

Aristotle, Political Decision Making and the Many

Forthcoming in Lockwood, T. and Samaras, T. (eds.) 2015
Aristotle's Politics: A Critical Guide (Cambridge University Press)

Section 1: Introduction

In Politics 3.11, Aristotle presents considerations in favor of the claim that the many—none of whom is virtuous—when they come together should, at least in some cases, be politically authoritative. This chapter, especially in recent years, has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Part of the reason for its popularity may simply be that it comes as a relief to our moral sensibilities after Aristotle's remarks about natural slavery, non-Greeks, women, and those who work for a living (banausoi).

But there are better reasons for interest. The above claim about the many is in sharp conflict not only with Plato's basic political principles, but those of Aristotle himself in the Protrepticus.¹ Nor is it obviously what one would expect from the author of the Eudemian and the Nicomachean Ethics (or even Politics Book 8). We might thus anticipate that the arguments in its favor would be clear and well worked out. But Aristotle instead relies on a series of analogies and developing arguments from them is problematic. Finally, in this very chapter, Aristotle apparently endorses much less ambitious proposals about the proper political role for the many that may be incompatible with the above claim. In sum, it is unusually difficult to tell what Aristotle is doing in 3.11 and how he goes about it.

In my discussion, I provide a close analysis of 3.11's main features while highlighting its connections with other aspects of Aristotle's ethics and politics. We cannot resolve all the

important questions, but I hope that we shall see more clearly what is genuinely puzzling.

Section 2: The Basics

Aristotle announces 3.11's main concern near its beginning.

[The proposition] that the many [plêthos] ought to be in authority [kurion] rather than the few best would seem to be held and to have some difficulty [aporian] and perhaps also truth. (Pol. 3.11, 1281a40-42)²

Before considering Aristotle's attitude to this thesis, let us note two related theses in the chapter. These are: the many when they have come together in an appropriate way (I shall call this "combination"), are (1) better than the virtuous few, (1281a42-1281b2) and (2) judge better about political matters than the virtuous few (1281b7-9, 1282a12-23).³ The question of who should be authoritative is politically fundamental, so it is unsurprising that Aristotle begins with it. Aristotle thinks that political authority should be distributed in proportion to the relevant kind of merit and in the case of a city, this is a group's virtue. Virtue is the relevant attribute, since it is what allows a group to contribute to the city's ultimate end, i.e. the citizens' happiness.⁴ Since rulers advance the city's end by their decisions, the many's claim to judge better, i.e. (2), is especially important. In turn, an agent's decisions are the outcome of its rational and non-rational dispositions, so an agent that is better with respect to these dispositions will make better judgments (i.e. (1) makes (2) true).⁵ The thesis that is defended by the best worked out analogies is (2), so I shall call (2) "the many thesis", although its connections to the other two claims should be borne in mind.

1281a40-42 quoted above is hardly an unequivocal endorsement of the many's claim to rule. Indeed, some interpreters have even held that Aristotle's endorsement of it and (1) and (2) is merely ironic or aporetic and is not Aristotle's own view.⁶ Although there are difficulties in finding a convincing Aristotelian argument for the many thesis, Aristotle offers less hedged endorsements of it in this chapter at 1282a14-23 (cf. 1282a32-3) and especially at Politics 3.15 1286a24-31 (where Aristotle seems to endorse the many thesis with respect to matters not settled by the law). So it appears that Aristotle does in fact intend to endorse the many thesis, at least in some form; our task is to discover why.

The second general preliminary point concerns restrictions of the many thesis in 3.11. The authoritativeness claim, as well as (1) and (2), seem to apply to all political matters without restriction. But at the chapter's end (1282b1-6), Aristotle adds a major qualification. Correct laws should be authoritative and the ruler, whether one or many, should be authoritative only over those things which laws, because of their generality, cannot specify. This raises much broader questions in Aristotle's political philosophy than I can discuss here and I shall focus on the analogies without trying to work out the exact boundaries of this restriction.⁷

But, as commentators have long noticed, Aristotle also endorses much more restricted participation by the many in this chapter. Starting at 1281b25, Aristotle focuses on, and seems to approve in some way, Solon's proposal that the many have in a share in elections and audits of officials, but not rule by themselves. Some think that this shows that this is the only form in which Aristotle endorses a political role for the many and that (1), (2), and the analogies are to be understood in correspondingly restricted forms.⁸ This would radically change our understanding of the chapter, but is unlikely to be correct.

First, the analogies are stated in fully general terms with no suggestion of such restriction. Second, the analogies' point that the many judge better would on this interpretation simply be overkill.⁹ As long as their judgments were as good, there would be no harm in enfranchising them. Indeed, it is only in connection with this proposal that Aristotle points out that excluding the many risks filling the city with enemies (1281b30). In this case, enfranchising the many may well be a good idea even if their judgments are worse. Third, the initial issue was the comparative goodness of the virtuous' and the many's judgments. The Solonic proposal concerns the very different idea of mixing the better and the worse. As we shall see, the only analogy—the food analogy—that seems intended to support the Solonic proposal directly is incompatible with the others since it suggests that the many's judgments are simply bad until they combine with the virtuous.¹⁰ Finally, the Solonic proposal only enters the text after Aristotle asks what kind of many is such that the theses in question are true of them (1281b15-18). Some men are no better than beasts and the many thesis could not hold of them (1281b18-20). The many enfranchised by the Solonic proposal are the free in general and thus especially the poor (1281b23 and 1281b29). Aristotle is highly critical of the ethical character of the poor, but, as we shall see, more optimistic about the middle class.¹¹ Aristotle would have no reason to examine the many's possible claims only in the worst case (that with the least promising many) or to assume that what is appropriate for them is appropriate for a better many.

