

IMPIETY AND POLITICAL UNITY: ARISTOTLE, *POLITICS* 1262a25–32

I

In the *Republic*, Plato argues that the communism of women and children will transform what citizens feel for one another. Instead of private households—private families—the city will in a sense be one large family. As a result, citizens will all feel intense familial affection for one another (see *Resp.* 463B–465B). In *Politics* 2.3–4, Aristotle criticizes this communism of women and children. Most of *Politics* 2.3 is devoted to demonstrating that such a communism will not increase affection, but will actually fragment or destroy any already existing affection, thereby creating disunity in the city, the opposite of Plato's intention. At the beginning of *Politics* 2.4, Aristotle claims that the communism of women and children (minus the intended affection) will lead to further problems (*Pol.* 1262a25–32):

ἔτι δὲ καὶ τὰς τοιαύτας δυσχερείας οὐ ῥᾶδιον εὐλαβηθῆναι τοῖς ταύτην κατασκευάζουσι τὴν κοινωνίαν, οἷον αἰκίας καὶ φόνους ἀκουσίους, τοὺς δὲ ἐκούσιους¹ καὶ μάχας καὶ λοιδορίας· ὧν οὐδὲν ὀσιόν ἐστι γίνεσθαι πρὸς πατέρας καὶ μητέρας καὶ τοὺς μὴ πόρρω τῆς συγγενείας ὄντας, ὥσπερ πρὸς τοὺς ἄποθεν· ἀλλὰ καὶ πλεῖον συμβαίνειν ἀναγκαῖον ἀγνοούντων ἢ γνωρίζοντων, καὶ γενομένων τῶν μὲν γνωρίζοντων ἐνδέχεται τὰς νομιζομένας γίνεσθαι λύσεις, τῶν δὲ μηδεμίαν.

And further, for those arranging this community, it is not easy to avoid such difficulties as outrages, involuntary homicides (and voluntary), fights and verbal abuses. None of these is holy when it happens to fathers and mothers and those not remote in kinship, as [distinct] from those who are remote. But these necessarily occur more often among those who are ignorant [of who their relatives are] than among those who are acquainted [with them]. And when they do happen, it is possible, among those who are acquainted [with them], for the customary atonements to be done, but not among those who are not.²

Aristotle's meaning is clear enough: Because citizens will not know who their real (i.e., natural) relatives are, certain impious acts will occur more frequently—violent and abusive acts that are unholy when committed against one's close relatives—and the city will be unable to do anything to expiate these actions. It is, however, a bit more difficult to ascertain the point of this criticism. One view, with a great deal of initial plausibility, is that Aristotle actually believes that certain actions are impious or unholy (in the religious sense), and that much ill would befall the city if the proper remedies were not initiated. Newman, in a note on this passage, seems to support this view.³ But at the end of the note, he leaves open the possibility of another kind of interpretation:

1. The τοὺς δὲ ἐκούσιους is omitted in some MSS.

2. Except where indicated, translations from the Greek are my own.

3. W. L. Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1887), 241. Most scholars working on the *Politics* do not consider this issue. Those that do for the most part follow Newman. For example, Jean Aubonnet, trans. and ed., *Aristote, Politique: Livres I et II* (Paris, 1960), p. 138, n. 9, writes: "Aristote dans la Politique, comme un Hellène ayant les sentiments religieux de son temps et de sa race, ne néglige pas la considération de τὸ ὄσιον." (He cites *Pol.* 1335b25 for support of his view, but this interpretation is incorrect: see n. 6 below.) Cf. Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford, 1983), 124. Most recent works on the *Politics* do not consider this issue at all. One exception, A. W. Saxonhouse, *Fear of Diversity: The Birth of Political Science in Ancient Greek Thought*, (Chicago, 1992), p. 161, n. 6, claims "Aristotle . . . is not so much worried about 'watering down' love as opening up the door for impieties." I will argue for the opposite interpretation: Aristotle is concerned with impiety only to the extent that it undermines political unity.

