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Author(s): Ben Koons

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Ben Koons

The ‘crowned republic’ was perhaps a paradox Lord Tennyson invented to flatter his queen, and already in the wake of 1848, the old Plantagenet’s protest that ‘we are no tyrant, but a Christian king’ was beginning to seem like so much pretense.¹ Yet for an ancient and medieval audience, the notion of a monarchical republic would have been entirely reasonable. Plato’s *Republic* after all was to be administered by philosopher-kings, and the Roman Republic kept its former name despite the ascendancy of the emperor. John of Salisbury takes ‘res publica’ to be synonymous with a kingdom, and the English translation of this word, ‘commonwealth’, could just as well signify the ‘kingly commonwealth of England’ even into the mid-19th century.² This question of how a republic can be crowned is one of the central issues of David Riesbeck’s recent interpretation of Aristotle’s *Politics*, especially its challenging sections in the latter half of Book 3.

Despite the generality of his title *Aristotle on Political Community*, Riesbeck approaches the topic by means of answering the accusation that Aristotle’s political theory excludes many individuals (especially naturally free adult males) from citizenship and participation in a political community. After all, Aristotle does accept both monarchy and aristocracy as just constitutional arrangements, and these regimes exclude the vast majority of their subjects from political participation. Riesbeck focuses, in particular, on two special problems for Aristotle’s

¹ ‘To the Queen,’ *Idylls of the King, Henry IV*, Part I, I.ii.241.

² Henry Reed, *Lectures on English History and Tragic Poetry, as Illustrated by Shakespeare* (Lond. &c., 1855), v. 150, cited in ‘commonwealth, n.’ OED Online. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 24 May 2017.

political theory: the ‘normative’ and ‘conceptual’ problems of monarchy.³ According to the normative problem, Aristotle inconsistently affirms that man is naturally a political animal, whose happiness is bound up with political participation, while allowing that a regime that excludes all but one man from political life is a just regime that serves the common good of all.⁴ According to the conceptual problem, monarchy not only fails to be a just regime, but it even fails to be a political arrangement at all.⁵ Rather, Aristotle’s definition of a citizen as ‘one who shares in rule as well as being ruled’ (*Politics* 3.I 1275b18-21) entails that the king is the only citizen, but then a single citizen does not a political community make.

In order to solve these problems, which he elucidates in his first chapter ‘Paradoxes of Monarchy’, Riesbeck engages with a range of topics and interpretative debates in Aristotle’s political and ethical corpus. In ‘Community, Friendship, and Justice’ and ‘From the Household to the City’, Riesbeck first considers the genus *community* and then considers what distinguishes the *polis* from other communities such as the household and village. In order to clarify this distinction, Aristotle invokes the concept of ‘self-sufficiency [autarkeia]’, which—as Riesbeck argues—stands for the city’s making possible lives for its citizens that are ‘choiceworthy and lacking in nothing’ (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.7 1097b14-15) rather than its not being dependent on other cities.⁶ In the chapter ‘Rule and Justice in the Household and the City’, Riesbeck turns to the issue of what rule means by considering it not only in its political context but also in the relationships of a household, i.e. between father and child, husband and wife, master and slave. For Aristotle, ruling essentially involves ‘one agent’s initiating the action of another by issuing an order to act in accordance with a decision that the ruling agent has made’.⁷

Drawing together the conclusions of these earlier chapters, in ‘Citizenship, Constitutions, and Political Justice’, Riesbeck shows that

³ David J. Riesbeck, *Aristotle on Political Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.* 107-109.

⁷ Riesbeck, *Aristotle*, 139.

Aristotle is committed to the justice of granting all naturally free, native-born, adult males citizenship and hence a share in political authority and that this commitment is consistent with Aristotle's endorsement of constitutions like aristocracy and monarchy, which exclude some such men from membership in the ruling class. How does Riesbeck reconcile these two commitments? He rejects the proposed solution of John Cooper and David Keyt, who suggest that Aristotle has in mind a distinction between first-class and second-class citizens where only the former group had any political authority.⁸ This interpretation conflicts with Aristotle's definition of a citizen in terms of participation in political rule, and it also cannot make sense of Aristotle's discussion in *Politics* 3.5 of why artisans do not count as citizens.⁹ Instead, Riesbeck proposes that it is the citizen's participation in political authority and not citizenship itself that comes in degrees.

A hierarchy of more or less authoritative offices is familiar from *Politics* 3.6 1278b8-15, and it is on the basis of which group holds the most authoritative office that a *polis'* regime is characterized (e.g. an oligarchy is a regime in which the highest offices may only be held by men who meet certain property qualifications).¹⁰ This most authoritative office is the deliberative element in the city, i.e. not the element that makes every political deliberation but the element that makes the most important decisions (e.g. about fighting wars and making peace, appointing lesser officials, exiling citizens and confiscating property, and about the laws themselves).¹¹ Admitting such a hierarchy of offices is important because even if a citizen can only participate in politics by sitting on juries for certain kinds of offences while all of the most central decisions of his community are decided by the king, this citizen still participates in political authority. This represents Riesbeck's solution to the conceptual problem of monarchy.

Riesbeck's solution to the normative problem of monarchy hinges on pinpointing what is wrong about political exclusion. In effect, excluding native-born naturally free adult men from political

⁸ *Ibid.* 186.

⁹ *Ibid.* 187-196.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 213.

¹¹ Riesbeck, *Aristotle*, 216-217.

participation is treating them like slaves because it denies them the ability to ‘exercise...their own deliberative facilities in deciding how they will live’.¹² Yet a necessary condition for a good life is to live according to one’s own decisions (*Politics* 3.9 1280a31-4), and although living under an exclusionary regime does not deprive its subjects of the freedom to make some decisions, it does limit to what extent they can live in accordance with their own decisions.