So, in what follows, I consider the many thesis and the analogies in their general forms.

Section 2: General Considerations

Analogies are often hard to interpret because it is unclear what features are supposed to transfer to the target case and

Aristotle's brevity only makes things worse. So rather than try to establish a single correct interpretation, I shall explore broadly how they might work. But let us first consider some general issues.

If the judgments of some many after combination are better or at least no worse than those of the virtuous few, there must be some unapparent deficiencies (i.e. features militating against making correct decisions) in the virtuous or good qualities in the nonvirtuous. After all, if the virtuous were infallible, no many could be better and the closer they approach to infallibility, the harder the task for the many. But the many are only capable of such good decision making after combination, so it is especially important to understand the nature of this combination and how it produces good results. It might be straightforwardly aggregative in the manner of Condorcet's jury theorem or it might involve extensive deliberation including belief revisions. As we shall see, there are other options.

The second general point concerns the interest of the many thesis. First, the many thesis' direct political significance is limited, since few Greek cities faced the option of entrusting their political decision making to a virtuous few. But determining how good the many's decision making can be is politically important. And even if the many thesis is false (or its truth requires highly implausible assumptions), it would be significant if the many could, under certain conditions, at least approximate the virtuous few's decision-making success. Even only a passably good approximation might be better than, e.g., rule by oligarchs.

Next, let us consider the general possibilities with respect to the deficiencies of the virtuous and the many's good qualities. There are significant limits to how deficient the virtuous can be. Since practical wisdom is "a reasoned and true state productive of action with regard to human goods"

(NE 1140b20-21), it hard to find room for systematic error. A virtuous person might, however, act out of character occasionally and thus non-virtuously.¹² But since this will only be occasional and non-virtuous people are also subject to acting out of character, this possibility does little to close the gap between them. Nor will it do to suggest that a virtuous person, who possesses courage, but not justice, may go wrong in cases involving justice. Aristotle is committed, in some strong form, to the Reciprocity of the Virtues, i.e. the thesis that one cannot have one virtue without having all the virtues.¹³

Once we allow (as should), that the virtuous here possess practical wisdom and a fully intact virtuous character, two general possibilities remain. I return to them in connection with specific analogies, but some brief prior discussion may be useful. First, the virtuous may lack relevant information. If we must repel an enemy attack coming at one of ten points, the many may obtain the information more quickly and thus make better decisions. The most plausible such cases are those, such the one just described, in which the virtuous and the non-virtuous share the same goal and the latter would use the information just as well. When these conditions do not hold, the cognitive and character defects of the many may outweigh any advantage in information. But their advantage may also be precarious, since typically nothing prevents the virtuous from acquiring the same information (e.g. by transmission from the many.)¹⁴

Second, it is intuitively plausible that the many may have greater experience than the virtuous few and Aristotle has great respect for the cognitive value of experience (e.g. Meta. 1.1). Experience may not only increase one's information, but also improve one's abilities to discern and judge. The process of gaining experience—especially ethical experience—is influenced by one's cognitive capacities and character. The

non-virtuous were presumably much less well habituated than the virtuous, so their defective habituation will have hindered their chances of gaining ethical experience and their developed defective dispositions will limit their ability to benefit from experience as adults.

More specifically, some have suggested that the virtuous of 3.11 lack political experience. But I see no reason to accept this. Aristotle, unlike Plato in some works, does not discourage the virtuous from political activity. Indeed, such political activity constitutes the second-best kind of happiness. Further, experience would confer a cognitive benefit and it is hard to accept that there is such a cognitive defect in the virtuous. Although practical wisdom is “especially” identified with wisdom concerning what is best for its individual possessor (NE 1141b29-30), Aristotle does think that practical wisdom and political science or wisdom are the same state (hexis), although they differ in being, i.e. in definition (NE 1141b24-5). Although this is a surprisingly strong claim, it gives Aristotle good reason to reject the idea that the virtuous lack the sort of general political experience necessary for political wisdom. (I say more about experience in discussing the user analogy.)

I cannot here discuss in detail Aristotle’s view of the many.¹⁵ But to see what combination must overcome, let us briefly consider their deficiencies. To begin, the Eudemian and the Nicomachean Ethics make it clear that the many hold mistaken views about happiness (and this is the ultimate end of political science).¹⁶ Moreover, their views are unstable because they are not rationally based, but rather depend on the desires and emotions in the non-rational part of the soul.¹⁷ Nor do they have “a conception of what is truly fine and pleasant, since they have never tasted it” (NE 1179b15-16) and are moved by fear of punishment rather than shame.¹⁸

In particular, they will not think that virtue is good for its own sake. (Not even the Spartans, who are among the most

admirable non-virtuous character types in Greece (EE 1248b37-1249a16), nor the more refined men (charientes) who pursue politics (NE 1095b22-3), think that virtue is good in itself.)¹⁹ Not having been brought up in good habits, the many would not benefit from discussions of the good and fine even if they were to hear them.²⁰ In sum, both the rational and the non-rational parts of their souls are defective. So as the good person tends to choose and act correctly with respect to the advantageous, the fine and the pleasant, the non-virtuous will go wrong (NE 1104b30-34). Thus Aristotle is insistent that the two character types that in some significant way approximate virtue—natural virtue and the Spartan character—often lead their possessors to go badly astray in choice and action.²¹

The many thesis thus seems to face serious challenges.

