

Introduction

Many philosophers are willing to entertain the possibility that Aristotle's moral psychology and ethics have some contemporary relevance, but it is rarer to find those who think that Aristotle's ancient theories of governance and the organization of political power could inform our current condition in any meaningful way. After all, modern political communities are highly pluralistic, fractious, and incredibly complicated; Aristotle, by contrast, could only ponder constitutions appropriate for hopelessly small cities that were simple, homogeneous, and aspired to quasi-organic levels of organization. The difference between these two views is not merely that modern thinkers discuss conflict more than the ancients, or that modern thinkers understand political society as a response to a basic condition of chaos and lawlessness while Aristotle sees political society as a response to the human wish for friendship and higher activities of virtue. Rather, the claim is that only modern philosophers are willing to *accept* that there will always be splits and distinctions *within* the social and political orders of the community itself that need to be theorized:

The peculiarly modern distinctions which began to emerge with Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) between state and society, specialized officials and citizens, 'the people' and government, are not part of the political philosophy of the Athenian city-state. For this city-state celebrated the notion of an active, involved citizenry in a process of self-government; the governors were to be the governed.¹

On this reading, there is something "peculiarly modern" about recognizing the divisions among citizens that arise from intractable debates, zero-sum decisions requiring winners and losers, and the difficult question of who

among them should rule and be ruled. Ancient political philosophers simply theorized different ways of governing for some ultimate goal, so they could only explore the contrast between governing for the sake of the common good (the correct end which would unify the city) and governing for the sake of self-interest (the incorrect end which would divide the city). Ancient philosophers did not have to *reconcile* themselves to ineliminable disunities built into the fabric of political life itself, for they could always interpret such conflicts as mere symptoms of bad governance. So it is that we find contemporary philosophers stating that “conflict, social and psychological, was the great evil for Plato and Aristotle”² and claiming that these ancient thinkers trace all conflict to imperfection:

Both Plato and Aristotle treat conflict as an evil and Aristotle treats it as an eliminable evil. The virtues are all in harmony with each other and the harmony of individual character is reproduced in the harmony of the state. Civil war is the worst of evils. For Aristotle, as for Plato, the good life for man is itself single and unitary, compounded of a hierarchy of goods. It follows that conflict is simply the result either of flaws of character in individuals or of unintelligent political arrangements.³

The ancient world featured small, quasi-natural holistic communities that, when successful, could aspire to familylike levels of unity. Plato and Aristotle, wedded to notions of psychic and civic harmony, were unable to think their way beyond such norms of the ancient city life, so there was no way for them to conceptualize conflict as anything other than the “great evil” of political life.

The first motivation for writing this book was to raise the hue and cry against such interpretations that would rob ancient political philosophy, and *especially* Aristotle’s political thought, of the subject of conflict. Setting aside the odd suggestion that ancient political lives were somehow simpler than the lives we are living now, as well as the highly problematic assumption that Aristotle’s attitude toward conflict was similar to that of Plato, I hope to show in this book that it is deeply misleading to suggest that Aristotle embraced a political philosophy that uncritically aspired to civic holism or to suggest that he failed to appreciate that differences and conflicts among citizens might be caused by something other than bad governance. It is certainly true that Aristotle understands conflicts such as civil war, partisanship, and deep distrust of the constitution as being antithetical to the best sorts

of political environments. It is also true that Aristotle made great efforts to develop proposals for how communities could eliminate, or at least manage, such disunity. But such regrettable problems, I shall argue, are not the only types of conflicts we find Aristotle attributing to political communities. He accepts and commends both disagreement and competition among the best sorts of citizens living in the best sorts of cities.

This brings me to my second motivation in writing this book. There have been other scholars who, like me, believe that Aristotle's conception of political conflict deserves attention. I hope to offer an interpretation that reframes and systematizes Aristotle's understanding of this subject in a way that has not before been attempted. Let me here briefly offer a summary of how my work fits into this broader scholarly context.

