

The Divine Principle of Aristotelian Politics:
Leisure and Self-Sufficiency as the Final
Cause of Political Activity

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Abstract: *This essay considers the relation between Aristotle's theology and political philosophy. I argue through a reading of Aristotle's Politics that the divine, under its description as the one completely free, inwardly determined and leisurely activity, lies behind the natural human impulse to come together into communities, and that the goodness of these political communities can be to some extent measured by how successfully they approximate this divinity.*

Keywords: Aristotle, politics, leisure, freedom, theology, God, metaphysics, actuality, activity.

Does the Aristotelian god play any role in the explanation of human associations and political regimes we find in the *Politics*? Many of Aristotle's central treatises conclude their inquiry into a certain subject with a reflection on the first divine principle and its relation to the subject under investigation. To name just some of the most central examples, this seems to be the case for the *Metaphysics*, *Physics*, *On the Soul*, and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Often these theological conclusions are frustrating or even embarrassing to contemporary interpreters, who point out the incompatibility between these concluding forays into divine being and his mundane analyses up to that point, which make no or barely any reference to a dependence upon a divine principle. Quite the opposite, in fact: the phenomena he analyzes appear to have a striking completeness, inner integrity and independence from any transcendent cause, and the conclusion that this independence is only a relative one and requires a further grounding in a truly complete and independent divine principle can surprise even the most theologically open of readers. I suggest that this same surprising dependence of a certain sphere of reality on a divine first principle also emerges in Aristotle's political thinking: that the divine lies behind our natural human impulse to come together into communities with one another, and that the goodness of our communities can be to some extent measured by how successfully they approximate this divinity. Recognizing this can help us better understand Aristotle's project in the *Politics*, and to connect Aristotelian political philosophy to the rest of his philosophical system.

In his book *The Activity of Being*, Aryeh Kosman articulates the way in which a divine principle emerges in the conclusion of Aristotle's investigations into being, life and motion, though in importantly different ways:

"In these discussions, we observe the same turn of argument: an appeal to a divine principle that seems more appropriate to a superordinate science. But there appears still to be this difference: in the *Metaphysics*, the discussion of the divine provides an account of a formal principle of the being of substance (and therefore of being in general) of which the divine is in fact an instance – paradigmatic, but

still an instance. And in the *De Anima*, Book 3's divine faculty of thought – *nous* – is still an instance – again, paradigmatic but still an instance – of life and consciousness. But what is noteworthy about the *Physics* is that the principle of motion is itself *not* in motion.”¹

This conclusion of a theoretical investigation which passes over into a reflection on a divine principle in relation to that topic also extends into the *practical* philosophy of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There, the inquiry into the good towards which all human activity aims, passes over into an investigation into the highest of practical goods, *eudaimonia*, and an inquiry into what is the most happy life for a human being. Yet in the famous conclusion to that work, when Aristotle identifies the theoretical life of philosophical contemplation as the most pleasurable, the least laborious, the most intrinsically lovable apart from any consequences and so most final, the most self-sufficient and independent from needing external requirements, and the most leisurely as directed to no end outside itself, the argument passes over into a reflection on a divine life in which we can partake through philosophical contemplation, but which is not properly human. The life of contemplation, we learn, is divine in comparison with human life: “the whole life of the gods is blessed, and that of men too in so far as some likeness of such activity (*energeia*) belongs to them.”² The target of the highest human life is thus defined as a striving for a divine and immortal life of thinking, in which we can occasionally partake, but which is not the proper possession of the human. It is the activities of politics and war in which the moral virtues are most fully exercised that we find activities which he calls *energeiai anthropikai*, properly human activities. This is a life that shares, though less perfectly, in all these attributes Aristotle lavishly heaped on to the theoretical life. Thus the highest

1 A. Kosman, *The Activity of Being: An Essay on Aristotle's Ontology* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 191.

2 *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8 1178b25-27. All translations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* are from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Focus Philosophical Library, 2002).

human happiness, which is the subject matter of this work in practical philosophy, is discovered in relation to this divine principle, possessing the fullest happiness and the greatest pleasure. The *Ethics*, then, like the *Metaphysics* and *On the Soul*, concludes with a reflection on a paradigmatic instance of the subject under investigation in that treatise.

