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## *Aristotle's Analysis of Oligarchy and Democracy*

RICHARD MULGAN

### 1 THE "REALISTIC" BOOKS

Though few would still subscribe to Jaeger's sharp distinction between an early theoretical and a later empirical Aristotle, the middle books of the *Politics*, Books IV–VI, are still commonly seen as more empirical and "realistic" than the rest of the work. To a certain extent this characterization is accurate and uncontentious. In contrast to other books, particularly the discussion of utopias in Book II and the ideal state in Books VII–VIII, Books IV–VI deal with constitutions and political remedies which are more within the reach of the average Greek city and statesman. This is part of Aristotle's express aim, announced at the beginning of Book IV: "political writers, although they have excellent ideas, are often unpractical. We should consider, not only what form of government is best, but also what is possible and what is easily attainable by all" (IV.1.1288b35–8).<sup>1</sup> To this extent, the books are undoubtedly more "realistic."

Moreover, it is also certainly true that these books contain the most frequent references to specific examples of actual constitutions and historical events. This is particularly true of the analysis of political change and revolution in Book V. In quoting individual examples, Aristotle may be making use of the detailed research into individual constitutions which he is said to have conducted or at least directed (Diogenes Laertius [V.27] includes 158 constitutions in his list of Aristotle's works); or he may simply be drawing on his own accumulated experience and knowledge. Whatever the source of his information, Books IV–VI clearly deserve to be described as more empirical, at least in contrast to the other books.

However, if we were to approach these books on their own, completely disregarding the rest of the *Politics*, and were to treat them as an independent exercise in empirical political science, other characteristics might be equally,

<sup>1</sup> Translations of Aristotle are from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, the revised Oxford Translation, edited by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, 1984) occasionally amended. Unless otherwise indicated all references are to the *Politics*.

if not more, striking. We would notice, for instance, the overwhelmingly practical purpose of the inquiry. Knowledge is being sought not for disinterested academic reasons but because it will help the statesman improve the government of his city. Political science, like ethics, poetics, economics and rhetoric, is a practical, not a theoretical, science, aimed not just at knowledge but at action (*EN* 1.3.1095a5–6). Thus, the reason why revolution is chosen as a topic for study is not that it is an interesting political phenomenon; that is incidental. Revolution threatens the stability of constitutions and therefore the security and values of the community and its citizens. It is a dangerous disease, whose causes must be understood with a view to preventing its occurrence (*IV*.1.1288b28–30, *V*.1.1301a20–5). Thus, the analysis of the causes of revolution leads straight on to practical remedies for its avoidance. In comparison, modern political science, particularly if it has empirical pretensions, will usually avoid any explicit recommendations for action and will confine itself to disinterested description and analysis.

Apart from the overtly practical orientation, the modern political scientist would notice, though not necessarily with disapproval, the theoretical and abstract method with which much of the subject matter is treated. Far from being a mass of discrete empirical material, more or less randomly collected, which some of the descriptions of these books might lead one to expect, Aristotle's account of actual constitutions is based on categories and typologies which are highly generalized and often *a priori*. The use of abstract and general categories is valuable, indeed unavoidable, in the social sciences as a means of making sense of what would otherwise be an infinite mass of undifferentiated phenomena. But if their purpose is scientific, the abstract categories must be tested against empirical evidence. The measure of how successful a particular schema or theory is will be the extent to which it captures what is empirically significant and thereby enhances our understanding of the social world.

From this point of view, the verdict on Books IV–VI may be a mixed one. The account of change and revolution itself in Book V, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> can be seen as a highly successful piece of political science – its categories are helpful, its theoretical hypotheses plausible and its recommendations therefore worthy of close attention. Aristotle's approach is undogmatic and open-ended; he is ready to amend and supplement his analysis if new evidence suggests itself even if this means disrupting the structure of his argument.

But he is not always so successful. This chapter deals with another topic or set of topics covered in the middle books, namely the nature of oligarchy and democracy, in particular the principles on which oligarchy and democracy are based, their different species and their relative merits. Aristotle's account of oligarchy and democracy is in many respects perceptive and carries political analysis considerably further forward than the level which had been achieved by his predecessors. Nonetheless, when compared with the high

2 *Aristotle's Political Theory* (Oxford, 1977), ch. 7.

standards that he set himself, it can sometimes be seen as excessively schematic and distorted by a priori preconceptions.

## 2 OLIGARCHY AND DEMOCRACY AS CONTRASTING POLES

Aristotle's analysis of oligarchy and democracy begins in Book III as part of the general account of constitutions and their classification. He distinguishes different constitutions in terms of their institutional structure of political authority, in particular the size of their supreme or "sovereign" body, and the aim pursued by those who belong to this supreme body (III.6.1278b9–10, IV.1.1289a15–18). In these terms, he can accommodate what had become a well-established six-fold classification of constitutions, depending on the size of the supreme body – one, few or many – and whether the members of this body pursued the common interest or their own self-interest. Those constitutions in which the members rule for the common interest are described as "correct" forms; those in which the rulers rule in their own interests are "perverted" forms. In these terms, oligarchy and democracy are classified as the perverted forms of rule by the few and the many, corresponding to the correct forms, aristocracy and "polity" respectively (III.7.1279b4–6).

