The Public and the Private in Aristotle's Political Philosophy

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The question of Aristotle’s teaching on privacy or freedom continues to engage the attention of scholars and to call for a return to the texts. Investigation of the problem is heavily affected by the premises or principles of interpretation assumed or adopted by the interpreter. For example, as is well known, Werner Jaeger and his followers insist on a developmental or genetic interpretation that presents a young Aristotle whose views on certain subjects are generally Platonic and a mature Aristotle whose thoughts are original. By this account, the critical distinction is the one between the stages in Aristotle’s understanding. My own study attempts to show that the most important difference is the one between the Aristotle of the common conception, which sees him as time- and culture-bound and thus thoroughly backward or reactionary, and the Aristotle whose point of orientation is the meaning and possibility of human goodness in and out of political society. On this very point there is also scholarly debate. Aristotle’s relation to Platonism implicates the issue of Aristotle’s idealism or utopianism


2 This is not to say that Aristotle’s relation to his culture ought to be dismissed, as this book tries to show, but rather that we must rely on Aristotle to prompt our interest in investigating aspects of his times and cannot assume that he unreflectively assimilated prevailing ideas.
Appendix

(his position, for example, on the distinction between the best and the best possible or second-best regimes) as well as his understanding of privacy. In the present discussion I attempt to address some of the general issues raised by interpretations that regard Aristotle as essentially a product of his times or of his teacher or of both.

Among those who insist that Aristotle’s texts cannot be understood without an appreciation of the culture in which he lived is A. W. H. Adkins. According to him, for example, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* can be properly understood only if they are read together because the former concerns excellence (*aretē*) and the latter describes the socially determined tasks (*erga*) to which excellences are *always* relative. The *Politics* gives excellence, which is devoid of “moral content” in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, further definition by linking it “with the different roles of different citizens in the polis.” Furthermore, according to Adkins, Aristotle appeals to the “virtues recognized by . . . his audience”—to their view of excellence “in politics and ordinary life.” Accordingly, “excellence” in Aristotle’s works always means excellence at a task or job that contributes to successful living, or means successful living itself, and living successfully is having the *aretai* that Aristotle and his (adult Greek male) audience acknowledge as being most conducive to living successfully.3

There are at least two difficulties with Adkins’s understanding of the two texts. For one, in arguing that Aristotle endorses ancient Greek values Adkins ignores the plethora of instances in both texts in which Aristotle explicitly criticizes common opinion or practices. Adkins contends, for example, that a good man according to Aristotle is a “good Greek male citizen”—one who rules, deliberates, and defends his city. But the distinction between the good man and the good citizen implies that no society alone determines the nature of the good man. Even if one rejects with Adkins that metaphysical biology informs human *erga* and thus sees the good man as simply a product of the best regime, the centrality of leisure to the best regime and the difficulty of a human being combining, even seriatum, a politically active way of life with a philosophical one, suggest that the philosophical life is an alternative to active citizenship. Indeed, as Adkins admits, only by setting *theōria* on

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3 “The Connection between Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics*,” *Political Theory* 12, no. 1 (1984), 33–47.
one side can one conclude that the definition of the good man derives "from Greek political practice from Homer onwards."4

Aristotle not only promotes the activity of philosophy but also teaches about the relation between politics and philosophy, or that between the practical and the theoretical. Thus, although, as Adkins claims, both the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* aim to develop the practical aretai, the works convey a theoretical teaching as well.5

Like Adkins, Richard Bodéüs argues that both works are fundamentally practical in their intent. Unlike Adkins, however, Bodéüs does not maintain that Aristotle is presenting a merely logical or formal account of human excellence; rather, he maintains that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle explains what ethical conduct or complete virtue is and in the *Politics* explains how to cultivate it in a populace. Both works, then, are addressed to the legislator, who cannot know what sorts of law to establish without understanding what they should accomplish.6 Bodéüs is arguing against the view, held by Eric Voegelin, René-Antoine Gauthier, and Jean Yves Jolif, for example, that the *Nicomachean Ethics* expounds "an autonomous moral science" that articulates "the wisdom of the excellences independent of the problem of its political actualization."7