The *Politics*, by a near universal consensus, is not a finished work, and so it is difficult to say anything conclusive about its conclusion. But there are several good reasons to think that the conclusion of Aristotle's *Politics* would have no business bringing into view the divine principle in the analysis of political reality. Even *if* a divine principle were to have any explanatory power and relevance within the *Politics*, a treatise devoted to understanding human associations, it seems as though it would have to be more along the lines of what develops in Book VIII of the *Physics*, where the subject under investigation, motion, is found to depend upon a principle which does not exhibit the attribute in question, an unmoved mover. For further on in the conclusion of the *Ethics*, Aristotle reconfirms the superiority of the theoretical life over the life of practical and political virtue, precisely because none of the virtues that belong to human practical life can be thought to apply to a god, due to the blessedness and happiness the gods enjoy through their complete self-sufficiency and independence of any external relations:

“That complete happiness is a contemplative activity would also be made clear by the following consideration: we assume that the gods most of all are blessed and happy, but what sort of actions will it be right to attribute to them? Acts of justice? Or will it appear ridiculous if they make contracts and return items held in trust and all that sort of thing? How about courageous acts, enduring frightening things and taking risks because that is a beautiful thing? Or generous acts? To whom will they give? And it will be absurd if they were to have a currency or any such thing. And what would their temperate acts be? Or will praising them for not having base desires be impertinent? And for someone who goes through them all, it would be obvious that the things involved in actions are small and unworthy of the gods. But surely everyone supposes that they are alive at any rate, and are therefore active, for they are surely not asleep like Endymion. But when someone who is living is deprived of

acting, and still more of making anything, what remains except contemplation? So the activity of a god, surpassing in blessedness, would be contemplative, and so among human activities, the one most akin to this would be most happy.”³

The central thought behind all these ways of disqualifying the virtuous activities which make up our practical and political lives from the divine is that having any of these practical or political excellences would compromise divine self-sufficiency, since they make reference to relations and interactions with other beings external to themselves, relations which would point to needs and desires that would bring lack into something which is defined as thoroughly complete and independent. In other words, a god lives alone, without need of community. A god has no part in a city, “needing nothing on account of its self-sufficiency,” we are told near the beginning of the *Politics*.⁴ We are animals that are essentially political, a determination which is meant precisely to distinguish us from the divine, who as complete and self-sufficient does not require the interdependent self-sufficiency of community. If this is a treatise about associations between several individuals in need who are hopefully dealing with one another through virtuous acts, a god would lie beyond any subject that would fall under the scope of this study. The *Physics* studies motion and discovers something beyond motion as its principle. If we were to discover some dependence of our political activity upon a divine principle, politics would show itself to have an apolitical principle.

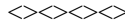
A further reason to suspect that Aristotle’s god would have no relevance for political philosophy is the clear division between theoretical and practical philosophy at the heart of Aristotle’s division of the sciences and division of the ways we know different aspects of reality. *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, along with *Metaphysics* VI, gives the clearest demarcation of inquiry into theoretical truth and practical truth. Practical

3 *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8 1178b7-23 (translation modified).

4 *Politics* I.2 1253a28. All translations from the *Politics* are from Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Focus Publishing, 2012), unless otherwise indicated.

philosophy, such as ethics and politics, studies objects which are able to be other than they are and which we help determine and bring into being; they are *up to us*. Theoretical philosophy, such as mathematics, natural philosophy and first philosophy studies what is necessary and eternal— as such, we do not deliberate about whether these objects should be like this or like that – since we cannot affect the way they are, we can simply come to apprehend their true natures as they are. On this division, an eternal unchanging principle would not be the subject of practical philosophy; its existence is not up to us, and so should be left to the first philosopher who tries to understand separately existing immaterial beings.

Yet as a preliminary justification for entertaining the possibility of politics having some causal connection with the divine first principle in Aristotelian thought, we can bear in mind the theological conclusion to the practical philosophy of the *Ethics*, and the privative conclusion to the *Physics*, so that in a similar way a god might be discovered to be causally connected to the explanation of human political activity.



Let us begin at the end of the *Politics*. In his discussion of education in the eighth and final book, Aristotle continues the extended reflection on the centrality of leisure in his conception of political community from Book VII. In a discussion of the role of music in education in chapter three of that final Book, Aristotle makes a significant and difficult comment I believe has not been properly appreciated in treatments of Aristotelian political thought:

“But one might already raise questions about skill at music. For most people these days take part in it for the sake of pleasure, but those who originally assigned it to education did so because, as has been said more than once, *nature itself strives not only to be busy in the right way but also to be capable of being at leisure in a beautiful way. For this*

one principle governs everything, so let us speak about it again.⁵

τὴν δὲ μουσικὴν ἤδη διαπορήσειεν ἂν τις. νῦν μὲν γὰρ ὡς ἡδονῆς χάριν οἱ πλείστοι μετέχουσιν αὐτῆς: οἱ δ' ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔταξαν ἐν παιδείᾳ διὰ τὸ τὴν φύσιν αὐτὴν ζητεῖν, ὅπερ πολλὰκις εἴρηται, μὴ μόνον ἀσχολεῖν ὀρθῶς ἀλλὰ καὶ σχολάζειν δύνασθαι καλῶς. αὕτη γὰρ ἀρχὴ πάντων μία: καὶ πάλιν εἰπωμεν περὶ αὐτῆς.”