Indeed, if Bernays is right (*Theophrastos' Schrift über Frömmigkeit*, p. 106), the Peripatetics thought little of expiatory sacrifice, so that Aristotle here may be speaking somewhat exoterically.⁴

That is, Newman admits that it is possible that Aristotle himself did not believe that certain actions were unholy in the religious sense of the term, but instead was arguing solely on the assumption that the citizenry would have such beliefs. This would not be unusual for Aristotle, who often argues dialectically, i.e., from ἔνδοξα, “reputable opinions.”⁵

I should like to present a version of this second type of interpretation—one that takes into account Aristotle's purpose in *Politics* 2.3–4: the criticism of the communism of women and children as a means to the unity of the city. I believe Aristotle wants to show that his own rejection of the communism of women and children can be defended in part by appealing to certain religious ἔνδοξα (namely, those suggesting certain acts are impious and cause pollution). But I do not think Aristotle believes the holy (in the religious sense) is a legitimate moral concept, for he believes that “the gods” do not concern themselves with human beings. He does think, however, that most citizens do believe impiety is a legitimate moral concept, and he believes the fact that they do would diminish the unity of the city.

II

Aristotle rarely uses the term ὅσιον—holy. We find it at *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096a16 and *Politics* 1335b19–26, and in neither case does the term have a necessarily religious meaning.⁶ But in our passage Aristotle refers specifically to “the customary atonements” (τὰς νομιζομένας . . . λύσεις), which suggests that this use of ὅσιον is religious. Acts that were not ὅσιον might bring pollution (μίασμα) to the city, and this pollution had to be removed through purification rites, exile, etc.⁷ This must be what he means by “customary atonements.” And yet this should strike us as

4. Newman is citing Jacob Bernays, *Theophrastos' Schrift über Frömmigkeit* (Berlin, 1866). On Aristotle's exoteric lectures and writings—those open or available to the public, and thus most likely presented with the views of the public in mind—see W. K. C. Guthrie, *Aristotle: An Encounter*, in *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 6: (Cambridge, 1981), 53–59.

5. In the first chapter of the *Topics*, Aristotle writes (100b21–23): ἔνδοξα δὲ τὰ δοκοῦντα πᾶσιν ἢ τοῖς πλείστοις ἢ τοῖς σοφοῖς, καὶ τοῦτοις ἢ πᾶσιν ἢ τοῖς πλείστοις ἢ τοῖς μάλιστα γνωρίμοις καὶ ἐνδόξοις (“Reputable opinions are those that seem so [i.e., reputable] to everyone or to most people or to the wise, i.e., to all of them, or to most, or to the most well-known and reputable”). The *Topics* is a lengthy discussion of dialectical argument, which is (100a19–20): συλλογίζεσθαι περὶ παντὸς τοῦ προτεθέντος προβλήματος ἐξ ἐνδόξα . . . (“to argue from reputable opinions about any problem put forward”). Aristotle believes that it is important, if possible, to demonstrate that what one believes can be reached through an argument that begins with reputable opinions (or at least most of the reputable opinions or the most important of them). (See *Eth. Nic.* 1145b2–6.)

The exact nature of Aristotelian dialectic is a highly controversial issue among Aristotle scholars—one that I cannot begin to touch on here. But see, for example: G. E. L. Owen, “*Tithenai ta phainomena*,” in *Logic, Science and Dialectic: Collected Papers in Greek Philosophy*, ed. by Martha Nussbaum (Ithaca, 1986); T. H. Irwin, *Aristotle's First Principles* (Oxford, 1988); and Robin Smith, “Aristotle on the uses of dialectic,” *Synthese* 96 (1993): 335–58.

6. *Eth. Nic.* 1096a16 says that holiness requires that we honor truth (i.e., that there are no Forms) above our friends (i.e., the Platonists). *Pol.* 1335b25 states that with respect to abortion, what is holy is defined by reference to perception and life. The former sounds more like justice than piety; the latter may be religious, but is not necessarily so. Cf. *Eth. Nic.* 1166b5 and *Pol.* 1253a36, where Aristotle connects unholy or impiety (ἀνοσιουργῶν, ἀνοσιώτατον) with the lack of virtue.

7. For an excellent discussion of this topic, see Parker, *Miasma*. See also Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 75–84. Aristotle does not actually use the term μίασμα in the present passage.

odd, for there was in intellectual circles a move away from the traditional views on pollution, and Aristotle, it seems, was a part of this movement.⁸ For instance, according to the traditional view, a son killing his father was an act which led to pollution (perhaps indelible pollution), no matter what the reasons for the father's death (see, for instance, Soph. *OT* 1182–1530 passim; cf. Aesch. *Eum.* 652–56, and *Sept.* 681–82). Aristotle, however, when discussing the accidental killing of one's father, calls it unfortunate (ἀτυχές), but makes no mention of its unholiness or the need for atonements ([*Mag. Mor.*] 1195a18–22, *Eth. Nic.* 1135a15–30, *Eth. Eud.* II 9). In a different passage, he calls striking one's father unjust, but he does not call it unholy (*Eth. Nic.* 1159b35–1160a7).⁹ What then is the purpose of his religious use of ὅσιον in *Politics* 2.4?