Of the six main types of constitution, oligarchy and democracy were much the most common in the Greece of Aristotle's day. Not surprisingly, therefore, when Aristotle turns to describe actual constitutions oligarchy and democracy figure most prominently. The other forms are not overlooked entirely – for instance, monarchy, in its two forms of kingship and tyranny, is treated quite extensively in the analysis of revolution (V.10–12). Occasional reference is also made to "so-called aristocracy." This is not the true, ideal aristocracy, the government of the men of true virtue, but an inferior form in which noble birth and a reputation for virtue are one of the criteria for office. This emphasis on birth as distinct from wealth is sufficient to distinguish it from oligarchy and Aristotle treats "so-called aristocracy" as a form of mixed constitution (IV.7.1293b2–21). He also devotes some chapters to describing the "polity" and recommending it as the best constitution for most circumstances (IV.8, 9, 11). But oligarchy and democracy are mentioned most frequently and are the subject of most detailed discussion.

Oligarchy and democracy also provide, to a considerable extent, the analytical framework for the middle books, being often seen as contrasting poles or opposites. Aristotle's usage of what constitutions are "opposite" to what other constitutions varies according to the context.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes the contrast is between correct and perverted constitutions in terms of the six-fold classification; thus kingship and tyranny are opposites as are aristocracy and oligarchy, polity and democracy (EN VIII.10.1160b21). On other occasions, however, opposite constitutions may be constitutions sup-

3 See W. L. Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle* (Oxford, 1887–1902), vol. IV, pp. 483–4.

ported by sets of political opponents, e.g. tyranny and democracy or democracy and aristocracy (V.10.1312b1–7). The main opposition in Books IV–VI is between oligarchy and democracy and therefore they are the key pair of opposites (VI.1.1317a17, VI.6.1320b19–20).

That oligarchy and democracy are a pair of contrasting opposites is already indicated in Book III. As soon as he has sketched in the six-fold classification in III.7, Aristotle moves immediately in the next chapter to consider an issue which arises only in the case of oligarchy and democracy and only when they are seen in their most contrasting mode as rule of the rich and poor respectively. “Oligarchy is when men of property have the government in their hands; democracy, *the opposite*, when the indigent, and not the men of property, are the rulers” (III.8.1279b17–19). The problem raised is whether both the degree of wealth in the ruling group, that is, whether they are rich or poor, and the size of the ruling group, whether they are few or many, can be considered differentia of oligarchy and democracy. This question will be discussed further below. For the moment, we need simply note that democracy and oligarchy are contrasted as opposites.

In the following chapter, oligarchy and democracy are again contrasted, this time in relation to their competing conceptions of distributive justice (III.9). These are analyzed in terms of a pair of contrary views. Democrats think that because they are equal in some respects they should be equal in all; oligarchs, on the other hand, think that because they are *unequal* in some respect they should be *unequal* in all. This is an important part of Aristotle’s constitutional analysis. Different constitutions embody different conceptions of justice with differing criteria of how honours and other public goods should be distributed. Oligarchs think that the wealthy should benefit exclusively, ahead of the poor. Democrats hold that all citizens should benefit equally. In this chapter the contrast is expressed in terms of a clash between supporters of inequality and supporters of equality. This is not the only way in which it can be expressed. Sometimes Aristotle uses the theory of the two types of equality, arithmetic (strict or absolute equality) and geometric (proportionate equality); democrats believe in arithmetic equality, that everyone should be treated the same; oligarchs believe in geometric equality, that everyone should be treated in proportion to their worth, i.e. in proportion to their wealth (V.1.1301b29, VI.2.1317b4). At other times, Aristotle makes the same point in yet another way by saying that all agree that justice is distribution according to merit (*axia*) but people differ about what is to count as merit – democrats identify it with the status of the freeman, oligarchs with wealth (EN V.3.1131a27–9).

All three formulations of the contrast between democratic and oligarchic conceptions of justice make the same point – that different people are thought worthy of receiving or not receiving certain goods on the basis of their relevant characteristics and that what characteristics are seen as relevant to the distribution varies with different conceptions of justice. The last formulation in terms of competing views of merit is perhaps the most sophisticated. It emphasizes that all conceptions have a view of individual worth and that all subscribe to a principle of equality in relation to that view.

It also reveals that even democrats draw the line somewhere, at the status of freeman. However, when comparing the oligarchic and democratic formulations alone, Aristotle prefers the less subtle formulation in terms of equality and inequality (V.1.1301b37–9). The reason, presumably, is that it emphasizes the contrasting nature of two opposite constitutions by giving them apparently opposite conceptions of justice. This is one instance, then, though a relatively insignificant one, where a desire for logical symmetry may have deflected Aristotle from a more perceptive analysis.