This is the Joe Sachs translation, which I think beautifully captures the ambiguity and grandeur of Aristotle’s claims here. Compare the translation of the key passage with the Jowett translation:

“Nature herself, as has often been said, requires that we should be able, not only to work well, but to use leisure well; for, as I must repeat once again, the first principle of all action is leisure.”⁶

Notice the key differences between the two interpretations at work here. In the Sachs version, it belongs to nature to strive not only to be busy but also to be at leisure; in the Jowett, nature requires of *us* that we not only work well, but be busy also – the distinction between working and being at leisure is thus a feature of human nature and not of nature as a whole. This is reflected in the next line’s comment about the *arche* – in Sachs’ version, leisure is the one *arche* of *all* things – this would include both human action and non-human natural beings – the same principle would be the principle of the activity of beings in nature and of the practical and political activity that belongs particularly to human beings. In Jowett’s version, a restriction of what Aristotle means by all things is implied by the political nature of his subject matter, and so we are justified in restricting the all here to all *action*: leisure is the principle of all practical, human activities.

There is no doubt that Sachs is closer to the Greek. The τὴν φύσιν αὐτὴν, nature itself (the intensifying pronoun

5 *Politics* VIII.3 1337b27—33.

6 Aristotle, “Politics,” trans. B. Jowett, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton University Press, 1984).

stresses this is nature and not particular nature like human nature) serves as an accusative subject of the articular infinitive τὸ τὴν φύσιν αὐτὴν ζητεῖν. This means that the earlier educators prescribed a musical education on account of nature itself seeking not only to be busy but also to be at leisure. But this thought is at least initially so strange and alien, that one would want not to dismiss out of hand the extra determinations supplied by Jowett to clear up the open-ended ambiguity of Aristotle's thought. After all, what would it mean to think of leisure as the principle of non-human natural beings, and would it mean to think of all beings seeking both to be busy but also more ultimately to be at leisure? What would leisure be for a fish or a bee, for a plant, for fire, air, earth or water, and how could this be thought of as an explanatory *arche* of all such natural beings? Unless we can make some sense of the more literal sense, which is simultaneously wider in scope yet puzzling in what it could mean, we might simply prefer the sensible restriction of this claim to mean simply that leisure is the end to which all our actions ought to strive, a claim consistent with the discussion of leisure throughout book VII of *Politics*.

So what does it mean that nature seeks to be not only busy correctly but to be able to be at leisure beautifully? The first thing to note about the first part of the claim is that nature does seek to be busy – many of its activities are characterized by work rather than leisure. This busyness or toil is best explained I think in terms of two characteristics. First, one is at work insofar as one is striving to attain ends which one does not yet possess and which lie beyond the activity directed towards achieving them. It is this kind of activity Aristotle in *Metaphysics* IX.6 calls *kinesis* – a motion or a process. He cites the example of making oneself thin – as you diet to lose 20 lbs., the goal lies outside the activity, and once you reach the goal, the process ceases. It is hard work to learn a language like Greek when you have not yet learned how to do so. Not knowing but trying to come to be knowledgeable is painful. You toil away at a goal that you do not yet possess, motivated by the prospect that at some point you will have learned the language and be able to freely, spontaneously use it, without pain and effort. This activity of exercising what you have

already come to possess is the goal of the work, but the memorization of vocabulary, paradigms, rules on the way to this is laborious and tiring. So work in this sense of it is directed towards ends which are as yet beyond the possession of the worker.

Now in what sense might something like the natural element fire on Aristotle's view be at work or busy without leisure? If the element fire is defined by its location upward, and so fire down below is striving to reach its natural location, then it is busy insofar as it is not yet up. If a seed is seeking to articulate itself and grow into the fully manifested form of a plant, but it is not there yet insofar as it is only a seed or a barely developed sapling, it is at work to achieve an end it does not yet fully possess. This is nature when it is busily active. So even natural things actively change, and work to develop into their nature or form.

And so in this sense, when you say that a natural thing is no longer striving to attain its form, but has achieved it and is actively being what it was previously striving to be, this activity Aristotle labels a *praxis* or *energeia*. As opposed to the incomplete process of change or motion, in an activity, the end is present throughout – it is complete during every moment of its activity. As such, it is not exactly right to say that such an activity is in motion; but it is equally wrong to say it is at rest – it is not actively becoming, but actively being. So when the fire is no longer striving towards its natural place but is there, being where it previously sought to be, it is fully being what fire is, not only being hot and dry, but being in the cosmological place which defines it as fire. When the tree has developed from seed through its immature stages into a full, healthy tree, exhibiting all the activities excellently that make it just the kind of tree it is, it is actively being a tree beyond striving and straining to be something it is not yet. This, I would suggest, is the leisure after which all natural beings strive and which they can come to enjoy – when they have attained their form and so are completely in active possession of their nature, they are at leisure, so to speak, in an activity beyond either change or rest. So the leisure all things seek is the full realization of their own intrinsic form – they seek to

actively be what they are, after having busily worked to overcome their separation from this end on the way to becoming what they were only implicitly.

