good that any *κοινωνία* is for, and of which it consists, is some activities, ones that are engaged in in common by the relevant group, which constitute it as the *κοινωνία* in question.

²³ In this and my other translations from the *Politics* I follow C.D.C. Reeve's excellent translation (Indianapolis and Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), but with many (usually unmarked) departures from it.

²⁴ This is clearly implied by what Aristotle says of the polis at *Pol.* 3.6.1278b15-17; it is or involves the shared or common life: τὴν κοινωσίαν τῆς ζωῆς.

²⁵ See Liddell-Scott-Jones (1940) s.v. κοινός II 2 for the very common use of τὸ κοινόν as a noun meaning the state or government of a given community, and (in the plural) its public affairs or public money.

²⁶ At first (1252a27) Aristotle mentions only husband and wife as participants in this κοινωσία (for the first use of this term in application to the husband-wife union, see 1252b10); but later he adds the children that, as he says from the beginning (see 1252a28) are the purpose of their union: 1.3.1253b6-7, and 1.12 passim.

²⁷ Aristotle speaks at 1252a6 in terms of containment (περιέχειν) of lesser by greater κοινωσίαι, but in subsequent chapters in terms of composition of the greater out of the lesser (see 1252b9-10, 15-16, 27-8), and of the lesser ones as “the parts” of the greater (1253b1, 1260b13). Already at the end of chapter 1 he speaks of a polis as a “compound” (σύνθετον) having parts out of which it is composed (1252a18-23), and these turn out to be these subordinate κοινωσίαι of household and village. It is important to realize that composition here does not mean that the whole (polis or village) just consists of the parts, or even consists of them at all. As we will see, the joint activities of which a village-κοινωσία or a polis-κοινωσία actually does consist go beyond those of the κοινωσίαι that are their parts, and, indeed, the activities making up these parts get altered and extended by their inclusion in the whole. On Aristotle’s analysis, the ultimate parts of any polis are the κοινωσίαι of master-slave and

husband-wife making up its constituent households. (In another sense of “part” it is the individual human beings who are the ultimate parts, see 1.3.1253a18-29: they are the sole members of or participants in the polis, that is, they are the ones that jointly do the actions of which it consists. See also 3.1.1274b38-41.)

²⁸ When Aristotle says that every polis “exists by nature” at 1.2.1252b30 (see similarly 1253a2, 25, and 7.8.1328a21-2) it is certainly not necessary, and presumably quite wrong, to interpret him as claiming that among the “natures” that are to be found at work in the natural world is the “nature” of a polis—“as if a polis is a natural entity like an animal” or a human being, as David Keyt supposes (“Three Basic Theorems in Aristotle’s *Politics*,” in Keyt and F. Miller, eds., *A Companion to Aristotle’s Politics*, Blackwell, London: 1991, 118-140). Aristotle can naturally, and in any event best, be taken to mean only that poleis come into being and exist because they are needed as fulfillments of these two other natures, which are, in his view, among the natures making up the natural world: human nature, and the nature of the human good.

²⁹ Aristotle’s view is that slaves share in reason, the fundamental distinguishing mark of human nature, only to the extent of understanding what is said to them, but not so far as themselves to use anything they do understand in planning and leading their life (*Pol.* 1.6.1254b22-3). Thus they lack the power of deliberation (1.13.1260a12). This need not mean that for Aristotle slaves cannot figure out how to get anything done using their own thought and planning (for example, in carrying out specific assigned tasks). It may, and presumably does, only mean that anything extremely complex or requiring concentrated attention over any significant period of time (organizing a whole life, deliberating about any serious matter) is beyond their

natural capacities. Their minds are always apt to wander off in pursuit of more immediate gratification.