Nicholas White, in *Individual and Conflict in Greek Ethics*, does a fine job exposing the absurdity of interpretations that assimilate Aristotle's work to those political theories that portray an ideal community as a giant piece of clockwork or a group mind-meld. But most of White's attention is devoted to Aristotle's understanding of what White takes to be conflicting moral imperatives to lead the life of the politician and to lead the life of the philosopher. Even setting aside my own doubts that Aristotle recognizes what we call "moral imperatives," it seems to me that White focuses too much of his discussion on the deliberative conflict within each individual as he or she engages in decision making. Though the topic of deliberation bears upon the issue of political dispute, White never explores whether *intrapersonal* deliberative conflict might or might not promote *interpersonal* political conflict. These two, I will argue, are not identical, and the latter demands separate treatment.

By contrast, Robert Mayhew's *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's Republic* does offer an analysis of political, interpersonal conflict. However, though I am convinced by this excellent piece of scholarship, the approach taken in this work is almost exclusively a *via negatvia*. Mayhew unpacks Aristotle's arguments for the claims that cities are not metaphysically unified in the way Plato believed, that Plato was wrong to promote intensely high levels of civic affection, and that Plato made a mistake to endorse any scheme that would collectivize property. In all these ways, we are shown why Aristotle does not support promoting Platonic unity. But one is then left wondering how Aristotle himself thinks of the possibility of conflict on its own terms. Does anti-Platonic disunity always have the same shape and form? What causes it? Is conflict one sort of event that happens for one sort of reason? Does Aristotle think of such conflict, even if inevitable, as still regrettable? Why or why not? These are the sorts of questions my project attempts to answer.

Another work that directly addresses communal conflict is Bernard Yack's intriguing *Problems of a Political Animal: Community, Justice, and Conflict in Aristotelian Political Thought*. This book does have a goal with which I am sympathetic: it aims to critique those who interpret Aristotle as embracing a conflict-free political ideal. Unfortunately, Yack relies on the worrisome argumentative strategy of explaining political conflict as the by-product of an absence of applicable philosophical theory. Chapter by chapter, his tactic is to show that substantive notions like nature, justice, and friendship do not undergird Aristotle's theories of political order as they have traditionally been understood to do. Yack adopts an antifoundational approach, believing that the only way to make room for political conflict in an Aristotelian city is by arguing that Aristotle denies the existence of extralegal stars by which rulers should guide the ship of state.

While Eugene Garver does not embrace an antifoundational reading, his *Aristotle's Politics: Living Well and Living Together* nevertheless offers something like a Yackian account of conflict's origins. On Garver's reading, there are many nonnatural constitutional forms (and associated principles of justice) by which average humans order their civic lives, but there is no clear way to pick the best among these forms since none directly embody the natural, normative *telos* of human flourishing. So, while Garver believes that there are, as it were, extralegal stars beyond the ship of state, he does not think that this fact solves the artificial problem of how the crew should be organized. This explanatory gap is *the* source of political difficulties, diversity, disputes, and contest.

In her work *A Democracy of Distinction* Jill Frank argues for an interesting variation on this theme. Like Yack and Garver, Frank thinks there is a role for conflict in Aristotelian political thought, and, like them, she believes that conflict cannot be suppressed by virtuous decision makers turning to fixed normative notions for guidance. What is different, however, is that Frank traces the origin of conflict back to unique differences among individual agents. On her reading, it is the fact of ineradicable individual diversity that, when handled poorly, leads to political conflict. It is also this fundamental fact that, when handled well, allows for genuine harmony—what Frank calls “a unity of the different.” Such harmony is achieved by agents virtuously seeking a mutual advantage that, though it never erases primordial diversity (and the associated threat of conflict), nevertheless makes civic friendship possible. Thus, for Frank, while the inapplicability of “essentialist” substantive norms does not by itself condemn agents to

endless struggle, it nevertheless keeps civic agents on perpetual notice: the conflict born of individual diversity is a haunting presence that can always erupt if the harmonizing work of politics ceases to be done.