So in the busy work of being engaged in a process towards some end not yet attained, one is only potentially in possession of one's goal, end, or form, not actively. Leisure is the activity which has overcome this separation or potentiality for the goal and is completely exercising the end which it already possesses. So in the desire or impulse all natural beings have for the full actualization of their own form, all natural beings seek to actualize themselves – this is their work – but really seek to be actively and completely what they are – this is their leisure for the sake of which they work. Each thing desires to actively be its own form and to be fully actual. In other words, to say that all beings seek leisure is to say that all beings seek *energeia*, complete activity or actuality. Leisure *is* this *energeia* or actuality. To desire leisure is to desire to fully be one's own form, but it is also in a sense to desire actuality itself. This is the sense in which the Aristotelian god moves the world by being loved – as a principle of *energeia* without potentiality, all beings in seeking to both preserve and realize themselves as excellently as possible seek actuality itself, and this is God.

I think this idea of leisure as the divine principle sought by all natural beings and all human activity can be illuminated by juxtaposing it with the passage from *On the Soul* II.4 where Aristotle most explicitly articulates this picture of mortal life as moved by the love of an immortal divine principle. There he remarks that even plants, like every natural being, are moved by a desire:

“...the most natural thing for a living being to do, if it is full-grown and not defective, and does not have spontaneous generation, is to make another like itself, for an animal to make an animal and a plant to make a plant, in order to have a share in what always is and is divine, in the way that it is able to. For all things yearn for that, and for the sake of it do everything they do by nature. (That for the sake of which is twofold, referring to the one to which the activity belongs, but also to the one for which it is done.) So since it is impossible for them to share continuously in what always is

and is divine, since no destructible thing admits of remaining one and the same in number, each of them does share in it in whatever way it can have a share, one sort more and another less, enduring not as itself but as one like itself, that is one with it not in number but in kind.”⁷

Borrowing heavily from Plato’s *Symposium*, there is a view expressed here that the natural desire for reproduction is a desire or impulse for an immortal divine principle, especially under its description as immortal, eternal being. Natural mortal beings, in seeking to preserve themselves in existence, thus seek not only their own intrinsic ends but betray a desire for a principle beyond themselves. This universal goal of all things is not to be thought of as reproduction of itself – this is just one activity that manifests this universal desire – the universal desire of all natural beings is to be like a god, a divine, immortal being, to whatever extent this is possible within the limits of its own particular nature. Here, in a treatise on the subject of the soul as the formal principle of life, and treating the nutritive soul common to all plants and animals, *to theion* is understood as immortal life, the continued existence of a living either in itself or in its offspring. But this principle is not simply desired as being eternal. The opening line of *Metaphysics*, for instance, that all humans by nature desire to know, is another expression of this very principle – this being, which is thought thinking itself, is the principle of human theoretical desire, a desire which is satisfied only in *sophia* or first philosophy, knowing the highest object in the way that it knows itself. On Aristotle’s account, this divine being is the ultimate *telos* of all natural activity. So here I would want to bring together the statement from *On the Soul* that

“all things yearn for that (i.e. *to theion*), and for the sake of it do everything they do by nature”

with the idea in *Politics* that

⁷ *On the Soul* II.4 415a26-b6. All translations from the *On the Soul* are from Aristotle, *On the Soul and On Memory and Recollection*, trans. Joe Sachs (Green Lion Press, 2004).

“leisure is the one principle of all things.”

Where the eternal, perpetual living might be the most basic desire with respect to thinking about the reproductive powers of living beings, in the *Politics* it is the divine under the description of leisure which is particularly relevant to the question of politics and the purpose of political communities. To think about the divine as *schole* or leisure is to think of it first as determined by no ends outside itself whatsoever, a being which is absolutely inwardly determined, second as absolutely final, an intrinsic good that is not explainable with respect to any further ends or consequences it helps to realize, and third as beyond the business and toil of not yet having achieved its end through the course of its activity – it is completely achieving its end which it wholly possesses at every moment of its activity. Leisure is the characterisation or description of the divine principle which is most relevant to thinking about what motivates or ought to motivate political associations such as families, villages, and cities, as well as the variety of different forms cities can take as analyzed in the treatment of different constitutional regimes.

