

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 1993–1994

Volume 21 Number 2

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Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$4.50 extra;
elsewhere \$5.40 extra by surface mail (8 weeks
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Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by
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Composition by Eastern Composition, Inc.,
Binghamton, N.Y. 13905
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,
Lancaster, PA 17603

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Mary P. Nichols, *Citizens and Statesmen: A Study of Aristotle's Politics* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1992), ix + 233 pp., \$19.95.

LESLIE G. RUBIN

Society for Greek Political Thought

Mary Nichols has written a concise yet comprehensive interpretation of Aristotle's *Politics* as a book defining and defending politics. Strange as it may sound, such an interpretation is far from common. Nichols' primary premise, and I believe a correct one, is that the *Politics* is an attempt to define political rule as distinct from tyrannical or despotic rule. Nichols' thorough interpretation shows how this issue appears in various forms throughout the work—not only in the more obvious places where Aristotle may suggest the injustice of the institution of slavery, for instance, or criticize the rule of a thoroughgoing tyrant, but also in the places where he calls into question the rule of the one or few virtuous over those inferior in virtue. Through careful development of Aristotle's concepts of citizen and statesman, Nichols can demonstrate convincingly that even the so-called ideal or best regime of Books VII and VIII falls short of perfection, though not in the way it is sometimes criticized.

I confess that I came to this book expecting the clarity and distinctness of exposition and argument for which Professor Nichols is justly well known. Already convinced that Aristotle means to defend political life and the middle-class polity against both conventional tyranny and the paternalism and political injustice of kingship or aristocracy to the extent possible in an imperfect world, I came away from this encounter with Nichols' keen observations and analysis with a deeper insight into the character and seriousness of this defense even in the face of the alternative of the private contemplative life.

Professor Nichols sensitively incorporates the insights of previous scholarship while carefully distinguishing her argument from most of the prominent schools of thought on Aristotle. She establishes not an entirely new view of the *Politics*, for that is probably both unnecessary and impossible, but a refreshing angle on a book that "everyone knows" as a collection of insightful notes on a wide range of political issues, and few take seriously as a coherent text.

The argument of *Citizens and Statesmen* develops very much like the plot of a novel. Nichols finds the "characters" in *Politics* I through III, develops their various quirks through the complexities of Aristotle's advice to existing regimes in Books IV through VI, and brings the story to an unsettling conclusion through an analysis of the place of philosophy and the status of politics in the regime of Books VII and VIII.

By the “characters,” I mean the crucial dualities Nichols discovers introduced in the early books. The organizing principle of these dualities is necessity versus human deliberation and choice, and it appears in many guises: e.g., the body versus the soul, the many versus the one best man, and the village versus the city. Most interestingly, Nichols sees this duality evident also in the double beginning and the double end of the city. As Book I argues, cities are created in some sense by natural necessity, but they cannot actually be instituted without the deliberate action of a human founder. The city’s beginning is both natural and artificial. According to Book II, the best founders have given some thought not only to the physical necessities, but to the purpose of human community. (Of course, the thoughtful founders and philosophers whom Aristotle discusses have been wrong as to the ends of the *polis*—their simplistic proposals would actually have been destructive of political community—but the *Politics* is meant to show that a theoretical yet practical approach can remedy those flaws.) Therefore, although the city’s initial end, perpetuating mere life, is dictated by necessity, it continues to exist for the sake of the choiceworthy, the good life. It is in the pursuit of the latter end without ignoring the importance of the former that Aristotle hopes to be helpful.

The byplay between the necessary and the chosen aspects of human life creates the arena in which politics, the story’s primary protagonist, works. It is only when one or the other side of the dichotomy is denied, when a tyrannical individual or multitude denies the soul for the sake of the body or when a philosophic purist denies the body for the sake of the soul, that political life is stifled and despotism becomes the only alternative. When political life flourishes, the duality appears in the form of citizens and statesmen. These categories are not one sided, but mixed: the citizens are the properly ordered body possessing a soul and the statesmen the prudently deliberative soul of the city acknowledging the importance of body. Each takes cognizance of the other’s strengths and contributions.