³⁰ See 1.4, which concludes with the summary statement that a slave is a human being that is a piece of property (i.e., a possession for use in actions, 1254a2) that is a tool and separate (from the human being whose tool it is—a human being’s hand is a tool for his or her actions that is not separate). See esp. 1254a1-8, contrasting slave-tools (tools that do actions) with physical tools such as shuttles: just as it is the weaver who does some weaving with a shuttle (while the shuttle weaves only in an extended or secondary sense), or, to choose a different contrast, it is the person using his fingernails who does the scratching, so the master uses the slave-tool to sweep the floor or cook the meals, or dig the trenches for a barn’s foundations, etc. In all these cases the agent, or primary agent, in the actions is the one that uses the tool, not the tool, even in the case of the slave, who, being a human being, is also an agent active in the doing of the action. One should compare so-called “master-craftsmen” (ἀρχιτέκτονες) in relation to under-craftsmen or assistants (ὑπηρέται) who do the actual labor of the craft under the hands-off direction of the masters (see 1253b38-1254a1). On Aristotle’s view “even in the case of actions involving external objects [such as weaving some cloth or sweeping a floor] the one who does them, in the fullest sense, is the master craftsman who directs them by means of his thought” (7.3.1325b21-3, tr. Reeve with one change); Aristotle expresses the same view more compactly at 1.13.1260a18, where Reeve seems to misunderstand the grammar and reverses subject and predicate: “the work that is done is in the first instance that of the master craftsman.”

³¹ See 1254b17-20 (slaves are “people whose work (ἔργον) is to use their bodies,” this being “the best thing to come from them”), and 1252a30-4 (“the same thing is beneficial for both master and slave”); and 1278b30-7 (rule by a master is “rule exercised for the sake of the master’s own benefit, and only coincidentally for that of the slave”).

³² 1252a27-30. He says that this coupling (συνδυάζεσθαι), like others, such as that of master and slave, brings together people “who cannot exist (εἶναι) without one another” (1252a26-7). He can hardly mean either that individual women or men could not, once raised, exist without being members of a male-female couple, much less that the male or female sex in general cannot exist without each male or female forming a lasting couple with some member of the other sex. Perhaps he has in mind, reasonably enough, simply that some males in each human generation must form couples with some females (not all the males and females can live apart by themselves) if either males or females are to continue to exist. Still, one might wonder why, if that is what he meant, he thinks that this continued existence should require the sort of enduring couples he is speaking of here, and not mere one-off sexual couplings. The latter would seem to suffice. In view, then, of what he goes on to say about the household and the male-female κοινωνία at its center, it seems better to suppose he has in mind that human beings need to be raised (nurtured, educated, initiated into a whole culture) over many, many years in order to become full adult male or female human beings at all (and not, maybe, crude and wild unhuman animals looking physically like human beings). Since (he thinks) this requires being brought up within a family with a male head and his female partner, there cannot be male and female adults in any subsequent generation if there are no such families for them to belong to as children and grow up in. It does seem plausible that in that sense human males and

females cannot (continue to) exist without adult males and females living with one another in households (even if our modern societies have developed ways that make possible, in special circumstances, the raising of children ready for a full adult life as human beings even outside such a rigidly defined family).

³³ For Aristotle, the constituent activities of households (and those of the two *κοινωνία* that make them up) are included in the activities of villages, and both of these are also parts of the polis and its activities. This complicates any attempt to specify which actually are the constituent activities of the family-*κοινωνία*. Aristotle offers a genetic account of cities as coming to be through a progressive natural development and articulation of human life, in households and villages, in ultimate pursuit of the final and complete human good. It is necessary to abstract the family from these encompassing other institutions and their activities if we wish to consider the family-*κοινωνία* on its own. So considered, the common activities of family-members will be limited to the overtly shared ones of eating, talking, playing, etc., together.

³⁴ It may be worth noting here that when we consider family life as taking place within a complete polis context, where both it and the polis life of which it is part are conducted fully according to nature, we will think of all the daily activities of the family members within the household, even these private ones (the parents sitting in their rooms reading, or whatever, for example), as belonging to the family-community's common activities, as parts of the common activity of the polis as a whole. While reading in their rooms the parents conceive what they are doing as part of an overall shared life. Where, as explained below, the shared life of virtue (or

decency) is pursued as everyone's highest good, even such private activities take on a wider dimension of community.