The analytical prominence of oligarchy and democracy in Books IV–VI is evident in the treatment of polity. In Book III, polity was defined as the correct form of rule of the many. It thus held its own independent position within the six-fold classification. In Book IV, however, a polity is described in terms of oligarchy and democracy, as a mixture of them (IV.8.1293b33–4) or as a mean between them (IV.11.1295b3). Analytically, its nature is therefore dependent on that of oligarchy and democracy; so too is the nature of so-called aristocracy which is defined as another mixed constitution, different from the polity. Oligarchy and democracy thus operate as the analytical poles, the two contrasting types of contemporary political reality in terms of which all other constitutions, with the exception of the monarchical forms of kingship and tyranny, are identified. Aristotle indeed mentions the view that there are only two principal forms, oligarchy and democracy: “as men say of the winds, that there are but two, north and south, and that the rest of them are only variations of these, so of governments there are said to be only two forms – democracy and oligarchy” (IV.3.1290a13–6).

Plato in *Laws* III had adopted a similar approach to constitutional analysis, describing two tendencies in government in which different individual constitutions shared to different extents. His two types were not oligarchy and democracy but monarchy and democracy, with monarchy represented in its extreme form by Persia and democracy in its extreme form by Athens. Such an approach, essentially one of contrasting ideal types, is analytically flexible, allowing particular constitutions to be analyzed in terms of the extent to which they share the characteristics of each type. Moreover, given that each extreme type is morally objectionable, such a schema also naturally leads to an argument in favour of a constitution which is a mixture of both tendencies, as Plato’s recommended constitution in the *Laws* is a mixture of the monarchic and democratic tendencies.

Aristotle is also arguing for the merits of a mixed constitution, the polity, which is a mean between two extremes; it would have been similarly natural for him in this context to adopt a typology of constitutions in which the two extremes, oligarchy and democracy, were the two dominant types or tendencies. He is not, however, happy with officially adopting such a scheme. The reason is that oligarchy and democracy are defective constitutions. Aristotle prefers to take as his archetype of any class the best instance of that class; this preference is part of his teleological view of nature according to which the essential character of any object is revealed in its best stage of development. Thus the best, not the worst, types of constitution must be the

logically fundamental types of constitution. Soon after stating the view that oligarchy and democracy are the two main types like the north and south wind, he rejects it in these terms: "the better or more exact way is to distinguish, as I have done, the one or two which are true forms, and to regard the others as perversions, whether of the well-tempered or of the best form of government" (IV.3.1290a23–6). Thus oligarchy and democracy are to be seen as perversions of the polity (the well-tempered constitution); that is, logically and analytically, the polity must be prior to oligarchy and democracy, even if, when analyzing it, we have to use the previously identified characteristics of oligarchy and democracy as the elements of the mixture. This seems an unnecessary complication which, indeed, Aristotle does not follow in the rest of his discussion of oligarchy, democracy and polity. Polity continues as the derivative mixture and oligarchy and democracy function effectively as the two logically prior poles, even if Aristotle is unwilling to admit it openly.

### 3 THE TYPES OF OLIGARCHY AND DEMOCRACY

The polarity between oligarchy and democracy is continued and fleshed out in the enumeration of the sub-types of each main type (IV.4–6, VI.4–6). Aristotle embarks on his account of the different varieties of constitution with an analogy from biological classification (IV.4.1290b25–38). The essential elements of the polis are like the essential organs of an animal. There will be as many different constitutions as there are possible combinations of these elements, which suggests a very large number of different species. In the event, Aristotle describes only a few species for each main type. In the case of oligarchy and democracy, the treatment is extremely schematic and is dictated by the underlying analytical structure.

Each main type has a number of species or sub-types, usually given as four. (In the first account of the types of democracy [IV.4], there are five rather than four types; the additional one, described first, is an anomalous type of "pure" democracy, giving equality to rich and poor alike, and is omitted from subsequent typologies [IV.6, VI.4]. The reasons for this omission are discussed below. The last and briefest account of oligarchies [VI.6] mentions only three types specifically, rather than the four mentioned in IV.4, 6.)

The first type in each case is very moderate and only just distinguishable from the polity. Thus the first, moderate democracy has a property qualification and does not allow citizen rights to all free men. The mass of citizens take little interest in politics – for this reason an agricultural populace is suited to this type – and government, which is conducted under law, is left very much in the hands of officials elected from the well-to-do. On the other hand, the fourth extreme type is a democracy in which all power resides with the assembly which is dominated by an urban populace paid to attend meetings. The rule of law is abandoned and government is by decree, as in a tyranny. The second and third types are intermediate between the

most moderate and the extreme types, as the citizen body becomes progressively less exclusive, more urban and takes on more power.

