

Aristotle's natural democracy.

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The title of this essay is admittedly paradoxical. Natural democracy seems, on the face of it, impossible in Aristotelian terms: Democracy is defined in the *Politics* as a corrupted (*parekbasis*) regime, and all corrupted regimes exist “against nature” (*paraphusin*: *Pol.* 1287b41). Yet I will suggest that certain features of democracy were nonetheless treated by Aristotle as emergent properties of human nature. “Natural democracy” explains otherwise recalcitrant aspects of Aristotle’s political philosophy; it reveals unexpected congruities between Aristotelian political philosophy and contemporary work in sociology and political anthropology; and it points to the fulfillment of human political nature as a subject for normative democratic theory.

Aristotle’s *Politics* is a philosophical conglomerate, which is part of what makes it such an interesting and frustrating work. One way of making the text less frustrating, and less interesting, is to chop it up into three distinct enterprises. The three standard interpretive silos are: 1. a natural/teleological account of the emergence and

characteristics of the community most suited to the lives of humans as political animals, i.e. the polis. 2. an empirical/historical account of the variety of institutional arrangements in Greek poleis, along with an account of the effects of internal political change and conflict, and recommendations for stabilizing various sorts of polis regimes. 3. a detailed description of the best practically achievable polis, i.e. the “polis of our prayers,” and the educational system by which its youth were to be taught citizenship. My approach seeks to bring the contents of the three silos together in a single comprehensible, if also somewhat paradoxical, whole. The paradox arises from Aristotle’s refusal to abandon either history or nature in his philosophical analysis of politics.

History and nature

Oswyn Murray sketches an approach to the co-presence of history and nature in Aristotle’s *Politics*, by pointing to “the consequences of history for political theory... [and] the disturbances introduced by history in the theoretical picture.”¹ Murray argues that the introduction of historical observations of actual political practices into the naturalized account of the polis leads to three philosophical problems. First, the naturalized polis of book 1, which is the natural *telos* of human sociability, has some difficulty in making room for the diversity of types of human political organization, that is for the historical emergence and persistence of non-polis forms of political community. Second, if the polis emerges naturally as a consequence of human political nature, it is not initially obvious why there should be a half-dozen distinct types of polis regime (monarchy, aristocracy, “*politeia*,” democracy, oligarchy, tyranny). And finally, the

theory does not seem to explain the prevalence of historical regime-changes (*metabolai*), least of all changes that come about in the violent context of intra-state conflict (*stasis*).

Now, it is important to keep in mind that nature does not always get its way in the Aristotelian universe.² And so, for Aristotle, things and processes may sometimes be natural without being especially prevalent, and they may be quite prevalent without being natural. But there is nonetheless a need to explain the disjunction between the theory of the polis as a unitary natural political entity and the observed socio-political diversity of the world known to Aristotle. Murray suggests, I think rightly, that Aristotle can solve the first problem (diversity of types of political organization) by positing a very uneven distribution of political virtue among peoples, Greek and non-Greek. There was, we might add, endoxic authority available to him (preserved for us by e.g. Herodotus 9.122.3-4 and the Hippocratic tradition: *Airs, Waters, and Places* 12.12-13, 16.3-6, 23.19-21) for assuming that climate and geography affected the development of political virtue. Aristotle himself (*Pol.* 1327b27-33) points out that Asians and northern Europeans labored under severe disadvantages in respect to the development of political virtue. This left peninsular/insular Greeks as the “middling” exemplars of a political nature properly balanced between spiritedness and reasoning ability, and thus as the best candidates for the development of the natural human community (i.e. the polis). The second problem, regarding the different sorts of regimes that emerged in different Greek poleis, was likewise explicable in terms of the differential distribution of political virtue among the members of actual polis communities: in communities in which political virtue was concentrated in one or a few individuals, the natural result would be a monarchical or an aristocratic-oligarchic regime. But, as Murray points out, the third problem, regime-

change and conflict within a given polis community, remains intractable; it cannot be easily solved on the basis of the “uneven distribution of virtue” hypothesis.

Murray’s list of history/nature problems assumes, I think rightly, that Aristotle’s natural teleology (e.g. *Pol.* 1252b31-53a1) makes out the polis to be a natural thing more or less in the way that an oak tree is natural: a healthy acorn planted and nurtured under optimal conditions will naturally yield an exemplary oak tree. Likewise, a healthy group of humans, offered the right conditions, should develop into an exemplary polis featuring an exemplary *politeia*. Given the best conditions, no other sort of plant will grow from the acorn and no other sort of community will emerge from the group of humans: both oak tree and polis are natural and final ends (*telê*). But conditions are not always optimal. And so, by analogy, one might well imagine oak trees simply failing to thrive in certain climates, and that in these places much less desirable, even somehow “unnatural” sorts of vegetation might grow up instead (e.g. in Asia and Northern Europe: Murray’s first problem). And one might further imagine that some acorns, deprived of certain nutrients or corrupted by disease, might grow into barely recognizable versions of the tree that nature intended (Murray’s second problem). But it is very hard to imagine an acorn growing into a tree that first seems to be a poplar, and then suddenly transforms itself into something that appears to be a pine, and then a plane tree, before ever coming into its proper form as an oak (Murray’s third problem). It is yet more difficult to imagine that strange series of metamorphoses occurring through conflicts among the tree’s several parts.

Murray suggests that this third problem, regarding change and conflict, is ultimately resolved only through the unsatisfactory device of an unlikely assumption:

that a *new polis* actually comes into being with each change of regime. He goes on to suggest that this “new regime/new polis” conception was systematically explored in the famous collection of *Politeiai* prepared under Aristotle’s direction in the Lyceum. But, as Murray notes, the history of Athens, the one polis for which we happen to have a surviving Aristotelian *Politeia* (hereafter *AthPol*), ill accommodates the conception of new regime/new polis. In the case of Athens, the democratic regime that pertained before and after the *stasis* situation of 411-403, for example, seems resistant to the new regime/new polis conception: many Athenians clearly clung tenaciously to the conception of themselves as democratic citizens subject to democratic laws throughout these changes, and to say that several distinct poleis emerged and dissolved within this period flies in the face of what a reasonable person could be expected to believe. This is, of course a serious problem for Aristotle in light of his endoxic method.