Section 3: Aristotle's Analogies

Aristotle's defense of the many thesis begins with a flurry of analogies.

It is possible for the many [pollous], each of whom is not a virtuous man, nevertheless when they have come together to be better than them [i.e. the virtuous few]—not individually, but altogether—as meals to which many contribute can be better than those supplied at one person's expense. For being many, each can have a part of virtue and practical wisdom [phronêseôs], and when they have come together, just as the many become a single man—having many feet and many hands and many senses—so too for their characters and mind [dianoian]. For this reason, the many [polloi] also judge better both about musical works and those of the poets. For some [judge] some one part, others another part, and all [judge] all.²² (1281a42-b10)

At 1281b10-15, there is a painting analogy that is merely supplementary to the judging analogy and offers no independent support for the theses about the many.²³

Aristotle adds three further analogies. First, he offers a justification of the Solonic proposal as such. As we shall see, this analogy seems inconsistent with the others.

For when all have come together, they have sufficient perception [aisthêsin], and when mixed with the better people benefit cities, just as nourishment that is not pure mixed with some pure nourishment makes the whole more useful than some little pure nourishment. Apart each is incomplete [atelês] about judging. (1281b34-38)

Finally, he gives two more analogies responding to objections to Solon, although these analogies have wider application and are consistent with the others. To the objection that only doctors are fit judges of doctors, the reply is that

The craftsman and the master craftsman and, third, the person educated [pepaideuomenos] about the art are doctors (for there are also some such people in almost all the arts). We give judging no less to the educated than to the knowers. (1282a3-7)

To the renewed objection that, at any rate, non-professionals do not share in judging more than professionals, Aristotle adds a final analogy.

[A]bout some things the maker would not be the only or the best judge--the ones where those who lack the art also have some knowledge of their products. For example, it does not

only belong to the maker to know a house, but rather the one using it judges better (and the householder is the user) and the captain [judges better] a rudder than the carpenter, and of a feast the guest, not the cook [judges better]. (1282a17-23)

In sum, Aristotle offers six main analogies:

- (1) the feast (1281b2-3),
- (2) the single man (1281b4-7),
- (3) judging poetry and music (1281b7-10),
- (4) pure and impure food (1281b34-38),
- (5) professionals and the educated (1281b38-1282a17),
- (6) makers and users (1282a17-23).

As we shall see, they display a certain progression.

The Feast

This analogy's popularity is not matched by its informativeness. A standard interpretation holds that the common meal is better than one cooked by an expert chef because of its variety.²⁴ (It is not clear whether the criterion is the diners' pleasure or that of haute cuisine.) This has the advantage of locating the benefit in some feature of the meal as such. Appealing instead to, e.g., the friendship engendered by the activity focuses on a non-essential feature of the meal and strains what should be, as the opening analogy, something readily intelligible without unobvious assumptions.²⁵ Clearly, some coordination is needed so that not everyone brings the same casserole. But even granting this, is such a meal likely to be better than one produced by Wolfgang Puck, even in respect of variety?

A recent revisionary interpretation holds that the key contrast is between a meal at one person's expense and a common meal at many's expense. The value or goodness of the meal is simply its total expense.²⁶ Assuming the many

collectively can contribute more money than a single person, the common meal is better in virtue of being more expensive. The benefit of combination is “sheer aggregation”: the value of the meal is an additive function of the monetary value of the individual contributions. Indeed, Lane holds that sheer aggregation also accounts for the result’s goodness in the other analogies.²⁷

This view faces problems. First, a meal’s expense is also a non-essential feature of it and is a deeply implausible criterion of goodness (unlike healthfulness, the diners’ pleasure, or the standards of fine dining) and highly unAristotelian. Aristotle hardly that thinks that the goodness of a flute or a rudder is defined in terms of its expense. Second, it is crucial to this interpretation that the meal’s goodness consists in its overall expense, not expense per participant. Sheer aggregation requires that overall goodness goes up with any added expense and this not true of average expense. So Lane’s interpretation would require that a meal of greater total expense that gave each diner one grain of wheat was a better meal than any meal of lesser total, but greater average, expense. This is hardly intuitively compelling. Matters, as the judging analogy will show, are no better in aggregating dispositions.²⁸

Although the standard interpretation is more plausible with respect to the meal itself, it does not provide much political illumination. Even granting that variety is strongly associated with diners’ pleasure or gastronomic excellence, it is not at all clear that variety in belief or disposition is similarly associated with arriving at correct decisions about what to do. We must turn to the other analogies.

The Man

Although this analogy concerns the many’s power to act, rather than decide, it marks an advance insofar as it points to the need for an appropriate combination for the product to be

good. We are, I think, to conceive of the single resulting creature as an ordinary animal. In an animal, what guarantees that its parts, however many or powerful, function well together is the activity of the species form. We would not obtain such a good result simply by, e.g., sewing many men together. We would have at best a heap (cf. *Meta.* Z 6), not a unitary thing.²⁹ Since a gathering of the many is not a single natural organism, Aristotle still needs to specify the nature of the combination and show how it produces a good result.