Interestingly, the two most recent books that focus directly on the subject of Aristotelian political conflict tacitly accept this inapplicability theory of conflict's origins but argue that Aristotle *does* take substantive concepts of justice, friendship, and nature to apply to political life and virtuous decision making. As a result, both end up portraying Aristotle's ideal community as utterly conflict-free. Kostas Kalimtzis's *Aristotle on Political Enmity and Disease* and Ronald Weed's *Aristotle on Stasis: A Moral Psychology of Political Conflict* portray conflict as the absence of teleology—they portray conflict as that which falls beyond substantive notions captured by theoretical reason. It is then no surprise that both Kalimtzis and Weed cast political conflict in the role of a corrosive, anticomunal agent. For them, political conflict is analogous to disease, and they conclude that Aristotle's normative commitments are implacably opposed to conflict *tout court*.

In this book, I reject the view that political conflict is incompatible with traditional Aristotelian ethical notions because it avoids the assumption made by these scholars that political conflict is one sort of problem to be accounted for by one sort of *explanans*. Aristotle has quite different theories of, and divergent explanations for, civil war, partisanship, constitutional mistrust, legal and political dispute, and political competition. These do not represent different points on a continuous spectrum of “troubles” or “dissensus”; rather, they designate distinct activities. As a result, because conflict is not of one kind, and because different sorts of conflicts can happen for different sorts of reasons, it turns out there is also no need to think that Aristotle adopted one normative attitude toward conflict *per se*. On my reading, he believes that legal and political disputes should be taking place in the best sorts of cities; he celebrates political competition; and neither of these positive endorsements is at odds with his uncompromisingly critical assessment of partisanship, rebelliousness, and outright civil war. So we need not make any sort of concession to any version of antifoundationalism for we need not admit that conflict can only enter an Aristotelian city when there are no theoretical stars by which the ship of state can be guided. Nor do we need to concede that Aristotle could allow conflict into his political theory only by accepting some dark, pessimistic truth that there is an ineradicable degree of contagionlike civil war infecting every city. On the contrary, I hope to show that for Aristotle some

types of conflict are part and parcel of how human beings undertake fully flourishing political lives, while others are different in kind and antithetical to the common good of the city.

Recognizing what we might therefore call the “multivocality of conflict” not only saves us from erroneously attributing to Aristotle either a conflict-free ideal or unstructured agonism, but also brings into view an interesting similarity between Aristotle’s approach to politics and that of recent theorists.

Over the last half-century, Aristotle has featured in many familiar debates over which fundamental values should take priority in guiding the basic commitments of contemporary political institutions. Whether the value being championed is liberty, equality, or community (or some version or combination of these), Aristotle is often cited, by both admirers and critics, as someone whose thought can help us appreciate what such commitments would render, or fail to achieve, in any given society. For those who believe that Aristotle can serve some role in current thought, the debate about the priority of political value naturally leads to attempts to show that Aristotle can aid in our comprehension of liberalism, republicanism, egalitarianism, or communitarianism.

The third motivation I had for writing this book was to show that Aristotle has the potential to play a role in a very different kind of contemporary political debate: namely, that over the meaning and nature of democracy. Once we appreciate how Aristotle understands conflict in community, I believe a number of interesting parallels between his approach to political philosophy and that of twentieth-century “leadership” models of democracy come into focus.

Organizing Principles and Chapter Content

There are three goals on behalf of which this book is *not* organized. First, there are already several works that provide excellent overviews of Aristotle’s political thought, and it is not my goal to add another. If the reader is looking to get a grasp of the totality of Aristotle’s political philosophy, I recommend Richard Kraut’s *Aristotle: Political Philosophy*; Fred Miller’s *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle’s Politics*; Richard Mulgan’s *Aristotle’s Political Theory*; and Peter Simpson’s *Philosophical Commentary on the Politics of Aristotle*. The arguments I advance here deal with many overarching themes, but the reader should be warned that I make no attempt at being synoptic. This book is an analysis of the specific subject of conflict in Aristotle’s ethical

and political thought, followed by a brief discussion of the significance this subject has for his contemporary relevance. This book is not intended to be a general summary or running commentary.