Does *AthPol* nonetheless allow us to suppose that a new polis emerged after a regime change? Leaving aside the ephemeral oligarchic regimes, it is certainly true that Athenian democracy in 412 was not identical to the democracy a decade later. There were significant institutional changes made in this period, some of them lasting, notably in the process of law-making and in the relationship of fundamental law to statute-law. Some modern historians have suggested that these changes amount to a genuinely profound regime-change – one that might perhaps even give warrant to the conception of the creation of a new polis.³ But, notoriously, the *AthPol* takes no special notice of the legal/constitutional changes in *nomothesia* procedure. In the historical account of democratic change offered in the *AthPol*, democracy in Athens seems to be a continuous (and overall teleological) evolution. That continuous democratic evolution took place

both through and in spite of a series of *metabolai*. From the era of Solon to the post-Peloponnesian War settlement, the Athenian *politeia* depicted in *AthPol* was either explicitly democratic or striving to become so: there was no period of post-Solonian history in which a non-democratic *politeia* achieved a persistent, stable existence: non-democratic interludes either maintained the forms of democratic law (the tyranny of Peisistratus) or failed to gain legitimacy (the oligarchy of the Thirty). The point is that the Aristotelian history of Athenian *politeia* seems to demonstrate the capacity of a democratic regime to survive *stasis* by its ability to change in ways that do not encourage, or even permit us to imagine that a new polis has come into being. Assuming that democracy was in some sense a natural end helps to explain the political teleology of *AthPol* in ways that are consistent with the account of the natural polis in the *Politics*.⁴

This essay takes Murray's issue of "historical change and conflict in the democratic polis" as a starting point for thinking about natural democracy in the *Politics*, and seeks to show why an Aristotelian political history of Athens need not resort to an improbable "new regime = new polis" explanation for change. Passages in Aristotle's *Politics* offering a positive account of democratic deliberation (see below) are sometimes cited as evidence (along with Plato's *Statesman* and *Laws*) for a moderate reevaluation of democracy in mid-to-late fourth century Greek philosophical thought.⁵ I will argue that Aristotle's reevaluation of democracy is more fundamental than is usually supposed, to the extent that the political regime appropriate to the "natural polis" of *Politics* book 1 and to the "polis of our prayers" of book 7 (which I take to be the natural polis, fully realized) is, in certain analytically important ways, to be understood as a democracy. The Athenian democracy, on this reading is an imperfect manifestation of a natural entity: the political

counterpart of an oak that has grown up in sub-optimal conditions, and thus is deformed in various ways, but for all that is recognizably an oak.

Democracy in the Athenian style, with its Protean capacity to change and yet remain fundamentally the same, was indeed a contributory part of the interpretive problem identified by Murray. But the political sociology of democracy also supplied the answer to an otherwise intractable problem that arose in the course of Aristotle's discussion of the polis as a community (*koinônia*) of citizens (*politai*). The imagined political regime I am calling "Aristotle's natural democracy" took (as did actual Greek democracies) the set "actual (i.e. politically active, participatory) citizens" (C^a) to be coextensive with the set "all polis residents culturally imaginable as citizens" (C^i), and (after adding an assumption about inherent political capacity) also coextensive with the set "all polis residents qualified by nature to be citizens" (C^n). Equating actual citizens with imaginable and natural citizens had the effect of removing a primary source of social conflict: The equation $C^a = C^i = C^n$ left no body of persons holding either cultural expectations of citizenship or the natural capacity to exercise citizenship stranded outside the actual citizen body. This eliminated, by definition, a category of residents, present in all non-democratic poleis, who were especially likely to resort to *stasis* in order to gain something they quite naturally regarded of great value and rightfully theirs, that is the status of active, participatory citizenship.

The political *telos* of the polis

The historical change/conflict problem and its relationship to democracy is in turn related to the question of the polis' political *telos*. In the *Politics* Aristotle argues that

despite the fact that there were manifestly several sorts of human community, the political nature of human beings leads ultimately to the polis as the most appropriate form of human community, i.e. the natural social environment for optimal human flourishing. We might then call the polis the social *telos* of human political nature. But that can only be part of the story. Given that the polis is a manifestation of human political nature, it is incomplete (if not unimaginable) without a *politeia*, and given that there are variety of *politeiai* manifest in the histories of the many Greek poleis known to Aristotle, we must also ask: What *politeia* is most naturally conducive to human flourishing? Aristotle states (*NE* 1135a5) that there is only one regime-type that is everywhere best according to nature. This best *politeia* is presumably the political *telos* of the natural polis. But which among the various types of *politeia* discussed by Greek political philosophers is it?

In book 1, Aristotle specifies the developmental steps that lead to the emergence of the “natural polis.” It is a progressive process of instrumentally valuable growth in the size and complexity of human communities: the aggregation of individuals into families (for purposes of reproduction), then of families into villages or clans (for mutual defense and in order to achieve conditions of justice), and ultimately of villages and clans into a polis (for the achievement of autarky and, potentially, of *eudaimonia*).⁶

The natural polis having achieved its *telos* in respect to social form, it is ready to take on a political form, a *politeia*. Two possibilities present themselves: First is that the political *telos* is inherently a part of the social *telos* and thus that the “natural *politeia*” of the natural polis will be manifest immediately upon the realization of the polis. In this case all subsequent regime changes are devolutionary, corruptions of the pristine original form. This sort of story is familiar from books 8 and 9 of Plato’s *Republic*, where

Kallipolis is the original and ideal form, and all other regime-types (timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, tyranny) are devolutions. The other possibility is that, like the polis itself, the emergence of the political *telos* is historical and sequential, requiring a development from one natural stage to the next, until the *telos* is achieved. This second, sequential-emergence, story seems to be what Aristotle has in mind in the *Politics*. So what is the final *politeia* toward which the polis was naturally inclined, and what are the historical stages through which the polis must pass in order to achieve that political *telos*?