Similarly, in the case of oligarchy, the first, most moderate oligarchy has its property qualification for office set comparatively low, though still sufficient to exclude the poor majority, and there are no other conditions set for entry to the ruling class; government is carried on in accordance with law. The fourth type is extreme or pure oligarchy; power is in the hands of a very few rich men, a closed, hereditary ruling family or group of families, a *dynasteia* (IV.5.1292b10) and there is no rule of law. Again, the second and third types are intermediate between the most moderate and the extreme types.

That the demands of the abstract scheme and the need to get theoretical symmetry is the main rationale of the typologies is openly admitted by Aristotle. Introducing the account of the types of oligarchy in Book VI, after the parallel account of the types of democracy, he says; "From these considerations, there will be no difficulty in seeing what should be the constitution of oligarchies. We have only to *reason from opposites* and compare each form of oligarchy with the corresponding form of democracy" (VI.6.1320b17–20). After a brief description of the most moderate form, he continues, "the principle [of qualification for office], narrowed a little, gives another form of oligarchy; until at length we reach the most cliquish and tyrannical of them all, answering to the extreme democracy" (VI.6.1320b29–31).

As a result of these typologies, the contrasting poles between oligarchy and democracy become joined by a more or less continuous spectrum with extremes at each end shading off into increasingly more moderate versions until both merge into the perfect mixture, polity. Interestingly, Aristotle makes little attempt to fit these typologies to instances of individual constitutions. The typology of democracy may reflect a perception of the course of Athenian history – it was commonplace among conservative critics of Athenian democracy that Athens had developed, or rather degenerated, from a moderate democracy, usually in the time of Solon, to an extreme democracy in the later fifth century. But the parallels are by no means precise. For instance, the Solonian constitution, unlike Aristotle's moderate democracy, did not provide for appointment of minor officials by lot (III.9.1280b30). Periclean democracy was restrictive in its citizenship criteria while Aristotle's extreme democracy is not.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from these implicit echoes of Athens, there is little direct reference to actual cities which might be thought to exemplify any of the sub-types. In his

4 For further details see Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle*, vol. IV, pp. xl–xli. The question whether the account of Athenian history in the Aristotelian *Constitution of Athens* was influenced by Aristotle's categories in the *Politics* is a separate question. See J. Day and M. Chambers, *Aristotle's History of Athenian Democracy* (Berkeley, 1962); P. J. Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia* (Oxford, 1981) pp. 10–13.



accounts of the different types of democracy in Book IV (IV.4, 6), Aristotle makes no mention at all of individual examples. In the Book VI account (VI.4), he mentions five different cities (Mantineia, Elis, Aphytis, Cyrene and Athens). However, even here the density of individual examples is not nearly as great as in the analysis of revolution, for instance in the account of the causes of revolution in democracy (V.5). Moreover, the cities are referred to in connection with particular laws or particular measures which are said to be characteristic of one of the sub-types. The cities as a whole are not directly mentioned as possible instances of one of the sub-types.

There is even less historical reference in the case of oligarchy. There was no well-known Greek oligarchy whose constitutional history, even in broad outline, mirrored Athens by following a progression from moderate to extreme. Nor, in either of the accounts of the types of oligarchy, does Aristotle make reference to any individual cities at all. The whole treatment is very perfunctory.

In this respect, there is a contrast between Aristotle's lists of species of the other main constitutional types. For instance, he lists five types of kingship (III.14). One of these, the Spartan kingship, is an actual historical institution. Two others, the *aesymnetia* and the heroic kingship, are derived closely and explicitly from well-known historical species; another (the second) type is described more abstractly, as a mixture of kingship and tyranny, though it is explicitly intended to refer to the kingships of Asia. Only the fifth type, the absolute kingship (*pambasileia*), is a totally theoretical construct in the same way as the types of oligarchy, and to a lesser extent those of democracy. The species of so-called aristocracy (IV.7.1293b14–21) and of tyranny (IV.10) similarly include historical examples as well as abstract categories.

It can be argued that the plethora of actual instances of oligarchy and democracy made it impossible to base the specification of sub-types on actual examples. A certain degree of abstraction and generalization is inevitable in constructing categories into which large numbers of individual instances are to be classed. However, as we have said, the effectiveness of categories is to be tested in their use, whether they aggregate and distinguish data in enlightening ways. In this respect, it is significant that Aristotle makes little or no attempt to test his typologies by applying them to actual instances. In spite of the apparent richness of historical material available to him, he does not begin to provide us with an informative analysis of the types of democracy and oligarchy that actually existed in classical Greece.

W. L. Newman, in his great commentary on the *Politics*, provides an indication of what we are missing.<sup>5</sup> For instance, taking the general category of oligarchy, and using only examples mentioned elsewhere in the *Politics*, he provides a list of twelve different types which reflect actual differences in institutional and social structure among Greek oligarchies. Similarly, in the case of democracy, he lists a number of sub-types, additional to Aristotle's four, again based on Aristotle's own evidence. The large number of Greek

5 Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle*, vol. IV, pp. xxiv–xxlii.

cities, each with its unique constitutional structure and yet each sharing a common culture, provided an extraordinary opportunity for comparative political analysis. Aristotle was aware of this opportunity and of the need to describe and compare the different laws and constitutions as part of a comprehensive political science. However, at least in respect of the task of classifying the different types of oligarchy and democracy, he cannot be said to have progressed as far as he might have.