What is interesting about this passage from *On the Soul* is the way it also articulates that different kinds of being participate in this divine principle to varying degrees of success, as determined by the particular nature of the being in question. While all beings ultimately desire this one principle, some achieve very little proximity to the ultimate object of their natural impulse, and some beings achieve a remarkable proximity to it. If the divine principle thought of as leisure is the ultimate principle desired by every human association, we could use it to measure which association most fully satisfies this desire for the *arche* of political life, both in thinking about the city as compared to pre-political associations such as the family or the village, and also once the city comes on to the scene to distinguish the success and worth of the various different types of cities or regimes. Kingship, aristocracy, constitutional rule or *politeia*, democracy, oligarchy and tyranny could also be measured with respect to the degree that they are able to participate in or approximate the *arche* of all political associations. Each association or kind of city must of

course be understood in terms of its own intrinsic and immanent form and function, but more globally could also be evaluated in the light of this universal political principle. That this principle of degrees of successful approximation of the divine *arche* of all natural things could be legitimately applied to political phenomena is already strongly suggested by the conclusion of the opening chapters of the *Politics*: that “the city is among the things that exist by nature.”⁸ If the city is natural and everything that acts according to nature strives to be like this principle, it would follow that a desire to be like this divine principle is what lies beyond our political activity as its original impulse and true target, through which we enter into various forms of association between individual human beings.

In fact, this concluding reflection on the divine principle of all human associations and political communities has already been anticipated in the opening chapters of the *Politics*, not under its description as leisure, but under its description as self-sufficiency. This emerges in Aristotle’s conceptual genealogy which traces the origins of the *polis* through pre-political communities, and ultimately to the community grounded in eros and reproduction through the immediate sexual attraction between man and woman. Pointing very directly back to *On the Soul*’s appropriation of the *Symposium* doctrine of sexual impulse as desire for reproduction, Aristotle identifies the origin of the immediate association of the *oikos* or household as a tacit desire for continued existence in offspring, an impulse which holds within it a desire for immortal being. This impulse exists in people who *need* one another, and the desire to overcome need, lack and insufficiency is a desire for self-sufficiency, though this does not clearly emerge at the household-stage of association. The various activities (providing food, shelter, and other basic necessities, as well as making children) and members (man, woman, children and slaves) of the household are drawn together into an association for survival and reproduction of

8 *Politics* I.2 1253a1-2 (my translation)

subsequent generations, a desire, that is to say, directed towards continued being or living.

A clearer sense of the goal which implicitly moves people into domestic and village associations appears when the human *koinonia* reaches its full development for Aristotle in the *polis*. The reason subsequent communities are taken to be natural is because the first community is grounded in a natural impulse, which shows itself to be the same impulse present throughout the development of human association.

Here it can seem as if the final cause or *telos* of all human association is the city: “for it is their end, and nature is an end; for what each thing is when it has reached the completion of its coming to being is that which we say is the nature of each, as with a human being, a horse, a house.”⁹ So household and village are not simply distinct forms of community, but are also parts contained within the complete community – they are not passed over as primitive forms of society, but continue to exist within the city, differently of course than when they were the ultimate form of community, but necessary and essential to the new whole nonetheless. So in one sense, the city is the nature or *telos* of all human community.

But in another sense, this is not adequate. The common desire which animated the incomplete and insufficient communities and brought them together was a desire for self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency is at the heart of the very definition of a city: “what it means to be a city is to be at the point at which the association of a multiplicity of people turns out to be self-sufficient.”¹⁰ Aristotle is careful to note that the city, despite having self-sufficiency as its defining characteristic which distinguishes it from more primitive forms of association, is still only incompletely self-sufficient. In Aristotle’s very precisely worded formulation, there is a double qualification of this self-sufficiency: “it gets to the threshold (*peras*) of complete self-sufficiency (*passes*

9 *Politics* I.2 1252b31-34

10 *Politics* II.1 1261b12-13

autarkeias), so to speak.”¹¹ This approach towards the boundary of complete self-sufficiency without actually crossing it, and this qualification of *hos epos eipein*, so to speak, both emphasize that the city is a mortal being, and that even the most self-sufficient being within human life, the total political community, merely approaches an end it never quite attains. This gesture towards a more complete and immortal self-sufficiency which lies behind political activity as its implicit goal already suggests that one of the targets or highest ends for any political community is self-sufficiency, and that what is being aimed for in other pre-political communities is not the city as the completion and realization of their nature, but a divine self-sufficiency beyond all political activity, a containing with itself everything that is required to be itself, excellently. As with leisure, we should not take the *telos* which is ultimately moving us into associations to be the best manifestations of these characteristics as they appear in mortal human life. It is not that the individuals coming together to form households desire to be cities – to be more precise, they desire a principle of self-sufficiency which is most fully manifested in human associations with the emergence of the city: “that for the sake of which, the end, is also what is best, and self-sufficiency is both an end and what is best.”¹² The city, not itself the moving *telos* of all impulse towards association, is the fullest mortal flowering of this universal impulse, and as mortal is itself motivated along with the household by this common desire or impulse towards self-sufficiency. This motivating end is a *complete* self-sufficiency – and this is God.