Murray suggests that in “an important sense” the final regime of the natural polis should be the hybrid form simply called “*politeia*.”⁷ That is an attractive suggestion, in that it answers the question of why there should be a *politeia* with the name “*politeia*.” But the idea that the hybrid form “*politeia*” was the political *telos* of the polis must account for the historical sequence of regimes alluded to in book 3. The passage is worth citing in full:

If then the rule of a number of persons who are all good men is to be considered as aristocracy, and the rule of a single person as kingship, aristocracy would be preferable for the poleis to kingship (whether the office be conjoined with military power [*dunamis*] or without it), if it were possible to get a large number of men of similar quality. And it was perhaps because of this that they were ruled by kings in earlier times, because it was rare to find men who were very outstanding in virtue, especially as in those days they dwelt in small poleis. Moreover they used to appoint their kings on account of their public benefactions (*ap' euergesias*), something that is the work of good men. But as it began to come about that many men arose who were similar with respect to virtue, they would no longer submit,

but sought some form of commonality (*koinon ti*), and established a “*politeia*.” As they became worse and made private profit from public affairs (*tôn koinôn*), it was reasonable that oligarchies should arise as a result; for they made wealth a thing of honor. And from oligarchies they first changed to tyrannies, and from tyrannies to democracy; for by constantly bringing the government into fewer hands owing to a base love of gain they made the multitude (*plêthos*) stronger, so that it set upon them, and democracies came into existence. Now that it has happened that the poleis have come to be even larger, it is perhaps not easy for any *politeia* other than democracy to come into existence. (*Pol.* 3.1286b 4-22. Trans. C. Lord, adapted).

Here, the polis is said to experience a sequence of regime changes, in the order: kingship ... “*politeia*” ... oligarchy ... tyranny ... democracy. This historical sequence of regimes is offered in the immediate context of Aristotle’s discussion of kingship, which is itself part of a complex double debate over whether laws or living persons should be authoritative in the polis, and whether monarchy or some form of collective rule is the optimal form of *politeia*.⁸

The sequence of regimes is obviously related to the canonical Aristotelian list of three uncorrupted regimes (monarchy, aristocracy, “*politeia*”) and three corrupted regimes (democracy, oligarchy, tyranny).⁹ The first two regime-types in the sequence of regimes passage (kingship, “*politeia*”) are from the uncorrupted group. The next three regime-types (oligarchy, tyranny, democracy) are each from the corrupted group. The canonical six-regime list is meant to be rank-ordered in respect to virtue. Aristotle’s long and sometimes tortuous discussion of “which regime is best?” in book 3 shows that the

ranking remains disputed in respect to the uncorrupted regimes: There is a sense in which kingship is best, another sense in which aristocracy is best, and perhaps also a sense in which “*politeia*” is best. But the rank-ordering is clear in respect to the corrupted regimes: democracy is better than oligarchy, which is in turn better than tyranny.

If we were to suppose that kingship is indeed the best of the uncorrupted regimes, then the sequence of regimes passage might indeed support the notion that the political *telos* emerges simultaneously with the social *telos*, i.e. with the realization of the polis. But the notion that kingship is simply the best form of *politeia* is effectively challenged in the course of the discussion of “which regime is best?” Kingship is the ideal form of governance in the event that the virtue of the one individual outweighs the aggregate virtue of all others. But that becomes less likely as poleis grow in size. Kingship is also, as we learn, subject to problems of succession (i.e. when inferior sons succeed superior fathers) and more subject to corruption than collective forms of rule. And so, rather than the political *telos* itself, kingship seems to be a historical way-station, and political change will be required if the polis is to achieve a stable political end.

Once we are embarked upon the sequence of regimes, we might expect that the sequence will fit into a developmental scheme based on a progressive change in the distribution of political virtue among the citizens. That is apparently the case in the first change, from kingship to “*politeia*”: In the sequence of regimes passage Aristotle says that in early times, when poleis were much smaller, it was difficult to find many virtuous persons. But when “many men arose who were similar with respect to virtue, they would no longer submit [to the king]”; so they sought for some form of *koinon*, and set up a “*politeia*.” We might suppose, on Murray’s argument, that with the emergence of

“*politeia*”, we have now arrived at the natural political *telos* of the polis. This might seem to be supported by Aristotle’s subsequent claim that the three “corrupted” regimes are “against nature” (1287b41). The emergence of these last three regime types cannot, therefore, be regarded as a natural consequence of human political nature. The series of post-“*politeia*” regime changes -- to oligarchy, then tyranny, and finally democracy -- does not fit with a story about systematic changes in the distribution of virtue among the citizens.¹⁰ Rather, the change to oligarchy is said to come about because men became “worse” (*cheirous*) and began making (private) profit out of public affairs (*koina*). The change to tyranny seems to be simply a hypertrophy of oligarchy, with wealth concentrated in ever-fewer hands. This process of concentration in turn results in the many (*plêthos*) becoming stronger, leading to a change to democracy. Aristotle’s historical sequence of regimes ends with democracy, which appears to be as far as polis political evolution has got by Aristotle’s own time. Immediately after presenting the sequence of regimes, Aristotle suggests that in his own times, now that poleis are even larger, it is “not easy” for any regime other than democracy to arise (1286b20-22).

Yet we cannot suppose that the polis has, in Aristotle’s time, achieved its *telos*, since, as we have seen, democracy is a corrupt regime and in that sense it is by definition “against nature.” Albeit, democracy is the least bad of the corrupted regimes. But surely, even though nature does not always achieve what it wants, it cannot be the case that the teleological political development that began with the realization of the polis as a natural form suited not only to the instrumental purposes of human survival and material flourishing but also the potential achievement of philosophical *eudaimonia*, just ends in democracy – or at least in democracy as it is ordinarily understood and as it is manifested

in (e.g.) Aristotle's Athens. This would leave humans with nothing to hope for beyond living in a "not too badly" corrupted political condition.