Before answering this question, I should like to look briefly at the *Republic's* account of how such crimes will be avoided. Plato writes (*Resp.* 465A–B; cf. *Ar. Eccl.* 636–43):

καὶ μὴν ὅτι γε νεώτερος πρεσβύτερον, ἢ μὴ ἄρχοντες προσταττώσιν, οὔτε ἄλλο βιάζεσθαι ἐπιχειρήσει ποτὲ οὔτε τύπτειν, ὥς τὸ εἰκός. οἶμαι δ' οὐδὲ ἄλλως ἀτιμάσει· ἱκανῶ γάρ τῷ φύλακε κωλύοντε, δέος τε καὶ αἰδώς, αἰδώς μὲν ὥς γονέων μὴ ἄπτεσθαι εἴργουσα, δέος δὲ τὸ τῷ πάσχοντι τοὺς ἄλλους βοηθεῖν, τοὺς μὲν ὥς υἱεῖς, τοὺς δὲ ὥς ἀδελφοὺς, τοὺς δὲ ὥς πατέρας.

Unless the rulers command it, it is likely that a younger man will never attempt to do violence to or strike an older man. And I don't think he will dishonor an older man in any other way. For there are two sufficient guardians preventing him, fear and shame: shame keeping him from touching his parents, fear that others will help the one who suffers, some as sons, some as brothers, and some as fathers.

This remedy depends on each person actually feeling close familial affection towards his fellow-citizens. But Aristotle believes he has shown that no such affection will exist among the citizens of the best city of the *Republic*. Instead, he takes the actions and attitudes of the average Greek as something of a given (or at the very least it is something that must be taken into consideration). And experience tells us that wherever there is a community of people, there is the chance that arguments, abuse, and fights will occur. This is especially true when men are drinking, and where there are men of all age groups.¹⁰ The possibility even exists among members of the same family, but the situation would be particularly bad in the absence of familial affection.¹¹

Now what exactly is Aristotle up to? It is unlikely that he himself accepts the doctrine of pollution, and yet he thinks that in some way it is problematic. Since he is discussing affection and the unity of the city and how Socratic communism precludes them, he may believe that the communism of women and children, combined with the

8. See A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford, 1960), 102–108, 136–38, and Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame* (London, 1980), 289, 292–93.

9. Although I claim Aristotle does not accept the traditional view of pollution, I do not mean to suggest that he did not, for example, regard the killing of one's father (even involuntarily) as especially horrible—more horrible than killing a stranger. To this extent his views are similar to the traditional religious ones.

10. See Antiphon, *Third Tetralogy* 3.2 and 4.2, where the topic is a youth who has killed an older man in a drunken brawl. See also Arist. [*Pr.*] 3.2 and 3.27, where drunkenness is tied to poor judgment and troublemaking.

11. For some examples of improper actions committed against family members, see K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford, 1974), 187, 248, 273–75.

ordinary Greek's view of impiety and pollution, somehow leads to a decrease in unity or affection.

According to Aristotle, the violent impious acts mentioned at 1262a25 would occur in the best city of the *Republic*, even with its communism of women and children. In addition, there would be a sense among the people that impious crimes had been committed without the city knowing it, in which case there would exist pollution that had not been removed (either through purification rites, or penalties of exile or death). Adkins writes that the belief in pollution

is not a belief restricted to tragedy or legend; belief in "pollution" and its consequences is an everyday feature of life even in Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries: a belief which does not belong merely to some hypersensitive priestly class, but is part of the outlook of the "ordinary Athenian."¹²

Aristotle's account depends on this outlook. What effect might it have on a city? Aristotle does not tell us, but sober speculation is possible.