On the way to a conclusion many may find startling, that Aristotle does not view the isolated contemplative life as superior to a thoughtful life that includes participation in political controversy, Nichols lays a long trail, beginning with Book I’s observation that the city is necessary to the good life. The best human life is not isolated but communal. The best ruler, we learn in Book III, does not view himself as above and wholly distinct from every other inhabitant of his city. Rather, the city is an amalgamation of the many and the one—neither can exist or perfect itself without the other. Hence, the analysis of citizenship and the defense of the many, followed by a critique of overall kingship or *pambasileia*, the situation in which the king is the only citizen and the potential political friendship and political virtues of the rest of the kingdom are ignored.

With due moderation, Nichols argues that Aristotle’s controversial defense of the virtues and political capacities of the many is to be taken seriously, though not without qualification. There is a potential for bestial qualities to be

fostered in the multitude, particularly by those demagogues and extreme democrats who offer freedom based only on its lowest definition, to do as one likes, and who rally the multitude by appealing to their superiority in numbers and brute strength. Nichols teases out Aristotle's counterarguments for the higher, human contributions most people can make to political life. According to the citizenship discussion (III, 1–4), no one who claims perpetual (indefinite or unlimited) office or acts wholly at will, neither the many who populate democratic juries nor the one virtuous citizen who holds an overall kingship, is a political ruler. Not only are there limits to what political life can achieve, there are limits political actors must set upon themselves, beginning with not acting as if one were immortal. These limits are summarized in Aristotle's definition (or delimitation) of politics as "ruling and being ruled in turn." Those who try to exceed these limits try to deny that human beings are political animals, requiring both opportunities for collective action, which the *pambasileia* does not provide, and a healthy sense of fallibility to restrain them from excess, which demagogues and zealous democrats discourage.

Nichols' subtlety of interpretation is well exemplified in laying out the "user argument" for the capacities and judgment of the multitude. On the one hand, she acknowledges, with Aristotle, that those who live in a house can be better judges of its excellence than any architect, at least as to its practical qualities. If politics is like architecture, then every political animal may have the wisdom to judge his political rulers and their actions. On the other hand, she distinguishes, with Aristotle, the household manager from all the other inhabitants as *the best* judge of the house's practical qualities: the one whose task is not only to live in the house, but to organize life for the benefit of all the rest, and who must take into account the needs of the diverse members as well as the good of the whole, is the best judge of the house's excellence. Even if each has some capacity to judge and his contribution must be taken into account, each may not be equally capable of coordinating all the members' contributions. Without overstating Aristotle's view of the potential virtue of the ordinary citizen, Nichols' interpretation shows the existence of such potential and the need of the statesman to foster it.

In Books IV through VI, these principles are developed in the course of recommending some form of polity, or political rule strictly speaking, to every imperfect regime—not only to democracies and oligarchies of which it is a mixture, but to tyrannies as well. The polity favors neither virtue nor material wealth, neither numbers nor strength, but mixes all of these principles into its laws and institutions. Insofar as it emphasizes one type of virtue, according to Book III's definition it is the military type, but it preserves both sides of the body/soul duality in treating military virtue as both necessary and noble. According to the longer discussion of polity in Book IV, this regime emphasizes a cluster of virtues that Nichols boils down to moderation, the sort of moderation in action that gives all sides their due and leads to friendship across class lines.

Though at times it seems that Aristotle's highest praise for the middle-class polity refers to its stability, Nichols rightly sees that this stability is not mere repression, but derives from the regime's justice to the various parts of the city, especially to the rich and the poor, but also to the politically ambitious (pp. 119–20).

The statesmen who exercise the greatest authority in the polity are the prudently moderate and moderately prudent products of a middling class background. They know and relearn constantly that they are not independent of or vastly superior to the citizens they rule. Rather, the citizens and statesmen are interdependent, the former supplying the bodies, the material necessities, as well as the cooperation the latter need, the latter supplying the forethought and public-spiritedness the former need. From this argument follows the defense of the naturalness of political rule, i.e., ruling and being ruled in turn, in many forms. According to Nichols, taking turns implies not only that political offices should rotate among various citizens, but also that the human rulers' authority is shared with the necessities of nature and the contingencies of human action—sometimes nature rules, sometimes the demands of the populace limit the power of the statesman (pp. 121–23).