Obviously, there is more to be hoped for: the "polis of our prayers" described in Book 7. It seems reasonable to suppose that the *politeia* of the polis of our prayers is meant to represent, in a practicable sense, the political *telos* of the natural polis: After all, why would we pray for a regime that fell short of the best and final political end of what nature meant for us as political animals? Thus, if we can characterize the regime-type of the "polis of our prayers" we may suppose that we have arrived at the answer to the riddle of "what regime is the political *telos*" of the natural polis?"

There seem initially to be two possible answers to the question "what is the *politeia* of the polis of our prayers?": "*politeia*" or aristocracy. In reference to the sequence of regimes passage, considered above, we will need to choose between a reversion to the regime-type that degenerated into oligarchy, or an advance to a new regime-type. Given that "*politeia*" had failed to resist degeneration, advance to a new regime type seems, on the face of it, a more likely way forward to the political *telos* -- even though it may not be easily accomplished. Notably, aristocracy is the "missing regime" in Aristotle's historical sequence of regimes: the only one of the canonical list of six regime-types that is not represented in the sequential history of the polis' political development. And thus, we may guess that political teleology is to be squared with history by a political evolution of the polis through a three-stage political sequence (kingship, "*politeia*," aristocracy), which would correspond to the three-part social sequence (family, village/clan, polis) offered in book 1 as leading to the realization of the polis.

Assuming the scenario presented above is correct, in the case of the development toward the political *telos*, there is a sort of hiatus, or detour, between the penultimate (“*politeia*”) and ultimate (aristocracy) natural stages: a period (of indefinite duration) characterized by a sub-series of three “unnatural” political regime-types (oligarchy, tyranny, democracy). It is furthermore important to keep in mind that the argument I am developing implies that the teleological process had not been completed by the time of the writing of the *Politics*: the polis of our prayers remains a hope for the future, and thus the polis has not (in Aristotle’s day) yet achieved its *telos*.

Aristotle’s teleological naturalism demanded that the political *telos* be realizable, even if not yet realized. I have argued elsewhere that the polis of our prayers is not intended as a utopia “laid up in heaven,” but rather it is imagined as a real possibility that could be brought into existence within historical time. And moreover, I have argued that Aristotle himself had reason to hope that the polis of our prayers might be brought into existence in the near future, as the consequence of historical developments in his own era.¹¹ Thus, it seems to me likely that the polis of our prayers is, at least in the first instance, to be regarded as an aristocracy, that it is to be equated with the political *telos* toward which the polis was naturally inclined, and that its appearance was (at least potentially) imminent in Aristotle’s own time.¹²

Democracy and nature

Two questions (or sets of questions) remain, which confront us with the paradox of “Aristotle’s natural democracy”:

First, are we to imagine the sequence of regime changes described in book 3, beginning with kingship, and ending (so I have suggested) with aristocracy, as occurring in a single polis? Or must we, with Murray, suppose that Aristotle was committed to the strange idea that each time the regime changed, so too did the polis? That is to say, when speaking of the sequential changes that antedated the teleological emergence of the best possible *politeia* for the polis, must we imagine that “the polis” in question was actually not a single entity with a continuous existence, but rather a series of conceptually distinct entities? And could the final step – the political *telos* - emerge within an existing polis via regime-change, or does achieving the *telos* entail making a new polis? I hope this set of questions will be answered as a consequence of answering the second question.

The second question sets the agenda for rest of this essay: Is the “hiatus era” of three corrupted regimes sequentially following the degeneration of “*politeia*” into oligarchy to be understood (in Aristotelian terms) only as an unfortunate detour – just a patch of historical bad luck that must, once the political *telos* of the aristocratic polis has been achieved, be mourned as having doomed a certain number of human generations to unnecessary misery? Or was something actually gained from that interlude, such that the final product – a genuinely choiceworthy aristocratic polis, has benefited as a consequence?

Even to ask this last question is to invite the objection that the categories of teleological naturalism and historical development have now become hopelessly muddled: After all, in Aristotelian terms, it hardly seems possible to say that nature can have anything to learn from history. Aristotle’s natural polis cannot be analogized to a Darwinian species, “designed” for fitness by a long process of selection driven by

historical adaptation to environmental circumstances. I readily acknowledge the issue, but this essay is specifically about the problem of reconciling teleological naturalism and history, a problem with which every reader of Aristotle's *Politics* is confronted as a consequence of the text's "conglomerate" organization and argumentation. Aristotle himself points to the conjunction of human nature and willed human action when he notes that, while "there is in everyone an impulse" to live in a political community, nonetheless he who first brought men together to live in a polis was the cause (*aitios*) of the greatest of goods (1253a29-31).¹³ I suggest that the resolution to the paradox of how nature could learn from history might be discovered by reconstructing Aristotle's thought process, which I would hypothetically restore along the following lines (keeping in mind, of course, that the actual sequence of ideas is unrecoverable and not particularly important).

1. Teleological naturalism is applied to political evolution: Starting with the "acorn" of humans as political animals, Aristotle derives the "social form" of the human community in a three-stage sequence: first is the family; next is the village or clan; the third and final stage is the polis.
2. He derives the "political form" of the polis via a three-stage sequence of virtue-based regimes. First is monarchy in which virtue is concentrated in an individual; next "*politeia*," as virtue is distributed more widely among certain residents of the polis; the third and final stage is aristocracy, the point at which virtue is evenly distributed, and maintained at a high level, among all citizens.