Attributing an essential Platonism to Aristotle, he argues that "man's excellence, in Aristotle's eyes, can be realized effectively only under the aegis of the right coercive norms, that is of just laws... most of the moral virtues analyzed by Aristo-

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4 Ibid., 41-44, quoting from 44.
5 Ibid., 30-31. This is also Carnes Lord's claim: "Aristotle's enterprise is not so much 'political philosophy' as it is 'political science' in its original sense—the practical 'art' (technê) or expertise of the statesman or legislator"; see "The Character and Composition of Aristotle's Politics," *Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (1981), 463. See also Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 12-29.
tle . . . suppose an organization of the life in common according to precise rules."8 Bodéüs's argument derives from the correct premise that, according to Aristotle, one does not possess complete knowledge of the virtues unless one understands how to actualize them.

In support of his argument, Bodéüs points out that at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1181b12–15) Aristotle is saying that the "philosophy of human affairs" is not lacking ideas for or conceptions of the perfect regime (previous generations have supplied these) but recommendations for implementing these ideas. Aristotle announces that what remains for him to do is to explain how to put these ideas into practice—to explain how to legislate what has already been discovered.9

The main difficulty with Bodéüs's "ends-means model" of the relation between the two texts is its assumption that, if legislators know what a virtuous human being is or what the best way of life is for an individual, then they have the basis for bringing about a virtuous city or the best way of life for the whole. This presupposition is unwarranted because, as P. A. Vander Waerdt points out, "if the city is capable only of an analogue of the highest activity of the individual (philosophia theorētikē), then the best way of life for the city and individual will diverge, and even in the case of the best regime the statesman will not simply attempt to establish the best way of life for the individual." More precisely, "the philosophy to which the best regime devotes itself is not theoretical contemplation but rather the leisured culture which constitutes the closest approximation to the philosophical life possible on the level of politics." In brief, Vander Waerdt explains, Bodéüs consistently disregards "the tension between the city and man which necessarily arises from the fact that man's highest end and perfection lies in the non- or trans-political activity of theoretical contemplation."10

8 *Le philosophe et la cité*, 85–86.
9 Ibid., 152–54.
10 "Political Intention," 84–85. Vander Waerdt cites Carnes Lord, "Politics and Philosophy in Aristotle's *Politics*," *Hermes* 106: 336–57, and refers the reader to Strauss, *City and Man*, 25–29, 49. A second criticism of Bodéüs by Vander Waerdt is that, since the natural character of citizen bodies varies, the legislator would need knowledge of the best way of life not only for those capable of complete virtue but also for those incapable or less capable of complete virtue. Thus, Vander Waerdt remarks, "in the case of inferior regimes . . . the question of how the statesman will employ his knowledge of the ethical writings is even more complex" ("Political
Moreover, "if it be true that the best way of life possible for the city and individual diverge, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that each of the components of political science—practical wisdom, economics, and political science—is partially autonomous or sovereign in its own sphere." Bodéüs, Vander Waerdt continues, fails "to explain why Aristotle had to treat the individual, the household and the city independently of and in partial abstraction from one another." Vander Waerdt's implied answer is that Aristotle does so to persuade us that the actualization of virtue is not simply dependent on the right coercive norms, just laws, or precise rules. Virtue may flourish between friends or in the household, for example. Vander Waerdt seems to be saying that Aristotle recognizes that the various entities on the public-private spectrum—the individual, the household, the economy, the laws—can sustain different kinds and levels of virtue. Legislators should not expect, then, to cultivate the same amount and kind of virtue in all entities on all points of the spectrum.