From such considerations, Nichols defends her argument that the *pambasileia*, the human ruler who sees himself as a god among men, subject to no merely human law, but a law unto himself, is, however similar to the godlike contemplative philosopher, lacking in crucial self-knowledge. As is more commonly observed, if all human beings are by nature political animals, the benevolent-but-absolute king unjustly denies his subjects the opportunity to develop their political capacities by treating them as perpetual children. Nichols focusses upon an even more serious charge: the *pambasileia* does not even understand his own worth and capacities. Describing himself as a lion among hares—asking “where are their claws and teeth?”—demonstrates the absolute king's failure to see both his own physical vulnerability—after all the multitude do have claws, in some sense—and his need for public support in the form of his subjects' contributions to defense and other necessary functions of the kingdom.

Having disposed of the *pambasileia*, Nichols sets to work on the rulers of the best regime described in *Politics* VII and VIII. She treats these books as an extended examination of the questions raised in the first chapters of VII—what is the best life for an individual and for a city? Unlike many interpreters of these passages, she carefully avoids assuming that Aristotle advocates the apolitical philosophic life as simply the best for an individual, so that when Aristotle shows that isolation is not necessarily the best life for a city, his argument produces no obvious dissonances. The purely contemplative philosopher, the *pambasileia*, and the tyrant all avoid political life, the life of deliberation and choice among people who respect each other's freedom and capacity for action. Aristotle grants that the happy life is the life of theoretical activity, but it must

include *political* theory. The best regime, if it is to parallel this best life, must lead a thoughtful *and* political life. Aristotle, like another thoughtful man, the Athenian Stranger of the *Laws*, can identify the physical and educational requirements of a purely virtuous city—isolated and attentive to its internal perfection. He does not, however, adopt all of these characteristics as the requirements of his own best city. Aristotle's city tries to confront rather than avoid political problems, such as the dilemmas of international relations. This attempt to be political is precisely the regime's strength, according to Nichols. The isolated way of life is not a regime or political order, strictly speaking: it does not engage in ruling and being ruled. It does not allow itself the challenges of social life, so that in an important sense it takes the easy way to virtue, but attains a virtue that is not fully human. To demonstrate human individual virtue, one must practice justice toward other humans, however uncooperative they may be and however difficult it may be to determine the perfectly just act. Justice must also be a constituent of a city's virtue, which means the city must create a just relationship, not only with the individuals within it, but with other cities, always treading a thin, but perceptible, line between submission and despotic hegemony. With regard to various issues, Nichols points to analogous thin lines that must be traced by the good statesman.

Despite its practically hopeful signs, this line of argument culminates in Nichols' critique of the city built in Books VII and VIII. In this part of the *Politics* the necessity/choice duality appears in the form of the conflict between the requirements for the regime's survival and its aspirations for excellence, and Nichols sees some of Aristotle's choices as unsatisfactory. If the education and perfection of the virtue of the citizens of the best regime require that a large population of farmers be enslaved and the defense of the city requires that the multitude who man the warships be enslaved, then "Aristotle's designation of that regime as the 'best' is surely ironic" (p. 145). Nichols identifies a reason that unnatural slavery is not merely a practical problem but a fatal flaw in the regime that aims primarily for virtue in its citizens: the need for slaves demonstrates the lack of self-knowledge in the only regime Aristotle associates, however loosely, with philosophy. The necessity for employing whole classes of slaves shows that the citizens themselves are enslaved to circumstances which make the perfection of their virtue impossible. If the ruling class's excellence requires complete leisure, the citizens are forced into a despotic relationship with the subordinate inhabitants. The enslaved suffer injustice, but the enslavers also suffer the decay of their virtue. As Aristotle clearly argues, the rule of slaves is baser than the rule of free men (*Politics*, I.7, III.4).