A number of reasons for Aristotle's failure to capture and make sense of the variety of constitutions in his day may be suggested. One may be just a lack of time or interest – the structure was sketched in and details could follow. We should never forget, in our absorption in one of Aristotle's works, the prodigious extent and breadth of his output. Omissions may simply be due to the existence of more pressing inquiries elsewhere. Another, more fundamental, reason is his approach to classifying constitutions. He explicitly wants a classification which not only classifies constitutions but also ranks them in terms of their value; hence the range of sub-types from the most moderate to the most extreme. This produces typologies which are logically and ethically straightforward and simple. But they may not have been as easy to apply to real instances as ones derived more directly from a consideration of actual constitutions, having regard for the most common characteristics and major differences among them. At any rate, whatever the reason, his failure must be noted and set against the undoubted advances he made in the empirical study of politics.

#### 4 OLIGARCHIC AND DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

Another respect in which Aristotle's emphasis on abstract simplicity and symmetry may have hindered as well as helped our understanding of Greek oligarchy and democracy is in his treatment of the dominant values and principles of each constitution. He rightly sees a constitution as more than just institutions and laws; it is also based on, and pursues, certain social goals and values. Each constitution, as we have seen, has a dominant principle or value. This principle provides both the basis on which the ruling group is selected and the aim which the members of the group pursue in their role. In the case of ideal aristocracy, for instance, the principle is virtue: rule is confined to men of virtue and the city as a whole aims at the good life or life of virtue (III.17.1288a9–12, 32–41). Similarly, the principle of oligarchy is wealth. Wealth is the criterion for office (III.8.1280a1–6) and those in power aim at increasing their wealth (V.10.1311a10).

On the whole, this fits reasonably well with the facts of oligarchy. Oligarchies restricted power to men of property; men of property tended to use their political power to maintain and enhance their wealth. It could be argued that Aristotle should have given more recognition to the close association of many oligarchies with traditions of hereditary nobility. Few were strict "plutocracies" which treated all the rich equally. The conscious aim at least of many of those in power in oligarchies was as much honour and

fame as the accumulation of wealth. Sometimes, indeed, Aristotle does identify good birth and culture (*paideia*) as characteristics of oligarchy (IV.8.1293b36–8, V.8.1309a2–3). On other occasions, these are more the characteristics of “so-called aristocracy,” the form of mixed constitution which places emphasis on noble birth. In general, Aristotle follows Plato in seeing the fundamental aim of oligarchs as their own enrichment, a judgment which, though severe and open to some counter-examples, is by no means implausible.

More difficulties surround Aristotle’s account of the principle of democracy. This is identified as freedom. Freedom, in the sense of the status of a free man, is the qualification for office; freedom, in the sense of living as one likes, is the aim of democracy. In Aristotle’s fullest and most careful account of democratic freedom (VI.2.1317a40–b17), the aspect of freedom which provides the criterion for office is linked to numerical or arithmetic equality:

One principle of liberty is for all to rule and be ruled in turn, and indeed democratic justice is the application of numerical not proportionate equality; whence it follows that the majority must be supreme, and that whatever the majority approve must be the end and the just. Every citizen, it is said, must have equality, and therefore in a democracy the poor have more power than the rich, because there are more of them, and the will of the majority is supreme. This, then, is one note of liberty which all democrats affirm to be the principle of their state. (VI.2.1317b2–11)

The status of the free man does not directly define the ruling group in the same way as a certain level of wealth identifies the members of an oligarchy or virtue singles out the members of an aristocracy. Aristotle’s whole political analysis of democracy, and its contrast with oligarchy, is based on the assumption that the ruling group in a democracy is the poor, just as the ruling group in an oligarchy is the rich. However, the status of free man includes all citizens, rich as well as poor, and not just the poor. The same applies when the qualifying principle of democracy is expressed in terms of equality. Whereas the oligarchs’ use of inequality (or geometric equality) singles out those wealthy “unequals” who are members of the oligarchic civic body, the democrats’ equality (or arithmetic equality) includes everyone, rich as well as poor, oligarchs as well as democrats.

Thus, if democracy is to be equated with rule by the poor, while its criterion for office is free status or arithmetic equality, the poor will need to be in a majority. In Book III, when discussing whether economic class (rich or poor) or numerical size (few or many) is the more important criterion for distinguishing oligarchy and democracy, Aristotle concludes that economic class is the essential criterion. Thus if a rich majority were in power the constitution would be an oligarchy and not a democracy; conversely, if a poor minority ruled, this would be a democracy (III.8.1280a1–3). However, if the qualifying characteristic for democracy is the status of a free man or arithmetic equality, government by the poor will emerge only if the poor are in a majority. If the poor were a minority and the rich a majority, political

rights of equal freedom would produce rule by the rich, i.e. oligarchy and not democracy.