Although this passage does not specify the combination's nature, we learn more about what is combined. In the analogy, bodies or body parts, that is, organs having certain abilities are combined. The idea that we combine differentiated organs having characteristic abilities takes us beyond the feast analogy and Aristotle goes further. Each of the many can have a "part" (*morion*) of virtue or of practical wisdom (1281b4-5). Unfortunately, it is not clear what this means.³⁰ The Reciprocity of the Virtues excludes the possibility of possessing just one virtue. Perhaps the best that we can do is to take this as the suggestion that each of the many possesses some dispositions of the rational or non-rational parts of the soul that bear some significant resemblance to those of a virtuous person. The resemblance cannot be too minimal or it should not be called a part of virtue, but the notion remains vague. (Must there, e.g., be at least a 75% match between when this person grows angry and when a virtuous person does? Must their anger be based on a true ethical description of the harm occasioning it?) We can add the following points that are at least strongly suggested by Aristotle's phrasing.

1. In someone having a part of virtue, the rest of his dispositions do not significantly resemble those of a virtuous person.
2. Each individual has only one part of virtue.

3. All the parts of virtue are represented in the many in such a way that a proper combination of them produces a group that is an analogue of the virtuous person.

(1) and (2) make it clear that despite having a part of virtue, the person is mediocre in other respects.³¹

The next analogy draws out some of the political implications.

Judging Poetry and Music, Paintings, and Users

According to the judging analogy, one subgroup judges one part well, a distinct subgroup another part well and so on and combining these judgments somehow produces an overall excellent judgment. This analogy further advances the discussion, since it attributes to the many abilities that are explicitly judgment-making and suggests something about the combination of the resulting judgments. Our two basic worries are: (1) do the subgroups really have such abilities? and (2) how are these individual good judgments combined into an overall excellent judgment that is endorsed by a majority? I shall focus on the relevant general considerations, since it is often difficult to reach a fully determinate conclusion.

I have noted some of the many's deficiencies, but first let us consider an underappreciated worry about (1). The worry is not simply whether subgroups are capable of superlative judgment (i.e. at least as good as those of the virtuous) in a given domain, but whether it is possible for those making such superlative judgments to be mediocre in others. After all, the abilities allowing one to make superlative judgments about odd numbers also allow one to make superlative judgments about even numbers. For some domains, the knowledge and ability that suffices for superlative judgment in one of them also makes for superlative judgment in the other.³² Are the domains relevant to political decision-making like this?

I have the space for only the briefest discussion. The most natural idea is that those with a given part of virtue are responsible for judging the domain related to that part.³³ Those, for example, with ‘courage’ (this is not, of course, the genuine virtue, but rather the part that corresponds to it by satisfying our above characterization) judge of the courage-related aspects of problems. But ethics is not a field that lends itself well to such compartmentalization. To determine what actions are courageous one must consider the norms or values relevant to courage not merely by themselves, but as part of a global scheme of values that includes those relevant to every other virtue. Since one of the virtues is practical wisdom which takes happiness as its end, determining what is courageous must thus be sensitive to the human good comprehensively understood.³⁴ So the knowledge that makes for excellent judgment in any domain will be the same. The holistic character of ethical judgment makes it very hard to see how such superlative judgment in one ethical domain is possible for people who are mediocre in the rest. This seems to be a grave problem for the strategy we are considering.³⁵

Let us turn to combination. There are many possibilities here, but I focus on two of the most important proposals, those of Jeremy Waldron and Josh Ober.³⁶ On Waldron’s deliberative proposal, after the initial proposals and arguments are given (Waldron does not give special weight to subgroup experts), there is an extended process of common deliberation that results in a majority sharing both a correct view about what to do as well as the reasons supporting this judgment.³⁷ This proposal may not have close historical parallels. Speeches were made in the Athenian Assembly before voting, but practical constraints would sharply limit the time for discussion, the range of participants, and the opportunity for extended dialectical examination.³⁸ An Assembly meeting is not a philosophical seminar. Nor does anything in our chapter

suggest, I think, that Aristotle has in mind a full discussion and evaluation by all that results in a majority coming to a worked out and shared understanding. But, given Aristotle's lack of explanation, any detailed suggestion has to go beyond the text and we might consider ways that the ideal could be better embodied in practice.

What the deliberative option requires is that the majority of the many, after deliberation, make choices about what to do that are at least as good as those of the virtuous person. But it is hard to see why this should be the case. As we have seen, the many have the wrong ultimate ends, so they will tend to go wrong with respect to choices about human goods in their own lives. Why would they get right choices about human goods in the larger context of the city? The sort of dialectical deliberation that Waldron envisages might bring to light good reasons for the virtuous' choice, but why think that the majority would rationally appreciate or be moved by them? As Aristotle remarks towards the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "If arguments were by themselves capable of making men good, they would justly, as Theognis says, have won very great rewards" (1179b4-6). But they are not. All of the many are adults and Aristotle thinks that the character of adults is, at the minimum, exceedingly hard to change.³⁹ Nor is character established or changed simply by listening to speeches. It would require, if it were in fact possible, a long process of counter habituation for the many to change their defective characters. We cannot, I think, expect that political deliberation will do so.

One might suggest that deliberation brings it about that the many choose the right things, but not for the reasons that the virtuous do. This cannot, I think, explain how the many could make superlative right choices across a wide range of political topics. Those with natural virtue stumble frequently and the Spartans go wrong in peace.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, there is

something important in this suggestion. Since the many have the wrong ends, they will not share the virtuous' reasons. But if we restrict the decisions to be made, we may be able to find not only areas of extensional equivalence, but also of partially shared reasons. This falls far short of the many thesis, but I return to it below.⁴¹

Before examining the details of Ober's view, let us note that at 1281b25 Aristotle turns to consider a much restricted version of the many thesis that applies only to elections and audits. It is in connection with this proposal that Aristotle presents his next three analogies, i.e. those concerning impure food, the educated, and makers and users. Ober draws on the last two in his interpretation and I shall discuss them in light of the unrestricted thesis. This is reasonable, since there is nothing in the analogies themselves that suggest a restricted application.⁴² The impure food analogy is an anomaly, since it never suggests that the judgment of the many can be better or as good as that of the virtuous few. I shall thus leave it for last.