Later, in Book VII, to show that a human being and a city can be actively exercising its virtue without being engaged in busy foreign relations with other beings outside itself, Aristotle tellingly cites the divine in its two aspects as an indication that active excellence does not demand external engagements.

11 *Politics* I.2 1252b28

12 *Politics* I.2 1252b34-1253a1

“For otherwise the god and the whole cosmos, which have no external actions over and above their own within themselves, could hardly be in a good condition. So it is that the same way of life is necessarily best for each human being and for cities and human beings in common.”¹³

Importantly here, the model for complete self-sufficiency is not simply the god, but also the whole world taken as a totality of all natural, material, moving being. In effect, these are the only two genuinely self-sufficient and wholly inwardly determined beings in the world, since for neither of them is there even anything outside themselves upon which they might depend. The whole cosmos is self-sufficient, since it quite literally contains everything within itself. Divine and cosmic *autarkeia* as the ultimate good, *telos* or object of desire of each human being and each association can thus be used as the measure of success for each association. It is in this way I think we should understand that comment near the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “For even if the good is the same for a person and for a city, that of the city appears to be greater, at least, and more complete both to achieve and to preserve; for even if it is achieved for only one person that is something to be satisfied with, but for a people or for cities it is something more beautiful and more divine.”¹⁴ The city is more divine than the individual human in that both have an impulse towards the completeness and self-sufficiency which properly speaking belongs only to the god or the whole cosmic order, and the city attains this end more completely than any individual or pre-political association. The divinity of the city is its greater approximation to divine self-sufficiency.

In the light of this reading, it is worthwhile to return to the very opening programmatic statement of the *Politics*. Every association of individuals comes together for the sake of something which appears good to that group. What this apparent good is will differ depending on the purpose of that particular form of association: pleasure, money, beauty,

13 *Politics* VII.3 1325b28-30

14 *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2 1094b7-11

whatever common interest the members take to be more easily realized together than apart. But the opening lines of the work leave open the question about whether behind the multiplicity of these apparent goods there is an absolute good commonly moving their impulse towards association. In fact, it makes discovering the most dominant or sovereign of goods one of the chief goals of the investigation:

“Since we see that every city is some kind of association, and every association is organized for the sake of some good (since everything everyone does is organized for the sake of some good), it is clear that all associations aim at something good, and that one is most sovereign and encompasses all others aims at the most sovereign of all goods. And this is the one called the city, the political association.”¹⁵

In one sense Aristotle wants to argue that every association is implicitly desiring to be like the most sovereign and encompassing community, the city which contains all other smaller associations within itself and rules over them. But Aristotle words his opening claim carefully: in the face of the possibly endless multiplicity of apparent political goods at the root of different forms of association or community, there is perhaps a single good, most sovereign of them all, which can be discovered by looking to the good which brings together the most ruling and comprehensive community. That is, we might find the good which is the root of all community in and through the study of the ultimate form of human community, the *polis*. So we can see implicitly at least three distinct tasks laid out in this programmatic opening:

- 1) To understand the various forms of human associations, both pre-political (the household or *oikos*), for instance, as well as political associations. These associations will be understood ultimately to fall into a kind of ordered series where their fullest realization is achieved with the appearance of the city, which contains and preserves them all within

15 *Politics* I.1 1252a1-7

itself as distinct and essential though subordinate parts.

- 2) Within political community, to understand the various possible forms or configurations of cities, that is, the various constitutional regimes, and to understand which of these is best, most sovereign, and most comprehensive. The kind of city that contains all the forms of city within itself will again, prove to be the best.
- 3) By looking at this most sovereign and complete community, the city, and by looking at the most sovereign and complete city from among the various kinds of possible cities, we will get some insight into “the most sovereign of all goods,” that is the highest good that motivates all human associations, the target which they implicitly strive toward. The inquiry seeks to uncover this ultimate and best target of all political activity, and the analysis of the best and most comprehensive community (the city) and the best kind of city (*politeia*) will help disclose this ultimate political good. I am proposing that this most sovereign of goods is God, who is the only principle of complete self-sufficiency and leisure. The divine is in this sense the first principle of all political activity.