By recognizing freedom as the principle of democracy, Aristotle has therefore admitted that size is an essential, not an accidental, characteristic of democracy. In fact, he does not stick to his strict position that only economic class is essential; when he raises the issue again in Book IV both class and number are made to be defining characteristics of oligarchy and democracy (IV.4.1290b17–20). This means that the anomalous cases of rich majorities or poor minorities would be mixtures, neither clearly oligarchy or democracy. Including number has the advantage of bringing both democracy and oligarchy closer to their usual connotations. Oligarchy, after all, was rule by the “*oligoi*,” the few; democracy was rule by the “*demos*,” the people, commonly associated with the *plêthos* or mass.<sup>6</sup>

The majority principle itself is not unique to democracy; it applies in any group in which members are treated equally, as Aristotle recognizes (IV.8.1294a11–14, VI.3.1318a28–30). A group of oligarchs or aristocrats may well treat themselves as equals, while excluding the mass of citizens, and apply the majority principle to the settling of disputes within their group. It is, however, particularly associated with democracy, partly because the group from whom the majority in question is taken is the group of all free men; partly because the majority principle is needed to explain how the procedures which in theory should give power equally to all free citizens, rich and poor, can, in actual practice, give power to the poor only. The majority principle is thus essential to the understanding of democracy as rule by the poor mass. Aristotle’s inclusion of number as an essential criterion, additional to economic class, is therefore an improvement on the classification in terms of class alone and not, as sometimes claimed,<sup>7</sup> a less satisfactory version.

The fact that the distributive principle of democracy does not directly single out the ruling group in democracy has another consequence: it allows the possibility, in theory at least, that the principle could be implemented at face value, and that the power could be shared equally among all free citizens, rich and poor alike. Arithmetic equality, after all, requires equal shares for all; though it implies the majority principle as a means of resolving disputes by counting every voice equally, it does not necessarily imply majority *rule*, in which the same people are always in the prevailing majority. More equal would be a regime in which everyone had a fair chance of being in the majority. Modern democratic thinking is often critical of majority domination, where one group is a permanently entrenched majority and another group a permanently oppressed minority as in Ulster or Sri Lanka. This is often equated with “majority tyranny” and contrasted with true democracy in which everyone has an equal chance of being in a majority and influencing decisions.

6 See Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle*, vol. IV, pp. 158–9.

7 E. g. by Ernest Barker, *The Politics of Aristotle*, (Oxford, 1946), p. 163, following Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle*, vol. IV, pp. 158–9.

Aristotle recognizes this possibility; in the first list of the types of democracy, as we have seen, he mentions such a democracy as the first and best type:

Of forms of democracy first comes that which is said to be based strictly on equality. In such a democracy the law says that it is just for the poor to have no more advantage than the rich; and that neither should be masters, but both equal. For if liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost. (IV.4.1291b30–7)

In the chapter which analyzes the principles and procedures of democracy (VI.2), he adds the possibility as an after-thought:

But democracy and demos in their truest form are based upon the recognized principle of democratic justice, that all should count equally; for equality implies that the poor should have no more share in the government than the rich, and should not be the only rulers, but that all should rule equally according to their numbers. (VI.2.1318a4–10)

The Greek word *dēmos* in “democracy” was ambivalent in meaning; it could mean “the mass,” i.e. the majority, or it could mean the whole people, all who had the right to attend the assembly. While the critics of democracy saw it as rule by the poor mass, its supporters could claim it, in principle at least, as rule by all the people. Though Aristotle normally defines democracy as rule by the poor majority, he does allow that its principles could generate a much fairer type of government and society from which no one was excluded. Democracy could also mean, as it does in the modern democratic tradition, political equality for all. He recognizes too that such a regime would have a claim to be called “true” democracy based on a “true” *dēmos*.

This type of regime, though it would truly implement equality, would still be open to objection from Aristotle on the ground that the principle of strict or arithmetic equality was itself mistaken and took no account of relevant differences between free men in their legitimate claims to a share in government. In this respect, the “true” democracy must be clearly distinguished from Aristotle’s ideal constitution of Books VII and VIII. The latter is an aristocracy in which the citizen body is restricted to men of virtue and excludes the artisans and laborers who would count as free citizens in a democracy.

Nonetheless, “true” democracy would not be open to the standard criticism against all the perverted forms of government, that they were unjustifiable rule by one section of the community in their own interests to the complete exclusion of the others. It is for this reason, presumably, that Aristotle does not make much of this “ideal” democracy. It is dropped from the later classifications of democracy and is mentioned only as an after-thought to the discussion of democratic principles. To give it more prominence, to feature it as the prime instance of democracy from which the other

types diverge, would be, again, to disturb the symmetry of his classification of constitutions. If democracy is a perverted form, its extreme or pure type must be the worst instance not the best, in just the same way as the extreme forms of oligarchy or tyranny are the worst instances of their respective types.