3. The empirical data of political history shows that regimes (corrupted as well as uncorrupted) follow one another in a sequence of regime-changes and that poleis had become larger over time.
4. Historically, in some cases it appears as if a new polis has emerged as the result of a regime change, but in other cases substantial changes are best understood as evolutionary steps within a single polis and single regime. The development of democracy in Athens, from Solon to Aristotle's own day, is a particularly good example of this latter model.
5. If a real-world example of an aristocratic "polis of our prayers" is to come into being and survive, it will need to be a genuinely new polis - a colonial foundation in which conditions for polis flourishing are optimal. But it cannot exist outside history – which means outside the world of large and successful poleis like Athens. This means that the new polis of our prayers must find a way to borrow from the competences that have made certain existing poleis historically successful in facing external threats: e.g. strong walls and up-to-date defenses against siege.
6. The ideal polis must also be resilient in the face of potential internal conflict. And so, the polis of our prayers must borrow from the socio-political factors that made certain poleis (notably Athens) successful in resisting catastrophic *stasis*, and thus in resisting the "metabolic" tendency to change into "another polis." The key factor is the democratic equation of the body of actual citizens with the body of culturally imaginable citizens ($C^a = C^i$).
7. The history/nature circle is squared by allowing the original hypothesis about human political nature to accommodate the thought that in a state of nature, the potential for

developing a level of political virtue adequate to participatory citizenship (ruling and being ruled in turns) is innate in virtually all newborn (Greek) males.¹⁴

8. In existing poleis, innate capacity is frequently squandered, as men corrupt themselves through engagement in bad (i.e. slavish, banausic, instrumental) practices. In the polis of our prayers, the socio-economic (especially land- and slave-holding) and education systems are designed to help nature achieve its purposes by preventing post-natal corruption of innate political capacity in “natural citizens” through precluding their engagement in bad practices. Ergo, under optimal circumstances, $C^a = C^i = C^n$.

Squaring the nature/history circle through this “8-step program” produces one unsurprising result: the political *telos* of the natural polis turns out to be aristocratic in that the citizen-rulers manifest political virtue and share in a standardized education centered on the perfection of that virtue. But it also produces a result that is quite unexpected in light of earlier Greek political philosophizing about the ideal state: The ideal polis is democratic in that no male permanent resident need be excluded *ab initio* from active, participatory citizenship by circumstances other than that of nativity. The unexpected result is, I have suggested, the product of Aristotle’s intellectual engagement with the political history of the poleis, and perhaps especially with the history of democratic Athens (as it is presented in the *AthPol*). Aristotle’s ideal state borrows from historical Greek democracy a key socio-political characteristic, one that made democracy (in Athens’ case, at least) resistant to the corrosive sorts of change engendered by *stasis*. And as a result, the polis of our prayers is an aristocratic democracy (or a democratic

aristocracy): a community in which all free native adult males were not only active and participatory citizens, but also highly virtuous citizens. And thus democracy finds a place in the political *telos* of the Aristotelian polis, and it is possible to speak, without irony (if not without paradox), of “Aristotle’s natural democracy.”¹⁵

Testing the “natural democracy” thesis

My main argument is now complete, but it remains to specify why the formula $C^a = C^i$ (leaving aside C^n , as a distinctively Aristotelian concern) rendered a democracy like Athens historically capable of experiencing change and *stasis* without losing its identity as a unitary polis in the process.¹⁶ As Athenian writers before Aristotle (e.g. Ps-Xenophon 3.12-13; Thuc. 6.39.1: speech of Athenagoras of Syracuse) had noted, the equation of the actual citizens with “persons culturally conceivable as citizens” meant that there was no body of disaffected people who might suppose that they were being denied “what they deserved” in terms of political recognition by the fact of being unfairly stranded outside the citizen body. Although this democratic move certainly did not eliminate *stasis*, it removed one of its least tractable sources: So long as there were substantial numbers of non-citizens within the polis who strongly believed themselves culturally entitled to citizenship, there could be no true long-term stability.

Once the Athenian solution was put into place, it proved remarkably successful in creating stable political identities: The account of the *AthPol* suggests that a key innovation came with Solon’s lawcode, which, by forbidding the enslavement of locals, initially defined the Athenian citizen body as “the native adult males.”¹⁷ This move was fundamentally important in that it extended the cultural imagination of “who could be a

citizen” as far as it would ever be extended in actual Greek practice (if not in Aristophanes’ and Plato’s imaginations).

After Solon there was a progressive increase in the participation rights of citizens.¹⁸ This progressive augmentation of the participatory aspect of citizenship was not without interruption; there were several oligarchic attempts (in 508: Isagoras and the Three Hundred, in 411: The Four Hundred, in 404: The Thirty) to narrow the definition of citizenship, by restricting the active-citizen body to some subset of the native male population. Each of these attempts failed, because most Athenians continued to act as if $C^a = C^i$, and continued to regard the democratic code of law (which they imagined as dating back to Solon) as continuously valid. The point is that although anti-democratic groups occasionally succeeded in changing the *politeia*, understood as the institutional arrangements by which the city was momentarily governed, they failed to effectively challenge the persistence of a democratic *politeia*, understood as a democratic identity and loyalty to a set of laws. And thus they failed to change the existing polis into a new polis.

Aristotle naturalizes this democratic social/political/cultural solution by defining (implicitly, through an argument about deliberative capacity that excludes natural slaves, women, and children) the “natural citizens” as justly free (i.e. not slave by nature) adult males. Such individuals have, *ex hypothesi*, the potential for developing skills necessary for ruling and being ruled over in their turn. Although the story gets more complicated with the introduction (at the end of book 1: 1260a36-b2) of the idea that voluntary human activity (performance of a trade) can render a free man a sort of “slave by practice,” I would suggest that among the most remarkable features of the *Politics* is that it makes

“natural democracy” possible by allowing (while never positively asserting) the premise that virtually every Greek male possesses, at birth, the inherent potential for developing the rather high level of political virtue necessary to participate actively in ruling an uncorrupted polity.¹⁹ In no existing polis was the “citizenship potential” of the male population actually realized; Aristotle believed that in actual democracies most of those with participation rights lacked adequate virtue for the proper exercise of citizenship. So the inherent potential of born citizens ordinarily went unrealized in the face of inadequate conditions for its nurture. Yet under the optimal conditions pertaining in the polis of our prayers men’s innate political potential could be reliably developed through a standardized system of education and a social system designed to ensure that “natural citizens” do not become “slaves by practice.”