There are, I believe, two factors involved in the so-called ordinary Athenian's view of the failure to atone for impious acts that, when combined with the communism of women and children, would not be conducive to a city's unity: fear and shame. Fear of the pollution brought about by all types of impious acts will be felt. Men will become suspicious of their neighbors, fearing that by eating at the same table with some person, for example, they might inadvertently become polluted too: The man sitting next to me struck someone last week who might have been his father.¹³ And there is also the fear they will feel for the fate of their city—a city that may be doomed for its failure to atone for an impious act.¹⁴ In the case of shame, the seat of the emotion is in the person who might be polluted. For example, the morning after the night of a drunken brawl with an older man, a young man wakes and reflects on what he may have done, i.e., he may have struck his own father. As a result, he is ashamed to come face to face with other men. Oedipus says that he will not be able to look at his parents when he gets to Hades (Soph. *OT* 1371–74), and a line from Agathon states that "When I consider that I am doing wrong I am ashamed to look my friends in the face" (Nauck, frag. 22).¹⁵

III

If my account of *Politics* 1262a25–32 is correct, then Aristotle's point need not be that these acts will actually pollute the city and, for example, bring about famine. Instead he might be saying that given the views of the average Greek, there will be

12. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, 89. See Parker, *Miasma*, 24. On pollution and its expiation, see Parker, *passim*, and Adkins, 86–87, 92.

13. See Parker (*Miasma*, 10) who writes, "religious danger is almost always potentially communal in Greece."

14. On fear, pollution, and the ill effects of pollution on man, see Parker, *Miasma*, 318. With particular reference to the family, see pp. 122–24, 133, 205. On pollution and its danger to the city, see pp. 128–30, 257–80, and consider the following passage from Herodotus, 6.139: "After the Pelasgians killed the [Athenian] children and women [i.e., the Athenian women they kidnapped, and the children these women gave birth to in captivity], the land did not bear fruit, and the [Pelasgian] women and flocks did not give birth as they did before." (Cf. Soph., *OT* 23–30, 97–102, 236–43.)

15. Translation from Dover, *Greek Popular Morality*, 236. (Cf. Xen. *Mem.* 2.2.14.) On the general misery and separation from others that follows being polluted, see Eur., *Her.* 1279–1302.

an overabundance of fear and shame in Plato's best city; and the offspring of fear and shame—distrust and alienation—will greatly preclude unity and affection.

Although it may be impossible to go beyond speculation on this issue, there are two advantages to my position. First, Aristotle's criticism at *Politics* 1262a25–35 is no longer a marginal point tossed at Plato in passing. Instead it becomes part of the broader project in *Politics* 2.3–4, namely, to show that the communism of women and children does not produce unity (as Plato claims) but actually reduces it.¹⁶ Second, my interpretation is more consistent with what Aristotle says elsewhere about religion.

Aristotle does not believe in the traditional Greek gods. He uses the term “god” (θεός) to refer to parts of the world like the Prime Mover and celestial bodies (*Metaph.* Λ and *Ph.* 8). He even calls the elements gods (*Gen. Corr.* 333b19–21). The truths of philosophy, however, will not be grasped or believed by everyone. Most people hold the traditional beliefs about the gods¹⁷ (see *Poet.* 1460b35–1461a1, *Cae.* 284a4–23, *Pol.* 1314b38–1315a4) and these traditional beliefs are important (*Metaph.* 1074b1–5):

παραδέδοται δὲ παρὰ τῶν ἀρχαίων καὶ παμπάλαιων ἐν μύθου σχήματι καταλειμμένα τοῖς ὑστερον ὅτι θεοὶ τέ εἰσιν οὗτοι καὶ περιέχει τὸ θεῖον τὴν ὅλην φύσιν. τὰ δὲ λοιπὰ μυθικῶς ἤδη προσῆκται πρὸς τὴν πειθῶ τῶν πολλῶν καὶ πρὸς τὴν εἰς τοὺς νόμους καὶ τὸ συμφέρον χρῆσιν. . . .

From the most ancient times it has been handed down to posterity, in the form of a myth, that these [i.e., the unmoved movers] are gods and that the divine embraces [or encloses] the whole of nature. The rest was added later in mythical form with a view to the persuasion of the many and with a view to its legal and beneficial use.

The city's attitude toward religion must take into consideration—be shaped by—what most men actually think, even if their beliefs are not true. Fortunately, the city can use these beliefs to its own advantage. This is why, even in the best city of the *Politics*, there are priests and temples devoted not to the Prime Mover, but to the traditional gods.¹⁸ Usually belief in the divine can be used to improve civic virtue and habituate citizens toward proper action. In the case of impiety, however, I do not think Aristotle is concerned with the promotion of inherently proper civic behavior. His point is that it must be recognized that citizens will have strong beliefs about what is and is not unholy, and the failure to construct a constitution accordingly could undermine the city's unity.¹⁹

16. Aristotle's criticism is perhaps best characterized as a dialectical argument which functions as an aid (συνεργόν) in answering some other question (see *Top.* 104b1–11), in this case, Is the communism of women and children a proper political arrangement? This kind of argument from ἐνδοξα (here, that certain acts are impious and cause pollution) does not establish the claim that the communism of women and children is improper, but supports it.