³⁵ See NE 8.12, "parents feel affection for their children as being something of themselves" (1161b18), they "love their children as being themselves, for the ones coming from them are as it were other selves of theirs" (b27-9).

³⁶ See 1252b12-13, 15-16.

³⁷ 1252b27-30.

³⁸ See 1.9.1257b40-1258a14, where Aristotle contrasts two ways of understanding the correct and natural goal of the craft of money-making: obtaining and preserving enough for "living well" i.e. as he says explicitly there, virtuously, or making as much money as possible, with a view simply to "living"—i.e., luxuriantly and indulgently.

³⁹ As noted above, at NE 10.9.1179b18-20, Aristotle speaks of those who are decent as having a "share" in (μεταλαμβάνειν) virtue (ἀρετή). These, he explains, are people who have firmly established good habits of feeling and action, and who love the fine, but do not have any well developed practical knowledge of the human good, such as his lectures on ethics and politics provide for those able to follow and make his arguments truly their own. Thus Aristotle recognizes merely decent people as in some way or at some level possessed of virtue (ἀρετή). In the *Politics* at 7.1.1323b23, he again speaks of virtue—he means specifically moral or ethical virtue, virtue of feeling and action—and practical wisdom, and happiness as well, as coming in degrees. Taking my cue from this, in speaking of the "virtue" of the citizens of a polis

according to nature in what follows, and of their “activities of virtue,” I speak loosely or comprehensively (as Aristotle himself does in this context). I include within the scope of these activities not only the full virtue of those who possess all the Aristotelian virtues of character as well as of practical intellect (and even, in some persons, the virtues of theoretical study and contemplation), but also the lesser virtues of habit and feeling attained by decent ordinary citizens living nothing but ordinary daily lives with ordinary political participation, but no leadership whether intellectual or political. Aristotle is plainly aware (see *Pol.* 7.7) that human populations vary by their inborn and natural capacities for developing virtues (see 1327b33-6). This must be taken into account in any description of an Aristotelian polis according to nature. Nothing further can be theoretically required of all the citizens of such a city than that they all be decent people. Given the “share” in virtue that decent people have, it is legitimate for Aristotle to speak, as he does in this connection, of the “virtues” and “virtuous activities” of all the citizens, these decent ones as well as the few fully virtuous. Presumably, when he says in *NE* 2.1.1103b18-26, that though we human beings are not born with virtues of feeling and action we are by nature able to receive them (through habituation), it is only the virtues of decency that he means to indicate that we all are by nature capable of receiving. The other virtues (and even full and true virtue of feeling and action) may well be beyond the natural powers of some people. A polis according to nature must be conceived on that basis.

⁴⁰ At least, this seems to be an implication of Aristotle’s discussion in *Politics* 7.1-3 of the “most choiceworthy life” and of whether it is the same for an individual person and for a polis-community (1323a19-21). Aristotle does not there openly state this result, perhaps out of a sense of delicacy in addressing his audience, where those aiming at political careers presumably predominate. But he clearly indicates there, as he explains more fully in *NE* 10.7-8, that his own

view is that the most choiceworthy life for an individual is the contemplative one of theoretical, especially philosophical, study (see 1325b14-30); and he also leaves no doubt that whatever life is most choiceworthy for an individual is also most choiceworthy for cities (1324a7-8, 1325b30-2). That means that his account of how the people of a polis which is completely self-sufficient for human life will live must include the provision that among them will be a group of citizens who live the contemplative life (and so, are provided an education that will enable them to live that way). By living that life individually and as a group, they contribute directly to the life of the polis of which they are a part, so that (provided other conditions in it are met as well) it will live the most choiceworthy life for a polis. That he leaves this upshot as something for the alert reader to see does not make room for doubt about his intentions: the city according to nature, and more especially the city that “fulfills our prayers” of book 7, will provide a place for contemplative philosophers among its other political goals in seeking the happiness of its citizens. (For this distinction, see below, n. 53.)