Ober offers an innovative alternative to the deliberative interpretation. Ober's suggestion is that the rest of the many do not accept the experts' judgments because they come through extended deliberation to grasp and share the experts' reasons, but rather because they are capable of recognizing the experts as such. Once the majority accepts the experts' judgments of the parts and also a predetermined weighting of the parts, the majority will endorse the correct judgment.⁴³ To show that it is plausible that the many can recognize experts, Ober turns to the opening of Parts of Animals.⁴⁴ In this passage (639a1-12), Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of proficiency with respect to respect to a study or investigation, i.e. that resulting in having understanding (epistêmê) of the subject and that resulting from being educated (pepaideumenos). Education makes one able to judge well

what has been said finely in an exposition. General education allows one to do so with respect to almost all subjects; more particular education allows one to do so for some limited subject.

Despite its greater attractiveness than the deliberative option, this interpretation faces serious worries. In addition to those mentioned above, I note two. First, the possibility of success by non-experts in judging plays may be misleading. Although judging plays or zoological methodologies may not always be disinterested, political and legal decisions are much more likely to be adversely affected by emotions and mistaken views about self-interest.⁴⁵ So the defective character of the many is all the more relevant. Thus even if they recognize experts, they may not be motivated to accept their judgments.

But let us focus on the educated's ability to judge. The Parts of Animals passage deserves longer discussion, but the first point to note is that the education in question produces an ability to examine the method of an exposition that is independent of the truth-value of the statements in that exposition (639a12-16). This is the ability, roughly, to judge whether the exposition proceeds in accordance with the right standards for that kind of inquiry, not whether it expresses the truth. In the Parts of Animals passage, it involves judging whether one should proceed by considering each substantial being separately or by focusing on common attributes (639a16-19). In Metaphysics Book 4, it involves grasping, in general, what one should (or should not) seek to demonstrate (1006a5-11). In the Nicomachean Ethics, it involves grasping the appropriate degree of exactness to seek in different subjects (1094a23-7).

C.D.C. Reeve plausibly suggests that the relevant education must be, at least in large part, philosophical and dialectical.⁴⁶ What else could enable one to make the sorts of judgments just noted and to grasp the proper methods of

different kinds of inquiry? Yet it is even clearer that whatever this education is, it is a very sophisticated attainment and not something provided by the run of the mill education of the average Greek in the streets. But if so, the many will certainly not possess it. So I do not think that we can accept Ober's interpretation and thus we have not yet found a convincing argument for the many thesis in these analogies.

Makers and Users

The chapter's final analogy has entirely general application, but differs from the previous analogies in important ways. The judging analogy attributed to the many restricted knowledge (i.e. their knowledge of parts was of the same kind as that had by overall experts). In the educated analogy, the knowledge attributed was not the partial possession of the same science, but a distinctive knowledge of the norms and standards for that science. In the user analogy, what is attributed is neither of these and initially seems to be a homelier kind of experience. But this may be misleading.

The analogy's basic idea is that a product's user is a better judge of it than the maker, e.g. a house's user is a better judge of it than the housebuilder. Filling this out, a product's user knows better than its maker how it is used and this knowledge of actual or appropriate use should determine how the product is made. The political analogue seems to be that the makers of decrees, laws or political decisions generally are not the best judges of them, but rather those who use them, i.e. are governed by them. Since the virtuous few typically live under the laws made, prima facie they and the many should be equally well off in judging these decisions, even if the virtuous few possessed, e.g., some special knowledge about drafting decrees. But the many will, in fact, have a wider and more varied experience of using the laws. For example, the virtuous will not have experience of laws governing manual

trades, since the virtuous do not practice them. And even when the laws affect the conduct of the virtuous directly, the many will collectively have a significantly broader and more varied experience, since they live under the laws in a much wider set of circumstances. More could be said, but this is enough, I think, to see the argument's general outline.

The problems for the analogy can be stated briefly. To begin, in the cases it mentions, there seems to be a fairly sharp distinction intended between the maker's knowledge (understood fairly narrowly as knowledge of how to make a given product) and the user's knowledge which is a grasp of the ends for which the product is used. To be sure, in grasping that a house is to be built, the housebuilder must realize what a house is, e.g. a shelter for human beings from weather, so the builder must have some idea of the use of houses. But turning to rudders and steersmen, it is clear why the user's knowledge is decisive.⁴⁷ It is not just that the user has more detailed experience of the product than the maker, but that the user's knowledge is normatively authoritative. Only the steersman has knowledge of what good steering consists in and it is such knowledge that should determine how the rudder is constructed. This is so for two reasons: (1) the value of a rudder as such consists simply in the good steering that it enables, and (2) by identifying the user as the steersman we identify him as someone who possesses the art of steering and thus knows what good steering is, i.e. what the telos of the rudder is and thus what its proper form is.⁴⁸ That the user possesses the relevant art is crucial; rudder makers should not seek design advice from first time steersmen.

