REVIEW ARTICLE
SCEPTICISM ABOUT A SCEPTICAL ARISTOTLE

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In her provocative and wide-ranging book Aristotle and the Rediscovery of Citizenship Susan Collins continues an exploration of the tension between the good of the individual and the good of state first begun with her translations (together with Devin Stauffer) of Plato’s Menexenus and Pericles’ funeral oration. The stated reason for her latest, Aristotelian, investigation is to search for answers to questions which contemporary liberalism cannot answer, or does not want to answer, concerning the demands the state makes of its citizens. Liberalism claims to allow each individual to define and pursue her own conception of the good, but what is presented as a freedom is in some sense a necessity that applies to all citizens. Somewhat paradoxically, justice and tolerance are required of all, and the primacy of the individual is itself an injunction of the state. The emphasis on individual liberty conceals the influence of the state and makes critical examination of liberalism itself difficult. How, for example, can liberalism argue that it is a better form of political organization than others, when it appears to concede all choices to the individual? (pp. 38–9). Bringing the presuppositions of the liberal state into view involves two fundamental issues: the relationship between the right and the good, and between the virtue of the citizen and the individual. We might be benefited in these explorations by looking to thinkers outside the liberal tradition. Thus, Collins claims, ‘it is precisely because Aristotle does not share liberal presuppositions that his thought becomes useful to us’ (p. 166, cf. pp. 2, 40) in solving the problem of individual freedom and political authority, for Aristotle’s political philosophy readily admits that regimes educate their citizens, whether explicitly or not, and so must tackle the issue of whether the life espoused by the state is in the true interest of the individual. In this way, then, liberalism might learn, not how to justify itself, but about the contours the discussion will take.

Collins takes the Nicomachean Ethics (NE) and the Politics (Pol.) to include an extended discussion of these problems. Collins has Aristotle move from the moral virtues (NE Books 2, 3 and 4) to justice (NE 5) to the founding of the polis (Pol. 1) to the debate over the good of the polis (Pol. 7.1–3) to the debate over authority (Pol. 3) to the life of leisure (Pol. 7–8) as illustrated by

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one of ‘social’ moral virtues (in *NE* 4) in a discernible order (except perhaps for the return to the *Nicomachean Ethics* at the end) as problems in one topic necessitate discussion of the next.

Chapter 2 posits a ‘dual meaning’ to the nobility that the political community espouses for its citizens. On the one hand, it is noble to benefit the community, as this involves personal sacrifice. (This is first said of courage (p. 53) and then of liberality, where Collins describes the liberal person’s giving and spending as a ‘loss’ (p. 58).) But that the city establishes honours for brave and generous deeds points the way to bravery and generosity for their own sakes, and this love of virtue is dangerous to the city because ‘the courageous man may seek to prove his virtue in less than politically prudent ways’ (p. 56) while the generous man might be led to tyranny (pp. 59, 64), in order to gain the means necessary for his good works.

Collins next (Ch. 3) moves to magnanimity and more particularly to justice as the virtues which offer a potential resolution of the tension between virtue as the good of the polis and virtue as the good of the individual. Justice, both general and particular, Collins claims, has its orientation toward others. As such, it places limits on the unrestrained exercise of virtue. However, our hopes for a resolution are unfulfilled, for the mean demanded by justice is given by law, which promotes moral virtue with its dual meaning. It espouses the common good and decides what is equitable on the basis of merit.

Since merit involves an examination of what is truly valuable (p. 84), from justice Collins moves (in Ch. 4) to an examination of the intellectual virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics* 6 and 10 (where we find both practical and theoretical wisdom) and the discussion of the good life for polis and individual in *Politics* 7.1–3 (where again we find practical wisdom and, if not theoretical wisdom itself, leisurely activity, though Collins separates these). Collins appears to allege that the political community authorizes justice (p. 95) or moral virtue (p. 98) as our perfection, and that this is in tension with the privileged position given to *theoria* or to the life of leisure.

The political scientist examines how the human good is reflected in the law, and in particular in the structure of the regime itself. This leads Collins (at the end of Ch. 4 and in Ch. 5) into an investigation of *Politics* 3. Here she finds that virtue (now including ruling) is still at odds with communal life, since politics requires being ruled, which does not involve the exercise of virtue (p. 115). Further, the political life is unfree, because it requires ruling for the sake of others (pp. 129–30). Thirdly, that because each claim to political authority, including that of virtue, is partial, ‘no regime can accommodate the common advantage in the full sense’ (p. 141). Nor does virtue in the form of philosophy make peace with politics, since politics and philosophy compete for authority (p. 117) and politics is an impediment to philosophy (p. 146).

Collins describes the life of leisure (from Pol. Books 7 and 8) as a middle ground between the demands of the law and one’s individual pursuit of virtue.