⁴¹ As with the household and village activities, many of these will also be aimed at achieving external goods for those participating in them, but these will often be common only in the sense that each is intended to get their own private share in each case. See my discussion above, p. 37-8.

⁴² Constance Meinwald (in discussion) proposed an analogy with string-quartet playing to clarify how I conceive the joint character of the individual virtuous actions of each participant in this common enterprise. It is possible, she pointed out, for quartet-players to produce the common music by each playing in time with the others, as a sum of the four separate parts, but without “playing with” one another: to play with one another is for each to be listening to each of the

others, adapting their individual playing as they go along to that of the others, so as to achieve a musical product that is common in a stronger way—a mutually conceived and throughout mutually adjusted, single shared conception of the musical product being aimed at. The household activity of raising children, as I presented it above, offers an application: it is not merely that the mother and the father agree as to who will be responsible for which activities of childrearing, conceived as a common enterprise. Each pays attention, if not constantly then at least regularly, to what the other is doing, and makes adjustments, as they see them needed, to their own contributions. There is a constant interplay of discussion and mutual adjustment in the ongoing shaping of the common enterprise, even though for the most part the constituent activities are undertaken by one single parent. The case of the activities of moral virtue differs, however, in that morally virtuous action is always a second-order superposition upon some first-order activity. In some cases the first-order activity may itself involve Meinwald’s sort of “playing with”—as in playing a competitive game. Here, if it is played with due concern for the quality of the play itself and not just for winning, and so with the exercise of relevant moral virtues, we find “playing with” at two levels. In other cases, say when one eats a solitary meal but does so with the virtue of temperance fully engaged, there is “playing with” only at the second-order level. The agent coordinates their activity implicitly with other virtuous actions of their own and others at the same and other times. But there is no “playing with” at the first-order level. Hence, the application of the analogy to the case of moral action involves special complexities.

⁴³ *Politics* 1.13.1260b14-17. At *Politics* 5.9.1310a12-18 Aristotle says that of all the ways one might attempt to make a constitution survive the most important is for the citizens to be “educated in a way that suits their constitutions”—differently in oligarchies, which place an

exaggerated value on money and wealth, from in democracies, which value equality and espouse fairness conceived as equality of status, wealth, access to political rule, etc. In the correct constitutions, and especially in the sort of “polity” that, as I understand him, he expounds in book 7 as the best under conditions one could pray for, the education in the home and in the public schools will be conducted not just with an emphasis on virtues, according to a true conception of which states of character actually are virtuous, but with a correct conception of the highest human good as simply being a life of virtuous activity.

⁴⁴ This needs qualification as regards the intellectually virtuous activities of the contemplatives of the given polis. These are not activities of just the same sort (i.e. practically virtuous) as the ones the ordinary citizens, or even the political leaders, contribute to this common good, the good that gets thereby shared in by all the fellow-citizens. See below, p. 72-3.

⁴⁵ Aristotle’s repeated insistence that a polis is necessarily and essentially a union among people of different kinds (see *Pol.* 2.2.1261a22-30 and 4.4.1290b37-1291b13) reflect this. It is easy to see that the members of the different groups he lists in the 4.4 passage will vary quite significantly in level and extent of virtue, even under the best of naturally achievable circumstances.

⁴⁶ Interestingly, in his description of the city of *Pol.* 7 and its institutions and constitutional practices, Aristotle makes no special provision for any such group. It is apparently not part of the formal constitution, any more than it was at Athens. Officially, all the citizens rule and are ruled in turn (and not merely in the contrived sense that Aristotle explains in 7.9.1329a2-17 and 14.1332b32-41—ruled when young, ruling when old). But that is, of course, compatible

with there being a group of people who seek and exercise leadership in ruling year by year. They take the lead in the assembly's affairs and offer themselves, when others might not, for the most important offices. In fact, that everyone rules and is ruled in turn is not a very demanding practice, important though it is from the point of view of justice. There is a plethora of offices to be filled year by year in any Greek polis. Since Aristotle holds that this life of political leadership is the undiminishedly happy one of practical virtue, his city according to the political expert's prayers (the one of book 7) must be understood as providing room for such a group living that life. The consequence of not providing it would be that the city could not live, as Aristotle clearly thinks it does, the most choiceworthy life for human beings.