We can test this conclusion by a simple contrary-to-fact argument: Were the “inherent political capacity” presumption *not* regarded by Aristotle as true -- were many of the native-born males of the polis of our prayers expected to be inherently so deficient in virtue as to be ineducable and thus unsuited to ruling in their turn -- then some provision would be needed in the polis of our prayers for dealing with them: Either for treating them as natural slaves (if they are recognized as such), or for relegating them to a status-group of free yet non-citizen (never-ruling/permanently ruled-over) natives, or for expelling them from the polis. There is no hint of any such provision in the text as we have it. I have suggested above that Aristotle’s awareness of the revolutionary tendencies of “native (adult male) non-citizens,” whether in residence or in exile, gave him good reason to avoid burdening his best-imaginable polis with a class of such persons.

Can the idea of “natural democracy” stand the test of plausibility? Is it just an inherently absurd idea, one that it would be odd to suppose that Aristotle could ever have entertained?²⁰ I don’t believe it is. Indeed, a recent survey of empirical studies on the comparative anthropology of foraging (hunting-gathering, “pre-agricultural”) societies suggests that, in an important sense, the “natural democracy” hypothesis is correct. Something like democracy (or anyway something much more like democracy than oligarchy or tyranny) does indeed seem to be a plausible candidate for the “natural” human political condition.²¹ The universal tendency of “simple” human communities to seek to resist the emergence of would-be tyrants or oligarchic cliques suggests that something like a presumption of inherent political capacity, and a commitment to political equality among those manifesting such capacity, emerge from our human nature. Moreover, there is no reason to suppose that our “inherent” preference for democracy is extinguished by the emergence of larger and more complex forms of human community: A methodologically sophisticated “happiness survey,” based on 6,000 interviews in Switzerland, demonstrates quite a strong correlation (correcting for other factors) between overall happiness and access to institutions of participatory democracy.²² A strong reading of these anthropological and sociological studies would suggest that Aristotle’s claim that humans are by nature “political animals” is correct; at the least they underline the reasonableness of a presumption that such a nature would tend to lead to a form of political organization that was some sense democratic.

I have argued, above, that while the political *telos* of the natural Aristotelian polis is in one sense an aristocracy, in another analytically relevant sense, it is a democracy. Aristotle certainly never comes out and states that as a conclusion; it is a thesis that

emerges, so I have argued, when we make the attempt at a reasonably comprehensive reading of the *Politics*, i.e. a reading that refuses to split the teleological argument off from the historical/empirical argument, or to split those arguments off from the account of the ideal state. Given that we will not find any simple authorial statement about the role of democracy in the political *telos* of the natural polis, can we test the unexpected conclusion by reference to other passages of the text? It seems reasonable to suppose that if it is true, a “natural democracy” thesis should help explain otherwise difficult-to-interpret passages, in a text that does not lack for passages that resist easy explanation. I offer, as an example, the tricky issues of deliberation and the “summation argument.”

If an aristocratic democracy (democratic in the simple sense that $C^a = C^i$) is the most natural form of “Aristotelian” regime, then it should also be the case that democracy allows humans to make best use of certain of their natural human capacities in respect to governance. After speech itself, the most basic and most important human political capacity is deliberation or “deliberative judgment” (*to bouleutikon*). Deliberation is the capacity (as is made clear in the *Rhetoric*) to make reasonable choices about matters relevant to the common good of the community, in the context of meaningful alternatives, and on the basis of prior knowledge (technical and social) and the ability to assess reasoned (but not logically indisputable) arguments.

Deliberation is the very capacity that limits citizenship to adult free males: In a notorious and brief passage (1260a7-14), Aristotle states that natural slaves lack *to bouleutikon*, that women do not possess it in an adequately reliable way (because it is not the master element in their moral psychology), and (less controversially) that children have yet to fully develop it.

Aristotle does indeed suggest that democratic decision-making processes can (under the right conditions) make optimal use of innate human deliberative capacity through the process sometimes described as “summation.”²³ The process is one of aggregation of diverse “knowledge/expertise sets” among the members of a large body of persons who must decide on a matter that cannot be adequately judged by any one of them, or by any small group of experts. The key passage is as follows.

The many, of whom none is individually an excellent (*spoudaios*) man, nevertheless can, when joined together, be better than those [the excellent few], not as individuals but all together [*hôs sumpantas*], just as potluck [*sumphorêta*] dinners can be better than those provided at one man's expense. For, there being many, each person possesses a constituent part [*morion*] of virtue and practical reason, and when they have come together, the multitude [*plêthos*] is like a single person, yet many-footed and many-handed and possessing many sense-capacities [*aisthêseis*], so it is likewise as regards to its multiplicity of character [*ta êthê*] and its mind [*dianoia*]. This is why the many [*hoi polloi*] judge better in regard to musical works and those of the poets, for some judge a particular aspect [*ti morion*], while all of them judge the whole [*panta de pantes*]. (*Pol.* 3.1281a40-b10. Trans. C. Lord, adapted).²⁴

Aristotle here offers two analogies to explain summation: First the “pot luck dinner,” a feast to which to which each of many diners brings some different dish, resulting in a superior dining experience for everyone. Next is the judgment of “musical and poetic” (certainly including dramatic) performances, an undertaking which demands

a variety of sensibilities (in the case of tragedy, this will require an appreciation of the six elements of plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song: *Poetics* 1450a6-10).²⁵

When the decision-making group is of the right sort, Aristotle claims that this democratic “summation” process in fact yields superior judgments. In order to be of the right sort, the group must be mindful of the common good and sensible to the locus of relevant expertise among its membership. That is to say, the group must not act as a selfish faction, and each of its members must pay attention to the opinions/responses of those who are (in the dramatic example) musically adept in respect to the singing, to those adept at visual art in respect to the staging, and so on.

An important part of the Aristotelian summation argument is that it implicitly acknowledges the issue of democratic diversity in respect to knowledge and judgment-capacity. The large-group decision-making process characteristic of democracy works to optimize the human capacity to deliberate well on matters in which no individual is adequately knowledgeable, only because the group in question is diverse in the right way and not diverse in any wrong way. Once again, there is an unsurprising conclusion and an unexpected conclusion to be drawn.