The problem for the analogy is that neither of these points straightforwardly holds in the political case. The knowledge that should guide political decision making is political science and this embodies knowledge of the end of the laws, i.e. human happiness at the level of the city. Political

science is the most authoritative (*kuriôtatê*) of the sciences and thus architectonic (*architektonikê*) (NE 1094a24-b7, cf. Pol. 1282b14-18). It determines what other kinds of knowledge should exist in the city and how they are to be pursued and, more generally, what the citizens should do and refrain from. It does so appropriately because its end, the human good for the city, embraces all others. Thus although it may include technical knowledge of certain kinds of makings, what is crucial is that political science possesses, in the best way, knowledge of the right use or end of political decisions.⁴⁹ This is, as we have seen, the knowledge the virtuous should have. On the other hand, merely using the laws in the sense of being governed by them is not sufficient for such knowledge. As we have also seen, the many lack practical wisdom and have a number of other ethical deficiencies. In sum, the analogy does not provide much support for the idea that they would be able to make better judgments.

So far I have interpreted the analogies in light of Aristotle's treatment of similar cases and his other general views. We might try to salvage something by appealing to other possibilities that seem plausible, but are not so directly grounded. In particular, we might appeal to the many's experience.⁵⁰ Since collectively they do have much wider experience of the laws' operation, they may have better information about the actual working of a policy. They may, for example, see that a measure, despite benefitting the city's treasury, has done so only at the cost of weakening military preparedness. It is easy to see how such information could result in better political decisions and there may be significant agreement between the virtuous and the nonvirtuous on the importance of military preparedness.

These considerations do not, however, even show that particular decisions about these issues would be better made if the many were allowed to vote along with the virtuous. They

only show that such decisions will better made if the decision makers possess such information and this result can be obtained if the many transmit the information to the virtuous. Of course, the many might be unwilling to pass on the information if they are excluded from voting, but that is another matter. If the virtuous do possess such information, it is not clear why giving the many a vote would tend to produce a better result. None of the many possesses practical wisdom, but it is also unlikely that a significant number of them possess the ability of cleverness (deinotês). This is an ability to determine well the appropriate means (including constitutive means) to whatever ends one has (NE 1144a23-29). Although it can exist without practical wisdom and probably is possessed by some of the many, it is a kind of intellectual ability that is out of the commonplace and thus unlikely to be found in a majority of the many. So even if the many's ethical defects were not immediately relevant to decision making in some area because no disagreement with the virtuous is relevant to deciding among live options, the virtuous seem better equipped to deal with the complexities of such choices which are not straightforwardly rule-governed.

Once again, there may be further possibilities to explore that are more or less loosely related to the user analogy, but the present discussion indicates, I think, the difficulties in appealing to it to sustain the many thesis or even a weaker claim about combined voting.

Pure and Impure Food

I close this section by returning to the food analogy. There is much that is obscure in this analogy. Aristotle says that some impure food mixed with some pure food is more nourishing than a little pure food (1281b35-38). He does not anywhere say that a sufficient quantity of impure food is equally or more nourishing than a little pure food (which is the

analogical equivalent of the many thesis.) Clearly, even mere silence on this point is a significant difference from the other analogies. Although certainty is not possible, it is tempting to read the claim “when [or if] [the many are] mixed with the better people, [they] benefit the cities” (1281b35-6) as conversationally implying the biconditional. (Ordinary language conditionals are often closer to biconditionals.) This would, of course, be inconsistent with the many thesis.

If we interpret the Politics passage in light of the Generation of Animals, this is what we would expect.⁵¹ Impure food is food in a relatively raw state, and although nourishment may be present in it, it needs working up (ergasia) in order to purify it and render it nutritious (GA 728a25-30). In its unworked up state, impure food does not nourish, but such working up can be effected by mixing it with pure food (GA 728a30-31, cf. 725a14ff. and 744b32ff.).⁵²

Either the conditional or the biconditional would support the Solonic proposal and this seems to be the analogy’s intent. I do not think that the food analogy shows that Aristotle intends to reject the many thesis, since, as I have suggested, the many intended here is not the optimal many.⁵³ The distance of the food analogy from the political case (like the meal analogy) leaves us with many unanswered questions. We would like to know, for example, how the mixing makes the many useful. Is it by improving their judgment? Or are they only better because they have come, perhaps in part because of shame, to support the judgments of the better people, and are no longer prone to faction? Next, the claim that the better are incomplete (1281b38) without the many plays a crucial role in the argument. Even if the many are improved by mixing, this would not show that the mixed group is superior to the better people by themselves. But Aristotle does not even hint as to why the better are incomplete. Is this because the judgments of the better are less likely to be effective without

the many's support or because the many actually improve the better people's judgments (e.g. by furnishing information)? Do the many play some substantial and essential role in making the virtuous more complete? Aristotle's presentation of the analogy is much too brief to answer these questions. Given its incompleteness, I do not think that this analogy adds greatly to our understanding of Aristotle's general political views.

Section 4: Conclusion

None of the analogies seems to provide a convincing argument for the many thesis. In particular, we have not found a good account of how combination overcomes the many's deficiencies. In closing, I note some avenues for further exploration. First, as we have noted, even if the many thesis fails, it would be politically significant to show that the many's decisions could be better than expected. The Politics provides especially rich material for study, since although its discussion of the many is not as informed by ethical theory as that in the two Ethics, it examines the many and the kinds of people composing it in much greater detail. Both the idea that the many contains subgroups whose judgments in certain areas are relatively good and that the many can draw on wide experience, even if they do not vindicate the many thesis, might be developed to show that its judgments can be better than one might have thought.