⁴⁷ I have in mind here primarily the lengthy and varied questions that Aristotle takes up in books 4-6 of the *Politics*, concerning oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny, as well as aristocracy, "polity," and kingship. But there are many details concerning the nature and functions of citizenship (judicial, deliberative, administrative) taken up in book 3, as well, the knowledge of which seems quite remote from such matters as how to eat one's food or carry on a civil conversation with a shopkeeper or hired employee, or deal fairly with others in the myriad of circumstances of daily life.

⁴⁸ Here one needs to bear in mind (see above, p.13-19) the distinction Aristotle draws at *NE* 10.9.1179b7-20 among three classes of people: (1) the "many" who are permanently only ever going to behave decently through legal requirements, backed by pleasurable incentives and painful sanctions; (2) the people who, having been habituated well, can come to acquire "some share of virtue" through argument, because of their love of the fine, and so become decent people living decently from their own inner resources, without the need for constant appeal to

such incentives and sanctions; (3) the ones who can become truly and fully good, in important part because they have a native love of the fine that is strong enough to permit argument to make virtue take full possession of their souls. (See also 1180a10-18.)

⁴⁹ Notice that this does not mean Aristotle's allegedly virtuous people would on his own analysis turn out to be merely self-controlled. Self-controlled and uncontrolled persons are ones whose characters are weak, making them subject to regular and characteristic temptations to self-indulgence under certain recurrent circumstances (see J.M. Cooper, "Nicomachean Ethics VII 1-2: Introduction, Method, and Puzzles," in *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics VII: Symposium Aristotelicum*, ed. Carlo Natali. Oxford, 10-14). The lapses here in question are uncharacteristic, but do sometimes occur, in no characteristic pattern—or would occur, if people were left simply to their own devices, relying only on their own self-generated inner commitment.

⁵⁰ See *Politics* 1.11.12559a33, 2.5.1263a39, 2.7.1266b27, 2.11.1273b6 and 11, 3.3.1276a34, 3.13.1283b37 and 1284b17, 4.1.1288b27, 4.12.1296b35, 4.14.1297b37, 5.9.1309b35, 6.5.1319b33, 7.2.1324b24 and 1325a8, 7.7.1327b38, 7.14.1332b35, 1333a14, 35, and b35, 7.16.1334b29, 1335a6, 1335b14, 7.17.1336b5, 8.1.1337a11.

⁵¹ It is possible, even likely, that our *Politics* text was originally written as an investigation and exposition of political theory, specifically just for persons interested in that subject on its own—including prominently anyone who had in mind to take an active role in politics as administrator or political adviser. When Aristotle wrote the *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, with its explicit orientation of ethical theory toward and as part of political theory, understood somewhat more widely, he invited us to read his *Politics*, enlisted now in this new project, in a wider

perspective—as addressed not only to intending political leaders but others as well, concerned to be as good persons and live as happily as possible.

⁵² See *Pol.* 7.1.1323b23, cited above, n. 39.

⁵³ A city “according to nature,” sketched in book 1, is to be distinguished from one that “fulfills our prayers” (i.e., τὴν κατ’ εὐχὴν γινομένην, 4.11.1225a28-9), that is, the prayers of experts in political science, whose knowledge will only show to the fullest what it is capable of achieving if certain external conditions of land, character of the population, location, etc. are provided to them (as Aristotle says at 7.4.1325b37-1236a5): these come by luck (7.13.1332a29-32, the rest of what is good about the resulting city comes from the knowledge and skill of these expert advisers). Aristotle outlines his own version of such a city in book 7. In doing so he assumes only conditions that are naturally possible, not, as he complains of Plato in his “ideal” cities of *Republic* and *Laws*, naturally impossible ones however much one might wish them away (7.4.1325b38-40, cf. 2.6.1265a17-18). That city is of course also one according to nature; but, as I understand him, the same holds for any other “correct” constitution (on these, see *Pol.* 3.7).