Earlier I cited Aryeh Kosman as noting how the *Physics*, as the study of motion, was unique in pointing in its conclusion to a divine principle which was not a paradigmatic instance of the subject under investigation, but rather the very privation of that attribute – the principle of motion is an unmoved mover. I suggested that perhaps in a similar way in the *Politics* God could be an apolitical mover of the political. But Kosman makes one more crucial observation about the conclusion of the *Physics* to complete this picture which is relevant for our discussion of *Politics*. In the explanation of all the motions in the cosmos, besides the unmoved mover, Kosman astutely points out that there *is* also in the conclusion of the *Physics* a paradigmatically moving principle at the root of all motion. Not the divine as the unmoved mover, but rather

the divine as the first *motion*, the circular motion of the outermost sphere which contains all other motions within itself and which exerts a causal force on the natural motions that occur within the kosmos. Consider how the same kind of argument could be at work in Aristotle's political thought. Recall that when Aristotle was explaining about how a city need not strive for conquest of other cities as its chief target in order to be active, since remaining active within itself is the best realization of its self-sufficiency, Aristotle confirmed this by speaking of the self-contained completeness of God and the cosmos as a whole: "For otherwise the god and the whole cosmos, which have no external actions over and above their own within themselves, could hardly be in a good condition."¹⁶ Perhaps the paradigmatic divine principle of all human community is not just the apolitical god, separate and by itself, but rather the totality of the whole cosmos as contained within that outermost sphere: the wholly interrelated, interconnected hierarchy of natural forms which apart from one another could not exist but constitute in their inter-relation the ultimate self-sufficient totality. Recall the military, political, and domestic images which conclude chapter 10 of Book Lambda:

"One must also consider in which of two ways the nature of the whole contains what is good and what is best, whether as something separate, itself by itself, or as the order of the whole of things. Or is it present in both ways, just as in an army? For its good condition resides in its ordering but also is its general, and is more the latter; for he does not depend on the order but it on him. And all things are in some way ordered together, though not all similarly, the things that swim and fly and grow in the ground; yet they are not such that nothing that pertains to one kind is related to another, but there is some relation. For they are all organized toward one thing, but in the same way as in a household, in which the free members of it are least of all allowed to do any random thing, but all or most of what they do is prescribed, while for the slaves and livestock little that they do is for the

16 *Politics* VII. 3 1325b28-30

common good and much is just at random, since the nature of each of them is that kind of source.”¹⁷

Here the kosmos is understood as a hierarchical differentiation of various roles, each of which participates according to its nature in degrees of freedom and contributions to the good of the whole, none of which are dispensable to the divine completeness of the kosmos. The self-sufficiency of this cosmic city is perhaps what we could call the paradigmatic instance of all human community.¹⁸ Importantly though, that this could be considered the paradigmatic instance of communal, hierarchically ordered reciprocal and interdependent self-sufficiency does *not* mean it provides us with a model for the best form of human government – *Metaphysics* Lambda famously finishes by citing Homer’s *Iliad* in order to explain that the whole order must ultimately depend on a single authority, the authority of the general which exists separately from the order all by itself, without any of the insufficiency or complementarity of all the beings it orders in the cosmic city.

This divine, wholly self-sufficient city of the kosmos is ruled by an absolute monarch, a form of government not best suited to free communities of basically equal citizens. Here the constant anti-Platonic principle which runs through the *Politics* once again applies – each kind of community is distinct in form and therefore requires a distinct kind of rule appropriate to it – just as a city ruled as a family or a family ruled as a city is not a completely just rule, the same rule is not appropriate for a god over the world and human rulers over

17 *Metaphysics* XII.10 1075a11-23. All translations from the *Metaphysics* are from Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Green Lion Press, 2002).

18 This connection between the city and the kosmos is clearly made by Al-Farabi. See *Attainment of Happiness in Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, i. 20 16:7-12: “It will become evident to him that the political association and the totality that results from the association of citizens in cities correspond to the association of the bodies that constitute the totality of the world. He will come to see in what are included in the totality constituted by the city and the nation the likenesses of what are included in the total world.” (trans. Mahdi, p. 24). I am grateful to Josh Hayes for pointing this passage out to me.

their political community. This might help explain the frequent occasions in the *Politics* where Aristotle entertains the idea of a human being so excellent that their permanent exclusive rule over the human community would be the most just form of rule. Given how improbable it would be for a human to differ from other humans to the extent that a god differs from mortals, the monarchical regime that would be appropriate in this implausible instance is replaced by a constitutional rule more suited to the existence of a relative equality with respect to virtue of many people within the community.