It is unsurprising (within the usual way of reading Aristotle) to say that if the group is diverse in the wrong way, the summation process will not get off the ground: If the group in question is merely a conglomeration of selfish individuals or selfish factions – each with a preconceived notion of the outcome it desires, then the various members of the group will neither be paying appropriate attention to each of their fellow citizens on the basis of his special knowledge and expertise, nor judging in respect to the common good. The point is that in order to judge well, there must be a certain homogeneity among

the membership: each member of the group must possess and manifest at least baseline political virtue, qua group-interest seeking.

The unexpected conclusion is that the group must be diverse in the right way, by which I mean that it must include a diversity of distinctly different knowledge-sets and expertise-sets.²⁶ If the group were homogeneous in respect to knowledge and expertise, then each would have precisely the same “knowledge/expertise set,” and so the decision to be made by the group could be made just as well (and presumably more quickly and efficiently) by any one of its members. By analogy, there would be no culinary benefit in common feasts if each member brought just the same sort of food to the common table – in that case each may as well eat at home. Nor would the dramatic judgment improve if we simply multiply sensibilities that we suppose each individual member possessed in fullness as an individual. It is only when the decision-making group is diverse in the sense that different people bring things that are both different and valuable “to the table” that the process of summation adds value to group judgments.

The summation argument is a test of the “natural democracy” thesis in that it demonstrates that methods of group decision-making strongly identified with democracy as a regime-type do allow, under optimal conditions, for the most effective use of capacities that Aristotle regards as at least potentially inherent in humans as political animals. The summation argument also suggests that a diversity of knowledge and skills among the members of the citizen body could be a source of community strength, and that strength was *not* produced by limiting acts of public judgment to an elite of “the excellent.” Unregulated diversity in the context of public decision-making bodies was strongly and negatively identified in the ancient philosophical tradition with democracy

as a socio-political system (Plato, *Republic* 557c is the locus classicus). Aristotle's discussion of summation opens up a more positive approach to diversity in public decision-making. He suggests that under optimal conditions, the right kind of diversity allowed for better decisions to be reached, as the deliberative capacity inherent in the individual members of groups was conjoined with an aggregated body of knowledge and brought to bear on some object of common concern.

It is important to remember that so long as we stay within Aristotle's conceptual universe, the scope of democracy will remain strictly delimited by the aristocratic frame into which it is put to work. The founder of a "polis of our prayers" can learn from the historical experience of Athenian democracy, but the polis of our prayers is not an option for Athens; it can be realized only by the creation of a new polis under near-optimal conditions. That restrictive aristocratic frame, along with the role of nature in justifying slavery and the exclusion of women from political life on the basis of an improbable and under-theorized moral psychology, renders Aristotle's political theory unsuitable as an "off-the-shelf" model for contemporary democratic theorizing.

Yet when we turn from the project of understanding Aristotle's own political thought to the project of normative democratic theorizing we need not be constrained by classical-era *endoxa* regarding women, slaves, or the effect of labor on the human psyche. The core Aristotelian argument I have attempted to develop here, that democracy is our natural inheritance as political animals and that natural democracy accommodates (even requires) diverse decision-making bodies, is not dependent upon peculiar assumptions about how deliberative capacity is distributed by nature or impaired through practice. If we are willing to expand Aristotle's frame, by assuming that virtually all humans come

into the world with the potential to become fully featured political animals in an Aristotelian sense, his core argument could provide the jumping off point for a democratic political theory that moves well beyond the familiar late-twentieth century frameworks of analytic liberalism and communitarianism.²⁷

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Notes

¹ Murray 1993, quotation from p. 204.

² E.g. *Pol.* 1254b26-32. There is, of course, a large bibliography on nature in the *Politics* and its relationship to Aristotelian naturalism elsewhere in the corpus. I have found Lloyd 1996, Depew 1995, and Cooper 1990 particularly helpful. In contrast to my fairly conventional understanding of how nature works in Aristotle, Frank 2005, argues for “denaturalizing nature,” i.e. that nature in Aristotle’s *Politics* does not constrain humans. This allows her to develop an action-centered model whereby it is not only possible for citizens-by-nature to become slaves through practice, but also possible for “natural slaves” to make themselves into citizens by willfully choosing appropriate activity. While I find this conception *normatively* more attractive than the ordinary way of reading Aristotle on nature, I do not think it is what Aristotle himself meant. Frank’s “denaturalized” reading does not, for example, account for *Pol.* 1256b20-26: the claim that just warfare is acquisitive military action aimed at enslaving those who are slaves by nature; see further, Ober 1998, 304-5.

³ E.g. Hansen 1991, Ostwald 1986.

⁴ I leave to one side, for the purposes of this essay, the question of whether *AthPol*’s Athenian history is, by contemporary historical standards, completely plausible. For the record, I would start the continuous history of democracy with the Athenian Revolution and Cleisthenic reforms of 508/7 B.C.: Ober 1996, chapter 4.

⁵ Democracy in *Laws* and *Statesman*: Bobonich 2002; Hitz 2004, 68-88. It is worth noting that Plato’s earlier political texts (especially *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, *Republic*) can be read as a “democratic” in the cultural/pedagogical sense of providing readers with both intellectual resources and argumentative method for contesting the apparent (non-democratic) conclusions reached by Plato’s Socrates: See Monoson 2000; Euben 2003.

⁶ Although the process is a product of natural impulses, it cannot be accomplished without willed human action, indeed, it requires something like a social contract – although the contract is very different (and based on a very different conception of human nature) than the familiar early modern contract theories (e.g. Hobbes, whose pessimistic conception of humans in the state of nature is radically different from Aristotle’s): see Ober 1996, 168-70.

⁷ Murray 1993, 201. I identify the hybrid regime-type by putting quotes around the term: thus “*politeia*” is the regime type, *politeia* the general term for constitution, political culture, or literary account thereof.