⁵⁴ One could think of these people as equivalent to the ones John McDowell mistakenly claims are in fact possessed of practical wisdom—people with nothing more than a strong sense of certainty (“Surely you can see that is wrong?”) that their inherited way of life is the best one. See John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” *The Monist* 72 (1979), 331-50.

⁵⁵ One might perhaps doubt that I am right in supposing that Aristotle's theories envisage such a group—or, if they do, whether they can do so consistently. If Aristotle holds, as I have inferred he does, that the happiest life devoted to the life of practical virtue (without theoretical philosophy) is the political life (see above p. 20-1), and if any fully virtuous person must know that it is (since each fully virtuous person possesses the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom, of which this knowledge is a part), doesn't that imply that all fully virtuous persons would at least strive to live the political life, and reject any other life (aside from the contemplative, to which they cannot aspire because of lack of native talent or, perhaps, personal predilection) as unworthy of them? Isn't Aristotle's *NE*, then, after all, aimed solely at an audience of intending political leaders, offering them the prospect, as well as the training needed, of this (second) happiest life of political leadership in their cities? However, if so, that might well open up an inconsistency in Aristotle's theories of its own. Presumably even in the city according to nature there would not be room for as large a number of people to live the life of active leadership as there could naturally be of fully virtuous persons living in it. The consequence would be that this excluded group of citizens would be frustrated and (relatively) unhappy. But this city is supposed to make every citizen happy (as happy as their specific natural abilities permit). In fact, the same considerations of personal predilection and natural talent that might prevent a (morally) fully virtuous person from pursuing the life of theoretical philosophy might also quite reasonably lead them not even to want to pursue a political life. After all, a successful political leader needs to be personable and outgoing and have other related talents and personal characteristics, as well as political science, even when the latter is conceived as a kind of practical knowledge. It is people like that that I have in mind: pursuing a political life, they can see, does not suit them and might leave them somewhat unhappy, while a non-political life would be quite satisfying. One should bear in mind two points. First, Aristotle's

announcement of the political life as (second) happiest comes only at the very end of the *NE*. No one reading the long discussion of happiness and the virtues in the preceding books would think the sort of person discussed there was being conceived throughout as a political leader (necessarily). Indeed, the level of discussion there involves no reference at all to (so to speak) professions or lines of work or favorite occupations; the characters defined are clearly being conceived as encompassing lots of different sorts of life, so far as such issues are concerned: fully virtuous lives of lots of such different sorts are clearly being envisaged. (If not, Aristotle couldn't be thinking that his lectures could have the wide appeal that they do, and that he surely knew and intended them to have.) Secondly, his account in the *Politics* of the life of moral virtue as a shared one already widens considerably, even for fully virtuous people not leading a political life, the scope of the engagement of their virtues in their life in just the way that, viewed from the *Ethics*, the political life might seem uniquely to do. The "gap" between the political life and the fully virtuous one focused on other sorts of work or occupation, when seen in the light of the theory of community in the *Politics*, is not so very great.

⁵⁶ I thank Danielle Macbeth for inviting me to speak at the November 5, 2006, conference at Haverford in honor of Aryeh Kosman, which was the occasion for the initial version of this paper. I thank her and the audience at Haverford for a lively and helpful discussion, and particularly Aryeh Kosman and Amélie Rorty for questions and comments. I also thank Gabriel Richardson Lear and the other members of the University of Chicago workshop on ancient philosophy for their spirited and instructive discussion of the paper when I presented it there in February, 2007. Finally, I thank Jonathan Beere for his written comments on the paper when I presented it at the annual Princeton Classical Philosophy Conference, December 1, 2007, and for his part in the lively discussion that followed. In preparing this final version I have tried to respond to

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