For similar reasons, perhaps, Aristotle does not attempt to link "true" democracy with polity. Though they are not strictly speaking identical – polity is a mixture of oligarchic and democratic principles and is based on the middle class – there are close affinities between them. A "true" democracy, which gave equal power to both rich and poor, could be said to be providing a balance between the exclusive rule of either the rich or the poor. Such a constitution could also be amenable to the emergence of a large and potentially dominant middle class. When Aristotle includes "pure" democracy in the typology of democracies, he puts it first, ahead of the otherwise most moderate version and therefore by implication closest to polity. However, to draw these connections would have upset the logical symmetry. If democracy is a perverted constitution, its purest form must be furthest from polity, the correct constitution from which it deviates, not closest to it.

These issues arise from the use of freedom, in the sense of free status implying strict equality, as a qualification for office in democracy. The other aspect of freedom is as an end or goal for democracy. Aristotle analyzes it in these terms:

Another [note of liberty] is that a man should live as he likes. This, they say, is the mark of liberty since, on the other hand, not to live as a man likes is the mark of a slave. This is the second characteristic of democracy, whence has arisen the claim of men to be ruled, by none, if possible, or, if this is impossible, to rule and be ruled in turns; and so it contributes to the freedom based upon equality. (VI.2.1317b11–17)

"Living as one likes," it should be remembered, is not Aristotle's own definition of freedom. He himself regards the essence of freedom as being one's own person and as having independent value rather than being, like the slave, merely an instrument for the purposes of others. Such freedom is consistent with restraint and obedience and does not, like the democrat's version, imply an absence of such impediments.<sup>8</sup> Aristotle criticizes the democratic conception of freedom on the same grounds as the oligarch's life of luxury – it works against the security of the constitution and is therefore not in the democrats' own interest (V.9.1310a19–36).

However, even this democratic view of freedom does not adequately cover Aristotle's own view of the interests pursued by the poor majority in a democracy. Elsewhere in the *Politics*, Aristotle refers to the economic motives of those who support democracy and is aware that they seek their own economic advantage as much as oligarchs do. Indeed, in contrast to the

<sup>8</sup> See the author's "Liberty in Ancient Greece" in *Conceptions of Liberty in Political Philosophy*, ed. Z. Pelczynski and J. Gray (London, 1984), pp. 18–19.

nobility, the many are said to be more interested in gain than in honor (VI.4.1318b16–7). In the discussion of revolution, one of the aims of democrats is to confiscate the wealth of the rich (V.5.1304b35), and democracies, if they wish to survive, are advised to spare the property of the rich (V.8.1309a15–20).

Aristotle was not mistaken to identify personal freedom as one of the characteristics of democracy; the tolerance and variety of democratic Athens are well-attested. Yet, by singling out freedom as the aim of democracy, he omits much that is important in the dynamics of democracy and much which is indeed suggested by his own political analysis and the considerable emphasis he lays on economic motives. Indeed, he might have been better to begin with his initial characterization of the perverted constitutions as being conducted not in the common interest but in the self-interest of the rulers: oligarchy in the interests of the wealthy, democracy in the interests of the poor (III.7.1279b9–10). If he had then proceeded dispassionately to identify the interests of the poor, he might have included the desire for personal freedom; but he would also have referred to their desire for the material means to enjoy this freedom and their use of political power to secure these means.

On closer inspection, the actual differences between the motives of oligarchs and democrats are less than the similarities. Both oligarchs and democrats aim for material economic advantage; both do so in order to gratify their desires, in the case of oligarchs living a life of luxury and license (IV.11.1295b15–18, V.9.1310a22–4), in the case of democrats “living as they like.” The personal license of democracy is not unique to that form of government; it is found among all self-interested ruling groups, among the rich in oligarchies and in the tyrant in tyrannies. What makes democracy unusually liberal is that the desire to live as one likes is there extended widely through the community, because the ruling group includes most of the ordinary citizens, and is not, as in oligarchy, confined to a small section of the community. The extent to which the law and the courts seek to control the ordinary citizen will therefore need to be restricted. In oligarchy, on the other hand, the ruling group is small and its members can live freely among themselves while still applying the law strictly to the rest of the population.

Aristotle’s comments on liberty as the characteristic aim and vice of democracy no doubt owe much to Plato’s well-known views on democracy (e.g. *Rep.* VIII.555–6). In Plato’s case, however, criticisms of the personal license of democracy were linked to his political analysis. Plato considered that democracy was an especially lax and ineffectual form of government, a factor which led him in the *Statesman* to describe democracy as the best of the perverted forms of constitution because least capable of action (*Statesman* 303a). Aristotle, however, does not wholly share this view of democratic government; if anything, democracy, by being less prone to internal dissension than oligarchy, is a more consistent and secure form of government (V.1.1302a8–13). His concentration on liberty is therefore less justified. The main explanation, we may surmise, is again the urge for conceptual simplicity and symmetry, the need to provide a single value which would do

the same work for democracy as wealth and virtue do, respectively, for oligarchy and aristocracy.