In addition to overlooking Aristotle's recognition of private activities and the respective virtue they can sustain, Bodéüs's account of Aristotle's political science fails, like Adkins's, to acknowledge its theoretical dimension. Political science requires more than knowledge of how to rehabilitate individuals. A legislator should know, not only what virtue consists of and how to cultivate it, but something about the relation between praxis and théoria, between the realm of justice and the realm beyond justice, or between convention and nature—the concerns of political philosophy. The legislator does not need to be able to perceive what nature intimates but should understand that it circumscribes the general character

Intention," 84; see also 87). It should be acknowledged, however, that although the Nicomachean Ethics does not provide complete knowledge of the characters of inferior human beings it does not neglect them altogether: Aristotle notes the difference between the virtues of a slave and a master, speaks of various kinds of friendship, and indicates that all other human beings are inferior to philosophers (1161a24–b8; VIII–X). He thus provides legislators with some insight into the kinds of people they will most likely legislate for.

11 "Political Intention," 85.

12 Carnes Lord does acknowledge it: "Aristotelian practical science indeed appears to renounce the search for the principles of moral and political phenomena . . . yet the possibility of an adequate theoretical account of those principles is nowhere explicitly denied, and to some degree seems taken for granted" ("Character and Composition," 463).
of the good life. Such understanding inclines him to heed the wisdom of those who grasp nature’s dictates and consequently to transform, by way of prudence, this wisdom about nature’s dictates into legislation. Or, similarly, Vander Waerdt explains, “knowledge of the theoretical sciences, although an end κατ’hausto, may be useful κατὰ συμβεβέκος . . . and . . . one of the tasks of the statesman is to be a good judge of when θεorία is relevant, i.e., of when it is useful κατὰ συμβεβέκος and when not ([EE] 1216b35–1217a7). So even if Bodéüs is correct in holding that the purpose of political science is solely practical . . . theoretical philosophy must play an integral role in the statesman’s education.”

With a view to clarifying further the premises of my study, a consideration of Manfred Riedel’s arguments may be helpful. According to Riedel, political philosophy for Aristotle is characterized by the quest not for natural right but for the requirements of the possibility of rational action and speech—for κοινωνία itself. In other words, political philosophy seeks to perceive that condition that is conducive to, or necessarily gives rise to, living well—namely, the confluence of praxis and logos. Or, to use Riedel’s Heideggerian illustration, a political philosopher seeks to understand the merging or focalization of historical occurrence and Being, which is the polis itself. The polis is the institutionalization of κοινωνία, the interchange of language and activity within the right order of communal life. A political philosopher, then, seeks the paradigm that embodies κοινωνία, a certain kind of communal life. According to Riedel, the Nicomachean Ethics and the Politics describe this paradigm.

Riedel’s view mischaracterizes Aristotle’s project in that it fails to appreciate the private dimensions of the polis. Riedel, much like Hannah Arendt, seems to think that Aristotle believes that human beings fulfill themselves qua human beings only by way of speech and rational action and thus that a political philosopher seeks the conditions most conducive to them. But, as this study attempts to

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13 See Leo Strauss, Natural Right and History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 127.
14 “Political Intention,” 86.
15 Strauss maintains it is in Natural Right, 156–63.
16 Metaphysik und Metapolitik: Studien zu Aristoteles und zur politischen Sprache der nezeitlichen Philosophie (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975), 37, 90.
show, Aristotle indicates that the most fulfilling activity is contemplation and thus implies that a philosopher seeks the political conditions that are most advantageous to the preservation and practice of contemplation. A philosopher seeks, then, to discover the dynamic equilibrium between public and private, which, because it preserves the quest for natural right, is necessarily an aspect of natural right.

Joachim Ritter offers yet another characterization of Aristotelian political philosophy. In Ritter’s understanding, Aristotle is saying that the distinctively human activity is contemplation of the divine order—but divine order that is to be found not in another world but in this one. Thinking must take place in the context of society and its practices. Indeed, theoretical wisdom presupposes human praxis: “Knowledge of practice and of ordinary life” renders accessible the theory of the divine order because “the object to which theory is devoted is already present in the knowledge appertaining to the life fulfillment of all men.” In other words, “free theoretical cognition elicits and frees knowledge from the world, knowledge which is already included in and present in all practical and poetical knowledge.”