Second, the idea of restricting the field of the many's judgments deserves further analysis. This is particularly so, since it was especially difficult to vindicate the many's claim to excellence in all-around good judgment. To take one example, elections and audits might be areas in which the many do relatively well. Both the virtuous and the non-virtuous (in general) desire to punish those embezzling from the city and to avoid entrusting offices to unscrupulous self-seekers. The many can also draw on a wider range of interaction with

officeholders and candidates in these cases. The middle class may be capable of significantly more.

But the Politics often points in more than one direction. As we have seen, the end of 3.11 claims that the laws should be authoritative and that only matters that they cannot specify because of their inherent generality should be left to the rulers, whether one or many. At Pol. 1286a24-31, in a difficult passage, Aristotle seems to endorse the many thesis with respect to such questions that cannot be settled by law. This is puzzling, since we have seen reason to think that the many will not be especially good at getting right highly complicated issues that require more than application of a rule. Matters are made worse by a passage at Rhet. 1354a31-1354b11 where Aristotle says that correct laws should leave as little as possible open to judges and the Assembly. Here one reason for this restriction is that “it is easier to find one or a few men who have good judgment [eu phronountas] and are capable of framing laws and giving verdicts” (Rhet. 1354a33-1354b1). We need a better understanding of how these claims fit together and of Aristotle’s ultimate views.

Finally, there is one especially important example of restricting the range of the many’s political decisions. Aristotle tends to think that in the vast majority of cities, the best that is possible is maintaining the stability of the current constitution and making small moderating changes for the better. This bounds the political decision-making of the many: they do not have to decide how best to get from the current situation to the city of our prayers or a close possible approximation of it. We have also seen that the middle class is an especially promising many since they lack many of the worst defects of the wealthy and the poor and have some tendency to promote the common good.⁵⁴ Here their wide experience may prove particularly useful, e.g. in determining how policies actually work to increase law abidingness, reduce resentment

among the citizens, and in general promote the common good. Indeed, their motivation for pursuing such small-scale improvements may, at least in some ways, be superior to the virtuous who would see such efforts as only a second-best forced on them by defective circumstances.

We may have more puzzles than when we began and may well have strengthened our suspicion that Politics 3.11 is a curious text indeed. There remains a persistent gap between Aristotle's apparent endorsement of the many thesis and the arguments we can develop from the analogies. Yet a clearer view of a text's puzzles is a necessary and important step in eventually finding a full resolution of them. I cannot offer the latter, but I hope to have made a start on the former. Even if we do not yet possess an adequate outline of the full resolution, time is, as Aristotle reminds us, a good co-worker.⁵⁵

¹ E.g. 84.9-85.23 des Places (1989), B46-50 Düring (1961).

² Bekker numbers without identification are from Politics 3.11. At 1281a41, I translate Richards' emendation legesthai. The sentence's last words could equally well be translated as "perhaps even truth." For discussion, see Newman (1986, ad loc.). The translation of 3.11 is mine; other Aristotle translations are based on Barnes (1985).

³ At 1282 a17, he says "better no worse."

⁴ More precision would require discussion of controversial issues in Aristotle's theory of distributive justice. For a start, see Keyt (1991) and Miller (1995, 123-8). Also, the above claims need qualification, since Aristotle recognizes that a just distribution of political authority may not be overall best if, e.g., it leads to destabilizing faction.

⁵ Aristotle endorses the inference from (1) to (2) at 1281b7, note dio. Some have suggested that 3.11 is only concerned with aggregating virtue, not with decision making, but such a contrast overlooks the link between (1) and (2).

⁶ E.g. Winthrop (1978), the idea goes back at least to Trendelenburg.

⁷ More general questions (to mention only a few) needing examination include: (1) What is it for laws to be authoritative and does it preclude all change in them? If correct laws were made by the virtuous, why cannot the virtuous sometimes change them?, (2) How broad are such laws and what is the exact difference between laws (nomoi) and decrees (psêphismata)?, (3) What is the relation between the law and the citizens' authority in Aristotle's best city?, and (4) Who or what should be authoritative when the laws are incorrect?

⁸ E.g. Lane (2013).

⁹ On the other hand, applying a general thesis to a restricted case (in which the many is very deficient) might well be reasonable.

¹⁰ Solon's proposal also differs greatly from Aristotle's announced question in that the previously enfranchised "better" (i.e. the better off) were hardly all genuinely virtuous in Aristotle's view.

¹¹ See, e.g. Irwin (1988b, 453-6), Kraut (2002, 438-44) and Samaras' contribution. On the middle and the common good, see, e.g., Pol. 1279a27-b4.

¹² E.g. Curzer (2005). Virtue may come in degrees (NE 1173a18-22), but this should not make a radical difference.

¹³ On reciprocity, see Cooper (1999) and Irwin (1988b).

¹⁴ Laws 964E-965A uses bodily metaphors to describe the less virtuous transmitting information to more virtuous decision makers.

¹⁵ Garrett (1993) is helpful.

¹⁶ E.g. EE 1214b35-1215a2, NE 1095a23-5, 1168b15-21.

¹⁷ E.g. EE 1214b35-1215a2, NE 1172b3, 1179b13.

¹⁸ NE 1121b13-15, 1179b7-15, Rhet. 1382b4-5.

¹⁹ Nor will they appreciate the value of philosophy.

²⁰ E.g. NE 1095a2-11, 1095b2-6, 1179b4-20.