17. See W. R. Connor, “‘Sacred’ and ‘Secular’: ἱερὰ καὶ ὅσια and the Classical Athenian Concept of the State,” *AncSoc* 19 (1988): 171–85. On p. 184 he writes: “Popular attitudes were likely to be strongly in favor of the view that sacrifices and worship of the gods were essential for civic well being.”

18. *Pol.* 1328b12–13, 1329a27–34, 1330a13, 1331a24, 1335b15, 1336b16; cf. 1299a17, 1322b8–22.

19. I have left unanswered the question: Is Aristotle's criticism of Plato on the issue of impiety and political unity successful? As I see it, an affirmative answer to this question depends on an affirmative response to two other questions: (1) Does Aristotle, in the other parts of *Politics* 2.3–4, succeed in showing that the communism of women and children is improper and/or impractical? (2) Is it wrong for Plato to present his picture of the best city without concern for what the average Athenian might think? I think the answer to the first question is “yes” and to the second “no.” But to defend this would take me beyond the scope of this essay.

According to Aristotle, Plato in the *Republic* (at least when describing the communism of women and children) forgets the tenacity of traditional religious views.²⁰ In Plato's best city, there will still be murders, abuse, fights, etc. The communism of women and children, Aristotle argues in *Politics* 2.3–4, will not make a city one big, happy family. And since the citizens of this city will not know who their real family members are, their religious views (which will surely be the traditional ones), combined with these "impious" actions, will produce fear and shame—and thus distrust and alienation—thereby undercutting the unity of the city.²¹

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20. In the *Laws*, a later dialogue generally regarded as less utopian than the *Republic*, Plato does seem to take traditional religious views into consideration. See *Laws* 868b–869e, 871a–d, and Trevor J. Saunders, *Plato's Penal Code: Tradition, Controversy, and Reform in Greek Penology* (Oxford, 1991), 301–4.

21. I should like to thank Alfonso Gomez-Lobo, Henry Richardson, Gerald Mara, and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments and criticisms. Any remaining errors are my own.

THE SIMILE OF THE *TALUS* IN CICERO, *DE FINIBUS* 3.54

In his discussion of the Stoic doctrine of things indifferent and preferred, Cicero has Cato use a simile involving the *talus*, one of the Roman forms of dice. The Romans had two forms of dice, and a game involving either was called an *alea*. The *tessera* was a cube bearing different marks on each side, as does our modern die, and it was thrown in threes. The other form of die was the *talus*, or knucklebone. The original *talus* was the knucklebone of certain animals, and later was made of other material in the same general shape, like the Greek ἀστράγαλος. The *talus* was rounded or pointed on its two ends, which were unmarked, and marked on the remaining four sides, of which two were apparently wider than the other two. The wider two sides bore the numbers three and four; the narrower two sides bore the numbers one and six. The *tali* were thrown in groups of four. The best throw, called a *Venus*,¹ revealed four different numbers; the worst throw, four of the same. But the point of the simile for Cicero's purposes concerns the shape of the *talus*, not the rules of the game itself. The simile is as follows:

... ut enim, inquit, si hoc fingamus esse quasi finem et ultimum, ita iacere talum, ut rectus assistat—qui ita talus erit iactus ut cadat rectus praepositum quiddam habebit ad finem, qui aliter, contra, neque tamen illa praepositio tali ad eum, quem dixi, finem pertinebit, sic ea quae sunt praeposita, referuntur illa quidem ad finem, sed ad eius vim naturamque nihil pertinent.²

... for it is, they say, as if we imagine that we have, as it were, the goal and end to throw the die so that it stands upright—and thus the die which will have been thrown so as to fall upright will have a certain preferred inclination towards that end; and the die thrown otherwise will have an inclination against that particular end; but nevertheless the preferred inclination of the die will not pertain at all to the stated goal of standing upright.

1. OLD, s.v. "Venus," 2b.

2. The punctuation of this passage follows that of M. R. Wright in her 1991 edition (Warminster).