“Now if the one sort differed from the rest as much as we believe gods and heroes differ from human beings, having such a great superiority right from the start in body, and thus also in soul, that the superiority of the rulers was beyond dispute and obvious to those who are ruled, it is clear that it would be better for the same people to rule all the time and for the others to be ruled once and for all. But since it is not easy to accept this premise, and there are no kings with as big a difference from their subjects as Skylax claims to be the case in India, it is obvious for many reasons it is necessary for everyone to share alike in ruling and being ruled by turns. For the equitable thing in the case of people who are alike is for the same thing to apply to them, and it is difficult for a form of government to endure if it is organized contrary to what is just.”¹⁹

When Aristotle closes his political image for the relation between god and world in *Metaphysics* by citing Homer’s *Iliad* Book II: “A divided sovereignty is not good; let there be one lord,”²⁰ he is using the line to confirm the truth and goodness of a single principle as one *arche* over the whole world, a kind of permanent absolute cosmic monarchy. Yet when he cites the very same line from the *Iliad* in *Politics* IV.4,²¹ it is to bring out the point that it is ambiguous what Odysseus means with respect to the rule of the many, and that it is primarily with reference to this horrifying possibility of

19 *Politics* VII. 14 1332b16-29

20 *Metaphysics* XII.10 1076a4; *Iliad* II, 204

21 *Politics* IV.4 1292a14

giving absolute sovereignty to the unwashed masses that the saying holds true. Yet the rule of many under the authority of a constitutional structure in Aristotle's best city would not fall prey to Odysseus' attack on whether the many should be ruling.

Even though the rule of the paradigmatic cosmic community is not to be simply taken to be the ideal for a human community, it is not as if what I am calling the cosmic city in its working under one absolutely pre-eminent principle is simply irrelevant for the consideration of the best human model based on the relative equality of citizens and alternating of offices. The reference to a transcendent principle of pure reason as the principle or *arche* of the best regime is still present, but it cannot rightly be an office held by a human being. The equal citizens in the ruling offices are ultimately subordinated in this best regime to the law, which Aristotle famously compares to a god, insofar as it is a principle of rationality apart from the passions and emotions that belong to the compound human being by nature:

“so it seems the one who bids law to rule is bidding a god and reason to rule by themselves, while one who bids a human being to rule is adding a beast. For that is the sort of thing desire is, and spirited passion warps even the best men when they rule. That is why the law is intellect without appetite.”²²

Underneath this legal version of a divine *nous* without appetite, the human holders of various offices are to be “set up as protectors and servants of the laws.”²³

Beyond the striking difference between the regime of the cosmic city and the best regime which Aristotle calls *politeia*, he seems to be drawing our attention to this striking similarity by comparing the sovereignty of law to this transcendent simple intellect.

22 *Politics* III.16 1287a28-32

23 *Politics* III.16 1287a21-22

I want to conclude with a difficult question about this reading of the role of the divine principle as the final cause of politics. It is not very controversial, I should think, to identify the self-sufficiency and the leisure needed to carry out the best and most free activities as the targets or ultimate goals of politics in Aristotle's political philosophy. I have argued that it is not self-sufficiency or leisure as abstract attributes which draw people into associations with other individuals, nor is it particular leisurely activities like poetry and theatre and dance and athletic competitions and philosophy that serve as the ultimate target, but rather the always active and absolutely complete self-sufficient divinity, this inwardly determined and so leisurely final good, that is, God and the whole cosmos, which serve as the ultimate principle of all human association. But what difference does it make whether we think of these as chiefly desirable attributes for communities or as the divine principle which perfectly possesses them? Would this alter in any way the target for which legislators and rulers should write their laws, educate their citizens and shape their constitutions?

The answer, I think, is "no". Either way, legislators and rulers will be trying to create the conditions for leisure and to educate the citizens so they know how to use this leisure excellently; they will be seeking to protect and promote the self-sufficiency of the community, but with this as the target, certain imperialistic excesses will not tempt them into constant foreign incursions, since it would add nothing to the self-sufficient city's happiness. In fact, the *phronimos* should not look to the divinity and try to apply this standard onto the moral complexity of human life – it is not merely that our desire for the free and self-sufficient activity of God *can* be unconscious, but it *should* be. To understand the divine first principle as the reason these targets are good, and to see God as the principle of politics and human practical activity, just as it is the first principle of nature, this is a *theoretical* truth attained by practical philosophy, not a practical one to be used by legislators. In its final conclusions, political philosophy, like ethics, passes over into a purely theoretical insight into a being which properly speaking is the domain of first philosophy. It suggests that the division between theoretical

and practical inquiries cannot be absolutely maintained. It is in seeing the complete leisure and self-sufficiency of God as the principle of political activity that the programme opened up in the first paragraph of the *Politics* is fulfilled. By discovering the city as the most sovereign and encompassing of associations, and *politieia* as the most sovereign and encompassing regime, we have discovered the most sovereign of all goods – the apolitical *kuriotaton agathon* at the root of all our political desires.

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