²¹ On natural virtue, NE 1144b1-17; on the Spartans, Pol. 1271b2-12, 1333b11-1334a10. I have benefitted from Hitz (2012) and Benjamin Miller's unpublished work.

²² In the last sentence, we should probably supply the stronger "judge better" from b8. In any case, the problems I raise below remain. Aristotle refuses to identify a whole with all its parts (Meta. Z17). It is, rather, very roughly, a unity of parts with a certain structure. As we shall see, there are serious problems about combining these partial judgments.

²³ The painting analogy only highlights the difficulties of combination. Merely aggregating the scattered most beautiful parts of real humans into a painting of a person would not produce the most beautiful painting of a whole human. This emphasizes the difficulty, but makes no positive suggestion.

²⁴ For a standard interpretation, see Ober (2013, 109-11); for the alternate, see Lane (2013, 253-9).

²⁵ Wilson (2011, 263) offers a friendship interpretation; Bouchard (2011, 166) rightly rejects it.

²⁶ Lane (2013, 257).

²⁷ Lane (2013, 260).

²⁸ Cf. n. 29. The painting analogy's point is that merely aggregating best parts does not produce the most beautiful whole.

²⁹ Contra Lane (2013, 260) who holds that the creature is better simply in virtue of having more hands, feet and so on.

³⁰ Morion can refer to one genuine virtue that is part of complete genuine virtue, e.g. EE 1219a37.

³¹ Combining dispositions to produce a good result is not straightforwardly additive: e.g. what is added must qualify as a part of virtue, and all the parts of virtue must be represented (adding more tokens of one part is not enough). Virtue is the relevant attribute for distributing power just because it

contributes to the city's ultimate end. Any criteria for an entity being more virtuous must preserve this link, and showing that an entity would make better decisions is complex. E.g. a group 99% of whose members have the same part may make skewed decisions.

³² This is true for domains such that grasp of the same principles is necessary and sufficient for good judgment in both. The more overlap among principles, the less variation there will be. The point is easiest to state in terms of principles, but they are not necessary: what matters are the relations among the types of knowledge in the domains.

³³ And since having a part of virtue is worse than having the corresponding genuine virtue, why would the judgment of parts be at least as good?

³⁴ I accept Cooper's (1999) and Irwin's analyses (1988b) here.

³⁵ Partitioning political issues is problematic, but assigning (antecedently fixed?) weights is more so. Should considerations about moderation always be worth 25%, courage 10% and so on? But partitioning and weighting are only likely to produce good results if they are established by someone with overall knowledge of the field. If not, the results will be worse.

³⁶ Ober (2013) and Waldron (1995).

³⁷ Waldron (1995, 569-71). Unless a majority endorses the correct judgment, its generation by deliberation is politically irrelevant and the many thesis fails.

³⁸ E.g. Hansen (1979, 49) suggests that a typical meeting of the Assembly might have 6000 members each of which had at least a theoretical right to speak, lasted a few hours and dealt with perhaps a dozen decrees. For Plato's attempt to craft a more adequately deliberative structure within the legal system of Magnesia, see Laws 855C-856A. Note how time-consuming and demanding on its deliberative participants the procedure is.

³⁹ See Muzio (2000).

⁴⁰ See n. 20.

⁴¹ Proponents sometimes cite passages (e.g. Meta. 993a30-b7) that seem optimistic about humans' capacity to hit on the truth. But these general passages should be interpreted so as to be consistent with Aristotle's express and specific views about the many.

⁴² E.g. the educated analogy suggests that the many's judgment is at least as good (1282a7, cf. 1282a16-7) as that of the virtuous and so justifies something much stronger than the Solonic restriction. The analogy requires that the contrast be between the virtuous who possess political wisdom and those well educated with respect to it. But neither characterization is true of the better and worse in the Solon case. The analogy would have to be radically revised if its intent were to apply to real life Solonic proposals.

⁴³ Ober (2013) considers some deliberative variants, but I focus on his most novel suggestion.

⁴⁴ Ober (2013, 107n8), this is by far the most promising passage he cites.

⁴⁵ E.g. Rhet. 1354b4-11.

⁴⁶ Reeve (1996, 192-3).

⁴⁷ Understanding the kubernêtês as a pilot would also stress his architectonic function. Cf. Pol. 177b26-32.

⁴⁸ Cf. Phy. 194a36-b8.

⁴⁹ Plato at Euthydemus 288D-292D claims that the knowledge that makes us happy must include knowledge of how to use correctly whatever it makes or controls and identifies it with politikê.

⁵⁰ On experience, see Gregorić and Grgić (2006). Experience may arguably include universal generalizations; what it lacks is any grasp of an explanatory item. Cf. NE 1143b11-14. It is thus well suited to the many. Meta 1.1. 981a12-13 suggests

that experience is no worse than art with respect to action, but grasping explanatory connections should often aid practice.

⁵¹ The chronological relation of this part of the Politics to the Generation of Animals is unclear.

⁵² For a helpful discussion of related issues, see Lloyd (1996).

⁵³ Unlike, e.g., the objection classed as part of an aporia at 1281b39, running from 1281b38-1282a3 and answered at 1282a3-7, there is no textual indication that the food analogy is only aporetic.

⁵⁴ Cf. n. 10. Although this raises disputed issues, they may—even while not valuing virtue for own sake, being virtuous, or having a conception of the fine—be capable of at least limited altruistic action.

⁵⁵ I would like to thank Huw Duffy for his comments on this paper.

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