On this account, a true understanding of the world requires seeing, not only the divine order, but necessarily the divine order as it is lodged in or emanates from praxis. Ritter further explains that

the object which theology has always contemplated and referred to is the divine as the totality of the world system present in all that is. This “totality” as the all-encompassing and controlling is called “being” in philosophy. Thus, “theory concerns being.” (Met. XII, 1.1069a18: peri tês ousias hē theōria.) However, while theory becomes science [in the broadest sense of organized knowledge], it applies itself to “being,” to the extent that being is present in things which, in their causes and reasons, are part of practical existence. The theory of “being” becomes science, in that it becomes a theory of “the things which are” (ta onta). However, the ‘things which are’ are the very things whose “reasons and causes” the formation of the active life of individuals and society develops and knows.

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18 Ibid., 28–29.
If theory concerns being, and being lies within the causal structure of practical existence and must therefore be gained access to through that existence, then one cannot philosophize apart from that existence. Further, since *praxis* occurs by definition at a particular time and place, the activity of philosophy can never be, according to Ritter's account, historically neutralized. To neutralize historically the activity of philosophy—to abstract it from its historical setting—is in Ritter's view to Platonize it.¹⁹ This seems to imply, in turn, that we should not abstract Aristotle's political philosophy from its historical setting—that to grasp Aristotle's account of the divine order we need to appreciate or have knowledge of the *praxis* through which he gained access to it. Yet, Ritter claims that we (presumably the modern democratic West) have inherited the political structures of Aristotle's time, and because we have we can gain access to or understand Aristotle's thought. If we did not have this political inheritance, then we could not understand Aristotle.

Ritter is not arguing, as Adkins does, that knowledge of the values, attitudes, and practices of fourth-century Greece is essential for understanding Aristotle's texts. His view does imply, however, that our intellectual link to Aristotle is historical, which suggests that it is fragile and precarious. Should human beings someday be robbed of the Western political legacy, their minds would in turn be robbed of their potential to understand Aristotle. Ritter would perhaps reply that humanity is not at risk of being severed from Aristotle because reason will continue to preserve throughout history the political structures through which it manifests itself. This Hegelian account nonetheless leaves our historical context as the medium through which we can grasp Aristotle's thoughts.

Ritter's understanding of Aristotle's notion of philosophy is correct insofar as Aristotle does indicate throughout his texts that the divine order manifests itself in the world—in nature and thus in human beings. But contrary to Ritter's view, Aristotle does not say or imply that theoretical wisdom presupposes *praxis*.²⁰ Thought

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¹⁹ Ibid., 106, 109.
thinks itself; *nous* does not require a medium through which to grasp the divine. It is the nature of (divine) truth that it does not need to be mediated. It follows that Aristotle’s teachings do not depend for their transmission on a historical medium. They depend primarily on his written words and secondarily on an understanding of the aspects of his intellectual heritage to which his texts explicitly or implicitly refer.

According to Günther Bien, we should read Aristotle neither for historically independent teachings nor (as Arendt, for example, tends to do) for historical truths; for, in the first place, Aristotle is a representative of the Hellenistic tradition and, in the second place, he is a critic of that tradition. His texts do not reveal unaided the truth of his own time. Thus, Bien concludes, Aristotle’s texts are valuable for their contributions to and place in intellectual history—more specifically, valuable insofar as they illuminate through intellectual criticism ancient Greek schools of thought and thereby the foundation of the European tradition of practical or political philosophy.21