Second, by titling this book *Conflict in Aristotle's Political Philosophy*, I do not mean to promise an analysis of one specific Greek word that could plausibly be translated as “conflict,” along with a philological discussion of that word and how it shows up in Aristotle’s political texts. As my first chapter will make clear, such an approach would not serve my purposes well since my overarching argument is in support of the conclusion that Aristotle never conceived of intracity conflicts as taking one form. To the extent that this argument has merit, there is no reason to assume that tracking any given word would successfully illuminate all the dimensions of civic conflict. Besides, even if Aristotle had used only one conflict word, his penchant for using the same word in stricter and looser ways would still necessitate the sort of investigation that I am here undertaking—there would still be a need to develop convincing interpretive arguments about which sort of event, exactly, Aristotle had in mind when using a conflict-related word in this or that particular passage.

In fact, there are many places in the texts where Aristotle describes civic struggle without even using conflict words. Consider the following statement: “This results in a city coming into being that is made up of slaves and masters, rather than free people: the one group full of envy and the other full of arrogance. Nothing is further removed from a friendship and a community that is political” (*Pol.* IV.11 1295b21–24).⁴ Or consider this example: “[W]hen [a great-souled person] meets people with good fortune or a reputation for worth, he displays his greatness . . . since superiority over them is difficult and impressive . . . and there is nothing ignoble in trying to be impressive with them” (*NE* IV.3 1124b18–22). In the first passage, Aristotle is describing the incredibly dangerous condition of unmitigated partisan opposition, and in the second passage he portrays a kind of high-minded one-ups-manship. Both passages involve humans who are at odds with one another in some way, but neither passage deploys any obvious conflict-related word such as “war” [*polemos*], “to revolutionize” [*neoterizein*], “battle” [*machē*], “faction” [*stasis*], “dispute” [*amphisbētēsis*], “rivalry” [*hamilla*], or “contest” [*agōn*]. While sensitive to language, my project is one of political philosophy rather than philology, and for that end I have done my best to offer arguments about how best to interpret Aristotle wherever he describes how, or implies that, political animals are not unified in some way.

Finally, while it is true that this book concludes with a discussion of how the subject of conflict sheds light on some similarities between Aristotelian political thought and contemporary democratic theory, readers should not assume that I have organized this entire project around the single interpretive goal of ensuring Aristotle's relevance. This book does not begin by adopting the outlook of a particular contemporary political theory, and then test, chapter by chapter, the degree to which aspects of that modern view can be discovered in Aristotelian texts. On the contrary, in the first two parts of my book, I attempt to set out the geography of Aristotelian political conflict, independently of any given contemporary concern. Part I is an analysis of Aristotle's treatment of the unfortunate and regrettable conflicts that plague sub-standard cities, and part II offers an investigation of the conflict that Aristotle believes would take place in even the best imaginable political community. It is only in part III, after sketching portraits of a number of different constitutional and democratic theories, that I argue that Aristotle's multivocal understanding of conflict shows his political philosophy to be more similar to one of these than others.

As far as specific content is concerned, each of the three parts of my book is preceded by a short prelude that explains the motivation for, and offers an outline of, the topics to be discussed. However, for those readers who may be more interested in one specific topic rather than the book as a whole, or even one part of the book, a brief overview of each of the chapters follows.

In chapter 1, "*Stasis* as Civil War," I argue that Aristotle does not use the word "*stasis*" (variously translated as "civil war," "faction," "sedition," etc.) to refer to *all* sorts of conflict, encompassing everything from the competition of neighbors to the bloodiest of battles. On the contrary, *stasis* specifically means "civil war." Showing that Aristotle narrowly delimits the meaning of the term is important for my argument because it blocks any assumption we might make that his admonitions against *stasis* are signs of some general, negative attitude toward conflict per se.