⁸ Cf. Ober 1998, 326. A different account of *metabolai* is offered at 1316a20-39, in the context of an attack on Plato’s sequence of regimes in the *Republic*. Here Aristotle suggests that there is no fixed sequence for regime-change, and that the most common

form of *metabolê* is from one regime-type to its opposite (rather than its “neighboring type”). Aristotle’s argument here is based on empirical evidence of regime-changes in various directions, and the emergence of the political *telos* seems not to be at issue.

⁹ See for example the schematic diagram, with discussion, in Ober 1998, 311.

¹⁰ Nor does Aristotle’s “oligarchy, tyranny, democracy” sequence reproduce Plato’s progression of post-timocracy regimes in *Republic* books 8 and 9 (oligarchy, democracy, tyranny) or Plato’s ranking of non-law-abiding regimes in *Statesman* 302b-303b (democracy, oligarchy, tyranny).

¹¹ Ober 1998, 339-50.

¹² Frank 2005 offers an account of the relationship between Aristotle’s naturalized political teleology and the “polis of our prayers” as an “aristocratic democracy” that is in important respects compatible with the account I offer here, although Frank’s activity-centered conception of “Aristotelian political nature” and her conception of the “polis of our prayers” as a possible future for Athens are quite different from my views.

¹³ See, further, Ober 1996 168-69 with note 21.

¹⁴ At 1316a8-11, again in debate with Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle leaves open the possibility that Plato might be right that some men may be born in a polis who prove ineducable and incapable of developing excellence. We might guess (the text gives us no guidance) that Aristotle would regard such men as slaves by nature. It is unclear, however, whether Aristotle accepts that this category of individual actually exists (other than as sports of nature, see below), or whether he simply allows the possibility in order to show that Plato’s understanding of *metabolai* is faulty even granted that unprovable presumption.

¹⁵ Given the somewhat contradictory definitions of “*politeia*” as a regime-type in the *Politics*, it is not impossible that this “democratic aristocracy/aristocratic democracy” might be described as both an aristocracy and as a sort of “*politeia*.” See, further, the thoughtful discussion of Frank 2005, chapter 5.

¹⁶ The Athenians did indeed “naturalize” their conception of citizenship, but they did it in a very different way than did Aristotle, via legally mandated bilateral nativity requirements for legitimate marriage and procreation and via the development of an autochthony myth and a related ideology of “Athenian character.” For a succinct analysis of Athenian naturalized citizenship, see Lape 2004, 68-76.

¹⁷ Solon’s innovation is well analyzed (in explicitly Aristotelian terms) in Manville 1990.

¹⁸ For a review of post-Solonian historical development of democratic institutions, see Ober 1989, chapter 2.

¹⁹ Cf. above, note 14. One must always account for sports of nature, which might throw up morally defective specimens, just as it threw up individuals with physical deformities. Perhaps a native Greek natural slave, who would of course be excluded from participation, would be regarded by Aristotle as such a sport of nature. The distribution of natural slavishness is a notoriously tricky problem in the *Politics*; suffice it to say here that Aristotle points his reader to Asia as the most obvious place in which slaves by nature were likely to be found: see Ober 1998, 304-306. It is not clear how the premise of inherent capacity to develop virtue is to be squared with Aristotle's comment (*Rhetoric* 1390b19-31) that inferior sons are often born to excellent fathers. See other passages cited and discussion in Ober 1989 250 n. 7, 256.

²⁰ Aristotle was quite capable of entertaining implausible ideas, for example natural slavery. But it is surely unfair to saddle him with truly implausible ideas that are not explicitly argued for in the text as we have it.

²¹ Boehm 1999 (a project that has a certain conceptual similarity to the collection of *Politeiai* in the Lyceum); cf. Leacock 1978.

²² Frey and Stutzer 2000.

²³ On the summation argument, see Keyt 1991.

²⁴ Waldon 1995 underlines the importance of this passage, which he discusses under the rubric of the "Doctrine of the Wisdom of the Multitude." Gottlieb, forthcoming, ch. 13 argues persuasively that Aristotle is neither being ironic nor presenting someone else's argument here. She shows (*loc cit. ad fin.*) that the optimistic account of democratic decision-making in this and related passages is compatible with the discussion of the unity of the virtues in *NE* and *EE*, because "vices are a disunited lot whereas only the virtues cohere in a unified and coherent way." See Ober 1998, 319-24 for further discussion and bibliography.

²⁵ The "summation" passage strongly recalls Aristotle's analysis of tragedy in the *Poetics*, with its discussion of how "parts" make of the whole, and of the essential roles in action and judgment played by *dianoia* and *êthos*.

²⁶ Cf. *EE* 1216b31: "Everyone has something of his own (*oikeion*) to contribute to the truth." This leads to a question, which cannot be adequately answered here: "What is the origin of diversity in knowledge-sets and expertise-sets?" Suffice it to note that if a community were to take each human infant as a perfect tabula rosa, and submit him (or her) to a perfectly standardized upbringing and education, such diversity would not emerge. The sort of desirable democratic diversity pointed to here assumes either some meaningful differences in inherent abilities, or in the culture to which community-members are exposed, or (most plausibly) in both.

²⁷ By “analytic liberalism,” I refer to the tradition most strongly associated with John Rawls; by “communitarianism” that associated with Michael Sandel. It is only fair to say that many political theorists, including those working on deliberative democracy, virtue theory, and neo-republicanism, have sought (more or less successfully) to move beyond these paradigms. This paper was first presented in at the Chicago-area Classical Philosophy Conference in April 2004; a revised and expanded version was presented in November 2004 as the Wesson Lectures at Stanford University. For their help at various stages of this essay’s development, I would like to thank Ryan Balot, Richard Kraut, Susan Lape, Sarah Monoson, Barry Powell, and Christian Wildberg. Thanks also to Zena Hitz, Jill Frank, and Paula Gottlieb for sharing their work in advance of publication, and for their valuable comments on Aristotle on democracy.