The Politics of Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato’s Republic

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1 Introduction

Aristotle’s critical review of Plato’s Republic and Laws in Politics 2, as well as his criticism of other constitutions in the same book, has had a mixed reception. Franz Susemihl and Robert Hicks say that Aristotle’s “attack upon the polity of pure reason, as it claims to be, in Plato’s Republic ranks among the most successful parts of the whole work,” while Julia Annas describes it as “surprisingly crass and literal-minded, much below Aristotle’s best.” In the same vein some scholars have accused Aristotle of failure to engage Plato in a fair way or even to understand Plato at all, while others have defended his criticisms as largely or completely justified. In this paper I will not offer a systematic interpretation of the content of Aristotle’s criticism, since neither the content of the criticism nor the questions concerning its validity will be my focus. Instead I will concentrate on some of the peculiar features of Aristotle’s discussions, features that could well be called polemical. These features include Aristotle’s several rather sharp or ironic remarks about Socrates and his project in the Republic, his use of rhetorical questions, and his tendency to bring out the most extreme consequences of Socrates’s theory (such as that it will destroy the polis and that it will lead to incestuous relationships). As I will argue, some of these polemical features result from the special character of Socrates’s theory, and some play a crucial role in Aristotle’s argument in that they are consciously aimed

1 Susemihl and Hicks, The Politics of Aristotle, 32.
2 Annas, An Introduction to Plato’s Republic, 188.
3 Surprisingly, this view is expressed by Susemihl and Hicks, The Politics of Aristotle, 215. Saunders, Aristotle: Politics i and ii, often complains that Aristotle’s arguments “hardly go home” (109). Perhaps the most negative treatment of Aristotle’s criticism can be found in Bornemann, “Aristoteles’ Urteil über Platons politische Theorie.” A largely negative, but very insightful, treatment of Aristotle’s criticism of communal property (and defense of private property) can be found in Irwin, “Aristotle’s Defense of Private Property,” as well as in Barnes, “Aristotle and Political Liberty.” For a different view, see Mayhew, “Aristotle on Property.”
4 The positive treatments of Aristotle are mostly found in more recent scholarship: Simpson, A Philosophical Commentary; Stalley, “Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato’s Republic”; and especially, Mayhew, Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato’s Republic.
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at countering the attractive force of Socrates’s image of the ideal city, which appeals to readers over and above its theoretical, purely rational credentials.

There is no doubt that there is something distinctly peritton (odd)\(^5\) about the second book of Aristotle’s Politics, especially regarding his discussion of Plato’s views in chapters 2–6. The book begins with what appears to be the standard way in which Aristotle introduces critical examinations of the theories or opinions of his predecessors.\(^6\) He tells us that as a part of the study of the best political community (politikē koinōnia), one must also examine (episkepsasthai) other constitutions (politeiai) to discover what, if anything, is correct and useful about them. In particular one has to look at constitutions that have already received some approval and are thought to be well designed (kalōs echein). These involve both constitutions that are already in use in states thought to have good laws and those that, although not in actual use, were proposed in theory. Aristotle then discusses four theoretical constitutions (Plato’s in the Republic and the Laws, Phaleas’s of Chalcedon, and Hippodamus’s of Miletus) along with three actual constitutions (Spartan, Cretan, and Carthaginian).

The first odd feature of the discussion comes at the end of this introduction. It features what Aquinas calls an apology (excusatio)\(^7\) for the critical examination. Aristotle tells us that we must review other constitutions not only in order to find out what is correct and useful about them but

\(^5\) The adjective peritton (odd) occurs four times in Pol. 2. First, at Pol. 2.3, 1261b29, it is mentioned by Aristotle as one example of words that are ambiguous and “give rise to contentious [eristikoi] arguments.” Here peritton has the value-neutral meaning of “odd” (as, in “odd numbers”). This is clear from its juxtaposition with “even” (artion). Second, at 1265a1, Aristotle uses it to describe Socratic dialogues, this time in the positive sense of “extraordinary.” Third, at 1267b24, it is used (in comparative) to describe Hippodamus’s lifestyle (bios), now in its negative meaning of “excessive” or “extreme.” Last, at 1272b25, it is used to describe (positively) the way in which Carthaginians govern themselves as being extraordinary in comparison to others. The inherent ambiguity of the word enables Aristotle to use it for expressing both admiration and contempt. These are also the two attitudes that commentators tend to take toward Pol. 2.

\(^6\) The introduction is understood as the first part of Aristotle’s standard dialectical procedure by a number of interpreters, including Susemihl and Hicks, The Politics of Aristotle, ad loc.; Stalley, “Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato’s Republic,” 183; or Mráz, “Die Kritik an Platons Politeia im II. Buch von Aristoteles’ Politik,” 80.

\(^7\) This is Aquinas’s comment: “Deinde cum dicit adhuc autem quaerere etc., excusat proprium intentionem; et dicit quod non oportet alicui videri quod hoc ipsum quod est quaerere aliquid aliud in ordinationibus civilitatum, praeter ea quae ab aliis dicta sunt, procedat ex hoc quod ipse (velit) sophizare, id est suam sapientiam ostentare: sed ideo inteserit hanc artem, quia ea quae ab aliis dicta sunt, in multis videntur non bene se habere” (T. Aquinas, Sententia Libri Politicorum, lib. 2 l. 1 n. 3).