Bien’s main interpretive premise is that we can understand Aristotle’s texts best if we understand his motive for writing them and can understand his motive only if we understand his intellectual heritage, “his own presuppositions which have now become foreign.” Bien reminds us that “through every philosophical writing, there is a certain polemical thread, even when it is only barely evident. The one who does philosophy is not one with the conceptualizations of his predecessors and contemporaries.” He goes on to explain that, just as the dialogues of Plato are directed against the poets (as H. G. Gadamer argues), so we should understand Aristotle’s thought to reflect “a critical-polemical” relationship with Plato.22 But, although Bien is correct to maintain that appreciation of Aristotle presupposes an understanding of the critical nature of philosophy and that Plato is among those Aristotle criticizes, two points should be kept in mind. First, one should recognize and keep in view the ‘Plato’ that Aristotle is from time to time criticizing. In the second book of the *Politics*, for example, Aristotle is evidently attacking the common interpretation or overt teachings

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22 Ibid., 46, 14.
of Plato’s Republic. More precisely, he is criticizing the “city in speech” that Socrates builds with the other interlocutors; but, one should realize, Plato too criticizes (via the dialogue and dramatic action) this communal city (indeed, the conversation reveals that it contains the seed of its own destruction). Plato, like Aristotle, suggests that this city is mostly absurd. Why then does Aristotle bother to attack it? Perhaps lest readers miss Socrates’ often ironic critique—lest they fail to see the absurdities of the city. When Aristotle criticizes Plato, he does not, then, as Pierre Pellegrin claims, “most often miss Plato’s point”;23 rather, he is criticizing the surface or exoteric Plato, using Platonic imagery or Socratic statements as a straw man.24

Second, even though Aristotle may at other times criticize the esoteric Plato (for example, his explicit critique of the Idea of the Good and the Forms in the Eudemian and Nicomachean Ethics; his implicit critique in the Politics of the philosopher-king), it would be mistaken to assume with Bien and Jaeger that entire works of Aristotle are directed against Plato or that Aristotle’s perspective is best understood as primarily a reaction against Plato—to assume, in other words, that Aristotle fails to go beyond merely writing against another argument. As Bodeüs explains, for example, when Aristotle announces his intention at the end of the Nicomachean Ethics to investigate legislation, he is not disavowing Plato’s Laws, as Jaeger claims, but proposing to go beyond the work his predecessors have accomplished, to investigate what has not been investigated.25

The Composition of the Politics

Carnes Lord begins his article “The Character and Composition of Aristotle’s Politics,” by lamenting that scholarly discussions of the “literary character” of the Politics “too frequently lack opera-

tional significance for the interpretive effort." Yet, as Lord notes, the problem of the literary character and composition of the Politics is "an area where all is hypothesis." There is an interpretive risk, which others may recognize, in bringing a hypothesis regarding the character and composition of the Politics to bear on its interpretation: a temptation arises to make the text support the hypothesis. Pierre Pellegrin, for one, cautions against succumbing to this temptation: although it is perfectly legitimate, he says, to have the conviction that a certain order of the books of the Politics, the traditional one, for example, makes sense, one should not regard this order as a hypothesis or a proposition capable of sustaining or holding up an interpretation. One can end up, but not begin, with a thesis about the order of the books. In other words, as Lord states, "an interpretation of the Politics . . . must depend importantly on the interpreter's view of the kind of work it is and the audience for which it was composed," but the interpreter must arrive at an understanding of the character of the Politics "only by a comprehensive interpretation of the work as a whole." Any claims about the character and order of the books of the Politics should be ventured on the basis of and substantiated by an analysis of its content.

Accordingly, the thesis of this book does not emerge from but is fortified or complemented by a hypothesis as to its composition which grew out of investigation of my thesis on privacy. My hypothesis regarding the composition of the Politics is unorthodox and has not, as far as I know, been previously proposed. It challenges "the old view that Books VII and VIII have been displaced from their proper position and belong between Books III and IV" and the reasons given for the more recent Jaegerian view that the books are in their proper order as they have come down to us. According to Jaeger, Aristotle inserted Books IV–VI between Books III and VII to correct or mitigate the Platonic idealism of the flanking books (I–III and VII–VIII), which he had written earlier.