However, even given this concern to find a single value it might still be questioned whether freedom, rather than equality, was the correct value to choose. In his analysis of the two aspects of democratic freedom (VI.2), Aristotle traces a connection between them through the principle of arithmetic equality. The first aspect, the criterion for office, is identified with numerical or arithmetic equality and thus with alternation of ruling and being ruled. Alternation is also linked to the second aspect of freedom, the goal of living as one likes. The best condition is not to be ruled at all. But, failing that, ruling and being ruled is the preferred alternative and "contributes to the freedom based on equality."

Equality was the value the democrats themselves emphasized and incorporated in their original catchword and slogan, *isonomia* (roughly "equality of rights"). It is equality, as Aristotle himself admits, which underpins the first aspect of democratic "freedom," equal sharing in power. As far as the second aspect, the goal of democracy, is concerned, equality may not highlight the libertarian aspects of democracy as well as freedom does. But it has the advantage of pointing to the redistributive aim in democracy, the desire to make the wealth of society available to all, to take from the haves and give to the have-nots.

Equality, however, was a more contested value than freedom and Aristotle may have been reluctant to concede it to the democrats. He followed Plato,<sup>9</sup> Isocrates<sup>10</sup> and, presumably, other members of the intellectual opposition to democracy, in arguing that democratic equality was only one version of equality, and inferior to proportionate or geometric equality. In contrast, Plato had been content to leave freedom to the democrats and to argue against having too much of it. Aristotle does not go that far but contests the democrats' conception of freedom (V.9.1310a32-6). Nonetheless, within the aristocratic tradition, Aristotle may have felt more at ease with attributing freedom rather than equality to democrats as their single dominant value.

Aristotle's own analysis, however, shows that neither value is sufficient on its own. Both egalitarianism and libertarianism are essential to democracy. In this respect, Aristotle's account of democracy is similar to many modern versions of democratic theory in which both liberty and equality are seen as basic democratic values. (For the Greeks, however, without a clear commitment to individual rights, these values were less likely to be in tension than they are in the modern liberal democratic tradition.) Indeed, Aristotle does on occasion mention equality and freedom together as the principles of democracy (e.g. IV.4.1291b34-6, V.9.1310a28-31). But to have incorporated both formally into his analysis of democracy would again have jeopardized the symmetry of his constitutional analysis.

9 *Gorg.* 508a; *Rep.* VIII.558c; *Laws* VI.757c.

10 *Areopagiticus*, 21-2.



## 5 RELATIVE RANKING OF OLIGARCHY AND DEMOCRACY

Finally, brief mention should be made of Aristotle's relative ranking of oligarchy and democracy.

In Book III, though he criticizes both oligarchs and democrats for having partial conceptions of justice, he nevertheless sees some merit in the arguments of the democrats. The two arguments for the rule of the many, the summation argument in favor of the greater collective wisdom of the many (III.11.1281a42–b38), and the "customer knows best" argument against the supposed wisdom of experts (III.11.1282a17–23), have become part of the stock-in-trade of democratic justification. Even if Aristotle is not prepared to endorse them wholeheartedly, he certainly presents them with clarity and a degree of sympathy he never shows for oligarchic arguments on behalf of wealth. In the later books, where political stability becomes the dominant value, democracy is clearly preferred over oligarchy because it is more likely to have the stabilizing influence of a large middle class (IV.11.1296a13–18) and because oligarchies are particularly prone to internal dissension (V.1.1302a8–13).

Early in Book IV (IV.2.1289b2–5) Aristotle endorses Plato's ranking in the *Statesman* (303a–b) of tyranny as the worst of the perverted forms of government, and democracy as the most moderate. This is based on the six-fold classification of constitutions in which oligarchy and democracy are perversions of the good forms of rule of the few and rule of the many respectively. As we have seen, this schema is then superseded by one in which both oligarchy and democracy are perversions of the same constitution, the polity. Using a musical metaphor, Aristotle compares the polity to a well-tempered harmony and the others to departures from this harmony. The degree of deficiency of any particular constitution will depend on the distance from the mean. A moderate constitution, whether an oligarchy or democracy, will therefore be better than either of the extremes.

The most that Aristotle will admit is that the democratic deviations from the well-tempered harmony of the polity are "more slack and soft" while the oligarchic deviations are more "taut and despotic" (IV.3.1290a27–9). His determination to preserve the logical symmetry of his analysis, with oligarchy and democracy the two polar extremes and polity the well-mixed mean, militated against a general preference for democracy as such, however much his own values and the evidence of political experience would have suggested otherwise.