In his final chapter ‘Kingship as Political Rule and Political Community’, Riesbeck answers a battery of objections to the justice of monarchy and concludes with a consideration of what theoretical role monarchy plays in Aristotle’s political thought and how Aristotle’s understanding of monarchy differs from Plato’s because of their disagreement about the nature of politics as a discipline. One objection is that Aristotle makes consent of the ruled a mark of kingship and its absence a sign of tyranny (*Politics* 4.10 1295a19-23, 5.10 1313a3-10) but this consent on its own seems neither sufficient nor necessary for the justice of a constitution because the citizens might be mistaken about the common good.¹³ For surely, the fabled king of Wirani, who drinks from the poisoned well that has driven his subjects mad and rebellious, does not thereby restore his city to justice. One response is that consent is merely evidence that a monarchical constitution is serving the common good and that the ruled are generally reliable at discerning a just constitution, but Riesbeck rejects this interpretation both because it does not help Aristotle distinguish between monarchy and tyranny and because it gives too much credit to the ruled in judging what is just in their own case.¹⁴ Instead, Riesbeck takes the consent of the ruled to be an integral part of the common good, since then the citizens have some measure of self-direction through the political process, and moreover dissident citizens represent a threat to the stability of any regime.¹⁵

Although the book is a solution to the ‘paradoxes of monarchy’ and its earlier chapters develop an interpretation of Aristotle’s central

¹² *Ibid.* 176.

¹³ *Ibid.* 243.

¹⁴ Riesbeck, *Aristotle*, 244.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 247.

political concepts of community, justice, the *polis*, rule, and citizenship so that in the final two chapters Riesbeck can solve these paradoxes, many of the sections of the book on their own are well-sourced discussions of some central debates about Aristotle's *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Riesbeck covers the disagreements over whether only character friendships are for the sake of the other, what it means for a *polis* to be self-sufficient, and whether a community is essentially a sharing in some common good or instead a sharing in some common activity. Thus the book achieves the generality its title promises while also significantly advancing the debate about some special issues in the *Politics*.

In one of the more difficult and controversial sections of the book (and one of the few sections lacking in his normal clarity), Riesbeck claims that political participation is not an intrinsically worthwhile activity and that it does not constitute part of a happy life.¹⁶ Thus depriving a free man of his citizenship is not unjust because it directly deprives him of a basic good. Rather, political participation is an activity we engage in for the sake of other ends even if sometimes these same activities are intrinsically worthwhile because of their orientation to these ends. Riesbeck compares Aristotle's views about political activity to his views about war.¹⁷ Nobody would fight a war in order to do warlike things, but acting courageously by storming the enemy's fortress is intrinsically worthwhile because it is an act of courage, which is a virtue a man must develop to lead a happy life. Yet independently of the ends that warfare serves (i.e. the preservation of one's state or the rectification of some just grievance), there is nothing worthwhile in a man's storming this fortress and risking his life. This contrasts with the friends engaged in a witty conversation over a drink, which is at once an exercise in virtue as well as intrinsically worthwhile. Aristotle does seem to suggest that politics is not intrinsically worthwhile when he describes it as 'unleisured' (*Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7 1177b4-18) and when he describes politics as different from the end it seeks, i.e. human happiness (10.7 1177b14-15).

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 157.

¹⁷ Riesbeck, *Aristotle*, 169-172.

An initial concern about this interpretation is that if politics is merely instrumental to one's happiness, then how is Aristotle any different from the modern liberals, who also conceive of politics as a means of attaining goods for individuals? Riesbeck's response to this criticism is that whereas for Aristotle the end of politics is *living well*, the end of politics for the liberals is something less comprehensive, e.g. survival, peace or protecting property.¹⁸ Riesbeck also insists that politics might be instrumental but still essentially related to happiness such that one cannot understand what politics is about without mentioning happiness just as one cannot understand bridle-making without mentioning horseback riding.¹⁹

Another controversial aspect of Riesbeck's interpretation is that he denies that the common good is anything over and above the separate and shared interests of the citizens in a community.²⁰ This contention is based on a controversial interpretation of the three sorts of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: pleasure, utility, and virtue friendships. According to Riesbeck, what distinguishes these friendships is what the person values in his friend.²¹ Thus a utility friendship, which he takes as the paradigmatic friendship for a community, is when I form a relationship with another person for the sake of some mutual benefit.²² Even if this is the correct interpretation of Aristotle's theory of friendship, it is not obvious that utility friendships are the model for the relationships in the *polis*. To assume that this is the case seems to already be a case of confounding the *polis* with the confederations Aristotle describes in *Politics* 3.9. Riesbeck's interpretation of the common good, though, is not central to his central thesis, and he could accept a more robust view of the common good without undermining his solutions to the paradoxes of monarchy.

Finally, Aristotle's conception of monarchy may clarify some aspects of historical Christian kingdoms that usually escape the notice of moderns. First, a good king is one who takes counsel, especially from

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 174.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 159-160.

²⁰ Riesbeck, *Aristotle*, 46, 86-89.

²¹ *Ibid.* 65.

²² *Ibid.* 45-46.

his best subjects. Closely bound up with this is that a king rules on the basis of a consensus of all times heeding the voice of traditional wisdom. Second, the importance of the consent of the subjects to a king's rule becomes manifest when his authority is threatened. Even the absolute monarchies of the Stuarts relied on the consent of the people, and a sign of what was always the basis of their royal power were the many stirring Jacobite songs speaking of the rights of kings. Indeed, one might understand much of Aristotle's political philosophy simply by hearkening to a Scottish Highlander singing, 'Let us strike for prince and laws'.