It is plausible, I contend, to attribute to Aristotle the present order of the books, but not on the grounds of an alleged intellec-

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26 "Character and Composition," 459, 460.
27 "La 'Politique' d'Aristote," 133.
28 "Character and Composition," 459, 469.
29 Ibid., 460.
30 Aristotle, 263–75.
tual development; rather, the books as they are ordered present a logical sequence of ideas. Books I–III concern two broad themes: the naturalness of the city, and the moral significance of the household. Within each of these themes are two subtopics. In discussing the naturalness of the city, Aristotle notes (a) the naturalness of ruling—that it is advantageous and good to rule and be ruled (Book I)—and (b) the difference between conventional or citizen virtue and full virtue (Book III). In discussing the household, he makes clear that (a) private relationships and (b) private things are essential for the cultivation of virtue or moral well-being. Although I do not dispute the general view that Books I–III cohere with Books VII and VIII in that they describe features of the best regime, I think that they are placed where they are, and apart from Books VII and VIII, because they are features not only of the best regime but also of the best possible or second-best regime and of the lesser regimes described in the middle books.

In other words, in Books I–III Aristotle is arguing that both ruling and the household are essential features of any regime (they must be preserved for a regime to be viable) and that the good or correct forms of ruling and the household can be maintained within a less than ideal regime. In cases where the same cannot always rule—the ideal—there can be “at least an imitation of this” (Pol 1261a38–b4). And even tyranny is not wholly bad (Pol 1315b4–10, V.11). Further, Aristotle’s discussion of the good household in Books I and II serves to explain his claim in the Nicomachean Ethics that individuals may cultivate moral virtue independently of the regime in which they live.31

Books I–III, then, are introducing neither “a general theory of the state” (as Jaeger claims Book I is) nor “an ideal state” (as Jaeger claims Books II and III are) but essential and ideal features of all regimes.32 That Books I–III recommend provisions for both the second-best and the best regimes is one of the reasons the line between the two kinds of regime is not as distinct as Jaeger and others claim. A second reason is that Aristotle is teaching legisla-

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31 As Vander Waerdt remarks, “there is no suggestion in EN x 9 that a father who lives in an inferior regime should educate his children in accordance with its inferior ends” (“Political Intention,” 87).

32 Jaeger; Aristotle, 267, 273; that is, Aristotle is introducing ruling and the household as necessary features of all regimes but at the same time promoting correct forms of rule and the best household.
tors in the middle books not only to preserve the regime they have at hand but to better it (in ways besides preserving households and ruling). As Vander Waerdt explains,

the statesman will be guided by the double teleology which underlies the program of political science announced in iv 1: his minimal aim will be the regime’s preservation, but his higher aim will be to turn it toward the good life and eudaimonia, so much as circumstances permit. . . . the purpose of the statesman’s architectonic science is not merely to legislate in the interest of the regime in force, as Bodéüs concludes, but to foster the good life and eudaimonia for others as far as possible through political virtue.33

To summarize with Harry V. Jaffa, it might be said that the line between the best and the lesser regimes is blurred because “the best regime is the implicit subject of every book.”34

Pierre Pellegrin is, then, correct to argue that Aristotle intends his unqualifiedly best regime to be neither purely speculative nor a blueprint for all regimes. More precisely, Pellegrin goes on to say, Aristotle is advocating that legislators transform all regimes into the best regime (l’aristé politeia) but at the same time suggesting that the best constitution can take many forms. The absolutely best regime, the city “one would pray for,” can arise only if the proper equipment (chorégias) is available (Pol 1325b37). But this regime is only one of Aristotle’s four best regimes, according to Pellegrin. Aristotle is arguing that, where the proper material or equipment does not exist, legislators should aim to bring about the best regime possible given the circumstances. Pellegrin describes the three general ways legislators can bring about the best regime according to