Although I would argue, *contra* Nichols, that it is possible on Aristotle's terms to have a just slavery relationship on an individual level, between a demonstrably superior master and a servant who cannot care for himself without external direction, I agree with her that no just political order can rely on such relationships on a wholesale level. The conclusion I would draw is not

that this regime is not the *best* regime, but rather that it is not a regime in the strict sense that also excludes tyranny and kingship. Aristotle is not ironic, so much as he is articulating a way of life that does not strive for political justice.

The term *politeia* (regime) implies a political order, and “the best *politeia*” of Books VII and VIII is an apolitical order. It is not its compromise with political necessity that condemns the best order Aristotle can construct for the production of virtuous citizens. Nichols defends the mixture of high-minded ethics and practical considerations at the regime’s heart in a novel and intriguing way—this mixture of motives in the founder’s choices represents not a necessary but distasteful compromise of philosophical integrity for the sake of political order, but an improvement upon the purely philosophic life through involvement with political, i.e., human, problems. The struggles of careful deliberation and choice amid the complexities created by nature and by the existence of various types of people are the proving ground of a city’s excellence. Such involvement is essential to the rulers’ acquisition of self-knowledge, but the ultimate reliance of this regime on despotic arrangements proves that the rulers do not achieve a crucial aspect of self-knowledge—they do not understand either their own weakness or their subjects’ strengths. The sticking point is the impossibility of satisfying the demands of political justice while nurturing virtue on a broad scale. As Nichols shows, the polity based on the middle class is much more suitable to achieving political justice. I would add that it grants more people more freedom to achieve individual excellence as well.

Throughout the book, Nichols points to moments in the *Politics* at which Aristotle is clearly exercising deliberation and choice, acting the statesman, insofar as he can do so, by weighing the practicability and desirability, the advantage and justice, of various alternatives and recommending some over others. Aristotle, in other words, practices what he preaches—he brings his philosophic speculations to bear upon actual human problems and in the process contributes to the good of communities (at least to those who might listen to his advice) and to his own self-knowledge and that of his students as human beings and citizens.

These veins of Aristotle’s statesmanship flow into a conclusion at the heart of Nichols’ book. No true statesman can be a tragedian. Nichols takes on admirably the tempting view that Aristotle, like Plato, views political life, however necessary to a good human existence, as tragically flawed, doomed to injustice or permanent instability. Although she takes due account of the perennial threats of both injustice and instability, Nichols shows that Aristotle sees a real middle ground, a habitable area in which statesmen and free citizens work together to maintain justice and stability (pp. 42, 81–84, 110–14, 143–44). That ground is more likely to appear and be fertile, if you will, in a polity, a regime mixing the principles of the most common regimes and calling upon the citizens of middling fortune and middling virtue to take the greatest respon-

sibility for its cultivation. If the human being is by nature political, it is neither sensible nor useful to overemphasize politics' potential to fail, and Aristotle is an eminently sensible man. He enumerates and describes in detail the pitfalls to which political life is prone but, as Nichols shows, unlike Plato's Socrates, he does not make those pitfalls seem ubiquitous. Rather, Aristotle stresses the choices people can make to alleviate the dangers and strive for improvement by moving toward the practicable and just political regime, the polity.

Given Nichols' hardnosed attitude toward tyranny in any form, I was surprised by her argument that a tyrant can be reformed by the habit of pretending to be a statesman, pretending to have virtues he does not have and is not interested in acquiring (pp. 108–10). The *Nichomachean Ethics* does stress the importance of habit to the development of virtue but, though it is plausible that the tyrant becomes less of a tyrant by following Aristotle's advice on preserving his power, we should not expect him to become positively a virtuous man. He has, after all, received a flawed training in virtue during his youth and would merely be going through the motions of good deeds not for the sake of the good life, but simply to hold predominance over a whole people.

Leaving this subordinate point aside, however, we have in *Citizens and Statesmen* an example of the practice of political/theoretical virtue. In imitation of Aristotle's *Politics*, Nichols' book demonstrates a judicious balance between consistency and depth of theoretical argument on the one hand and statesmanlike attention to the thorny dilemmas of political life on the other that could not be attained without the author's practice of excellence in political thought.