Chapter 2, "The Unique Problem of Partisanship," explores Aristotle's unflinching criticism of democrats and oligarchs and the origin of his belief that these two groups will be implacably locked in hostile opposition toward one another. The key to understanding Aristotle's negative view, I argue, can be found by appreciating the extraordinary precision with which he constructs their partisan political identities. Democrats and oligarchs are defined by no fewer than the four distinct elements of (1) an incorrect theory of justice, (2) an emotional defect, and (3) a very specific intellectual fallacy—all of

which are then reinforced by (4) a misguided theory of happiness. Recognizing who Aristotle takes these partisans to be and appreciating how narrowly he defines them allows us to understand why he essentially banishes them from the best possible city and why this banishment still leaves plenty of room for other sorts of disunity among model citizens.

Chapter 3, “Managing Mistrust in Average Cities,” examines Aristotle’s conception of the conflict produced by the long-term causes of civil war before any fighting actually takes place. This kind of conflict, which results from inhabitants becoming increasingly mistrustful of the constitutional order and the associated responses rulers take to manage it, has many different forms in different kinds of constitution. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s portrait makes it quite clear that this sort of tension, though highly variegated, is an affliction of average cities that involves either rulers or ruled who lack virtue. Constitutional mistrust is not the sort of problem the best sort of city would have to bear or manage.

Chapter 4, “Dispute and Disagreement,” turns away from the unfortunate conflicts of suboptimal political life and examines conflicts of which, I believe, Aristotle approves. Even people of perfect human virtue can have serious and intractable disagreements with one another. I argue that Aristotle anticipates such disputes occurring within political institutions of the best kind of city and that he in no way interprets such disagreement as a failure, shortcoming, or even limitation. Rather than any concession to a pessimistic “realism,” Aristotle approves of debates as being the very fabric of joint deliberation among human beings, and he thinks of joining such a dispute as a rather noble undertaking that constitutes virtuous participation in the practical action of a community.

Chapter 5, “Contending for Civic Flourishing,” takes up the subject of competition. Disagreeing with fellow citizens is something quite different from being competitive with them, and while some readers might admit that intractable epistemological challenges will persist in even the best cities, fewer may grant that political competition will remain as a city becomes better. Yet I argue that this is indeed how Aristotle thinks of civic life. I argue that in his “city of our prayers” there are four types of competition that actually *increase* as civic conditions improve: (1) traditional “competitive outlays” in which citizens strive to out-do one another with their civic contributions, (2) competitions among citizens for high offices, (3) competitions to see which proposal made in the deliberative assembly is best, and even (4) competitions among deliberators themselves to make the winning proposal that sets the *polis* on a path toward flourishing.

Chapter 6, “Conflict and Constitutionalism,” offers an initial attempt to investigate whether Aristotle’s understanding of conflict resembles that which is recognized in familiar modern political theories. Given that Aristotle develops such a detailed set of recommendations for how cities can best handle distrust to prevent open rebellion, it is reasonable to wonder whether Aristotle’s philosophy anticipates the most famous modern political theory of conflict management: constitutionalism. Unlike those who believe Aristotle was too Pollyannaish to even be aware of such possibilities, I argue that Aristotle’s theory of conflict shows that he actually entertained notions that are strikingly similar to the ideas that later became known as rule by law, limited government, balanced powers, and even separated powers. However, while he was aware of such possibilities and their appeal, I conclude that Aristotle was not convinced that such tactics could ultimately prevent civil war. Though he recognizes the sorts of conflict to which constitutionalism is a plausible response, Aristotle’s conception of the causes of conflict leads him to embrace a political philosophy considerably different from that of constitutionalists.

In chapter 7, “Conflict and Democratic Theory,” I argue that it is a strand of twentieth-century democratic theory that is most similar to Aristotle’s approach. After a brief overview of major models used to theorize contemporary democracy—democracy as self-government of the people, deliberative democracy, agonism, and interest pluralism—I draw the conclusion that Aristotle’s treatment of conflict is most similar to that portrayed in the democratic theory known as “plebiscitarianism” or “leadership democracy.”