34 Jaffa goes on to explain that “in Book I, the understanding of the generation of the polis implied an understanding of its perfection—i.e., the best regime—because to understand the generation of anything that exists by nature means to understand the activity of that thing when it has attained its perfection . . . . Book II examined a number of regimes . . . . and they were found wanting. But the principle in virtue of which Aristotle noted those deficiencies was the principle of the best regime. Book III culminated in the examination of the principal rival claims to supreme power in the polis. . . . The reconciliation of these claims . . . itself constituted the principle of the best regime. Books IV, V, and VI demonstrate the different manners in which this reconciliation or harmonization takes place when external conditions forbid its full implementation”; “Aristotle,” in History of Political Philosophy, 2d ed., ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 125–26.
Aristotle. Encountering a badly functioning regime, a legislator should change the constitutional form itself—not all at once to the absolutely best form, but to a better form; that is, the legislator should reform the regime, changing it piecemeal in the direction of the best to the extent that circumstances allow. In situations in which it is not possible or desirable to change the existing form, a legislator should (simply) improve it—either by replacing a deviant form with its corresponding correct form (oligarchy with aristocracy) or by better adapting the existing (correct) form to the circumstances (in effect replacing, for example, one kind of aristocracy with another). Still other circumstances may require a legislator to give power to and establish laws that benefit the middle class (Pol 1296b35–1297a13). Aristotle, Pellegrin correctly notes, is not here advising the legislator to transform the regime into a particular kind of regime; rather, he is giving the legislator “valuable principles for all the particular forms of constitution.”

Aristotle never says, according to Pellegrin, that legislators should rest content with less than perfect regimes. All legislators should know how to bring about the best form of regime that circumstances allow. This view makes evident that Aristotle as much as Plato is a partisan of the ideal regime. In short, Aristotle “assigns to the legislator only a single goal in all possible situations: the best constitution. . . . in each case there is only one form (kind?) of constitution that is ‘naturally the best,’ having taken into account the conditions.” Therefore, Pellegrin reasons, in Books VII and VIII Aristotle does not present a particular form of regime but a perspective from which to judge all regimes. At the same time, Aristotle suggests or leaves open the possibility that the city that “one would pray for” could be endowed with or embodied by a specific form, “une constitution déterminée.”

This very point seems, however, to undermine Pellegrin’s thesis that Books IV–VIII are more unified than Books IV–VI on the one hand and Books VII–VIII on the other. Although it is true that Books IV–VIII are united by their intention to promote the best regime circumstances allow, including the best of circumstances (again, it seems that all of the books are so united), the observation that Books VII and VIII present not only a standard or vision for

36 Ibid., 141–58.
other regimes but also the foundations for an actual regime indicates that they cannot be wholly integrated with, but—as Pellegrin says about Books I–III—should be annexed to, Books IV–VI.37

My view of the rationale behind the order of the books is, as noted earlier, supported substantially by the contents of the Politics. It is also, however, generally supported by the passage at the end of the Nicomachean Ethics which allegedly lays out the plan of the Politics (1181b12–21). In that passage Aristotle proposes that we (1) “in general study the question of the constitution” (the phenomenon of ruling and being ruled?) (Book I); (2) review what “has been said well in detail by earlier thinkers” (Book II); and (3) study what preserves and destroys cities in light of the constitutions we have collected, as well as what makes them ill or well administered (Books IV–VI); after studying these subjects, (4) “we shall perhaps be more likely to see with a comprehensive view, which constitution is best” (Books VII–VIII).38

The view that the order of the books is the original and intended order also has historical support: “Almost alone among the major works, the Politics is cited by name and assigned the correct number of books in all of the ancient lists. There is a strong presumption, therefore, that the Politics existed in something closely approaching its present form prior to the edition of Andronicus—indeed, in the lifetime of Aristotle himself.”39

37 Ibid., 155, 159.
38 I am aware of the claim that this paragraph was not written by Aristotle and refers not to Aristotle’s but to Theophrastus’s Politics. As Lord acknowledges, there is evidence on both sides (“Character and Composition,” 473).
39 Ibid., 467; however, Lord goes on to argue that the traditional arrangement of the books resulted not from “the work of Aristotle” but from “a mechanical accident”; he maintains that “Books VII–VIII do indeed belong between Books III and IV” (470, 471).