ARISTOTLE'S MIDDLE CONSTITUTION

In *Politics* Book 4 ch.11, Aristotle asks 'what is the best life for most cities and for most men, if we are judging neither with an eye to virtue beyond the reach of ordinary men, nor with a view to education which requires a fortunate nature and fortunate external circumstances, nor yet with a constitution in mind which conforms to our ideals, but seeking rather a life in which most men can share and a constitution in which most cities can participate'; his answer is that 'the best constitution is that which depends upon the middle people'. My aim in this paper is, first, to see whether this 'middle' constitution is - as has been argued and more often assumed without argument - identical with what Aristotle elsewhere calls the 'polity' and is sometimes characterized as a 'mixed' constitution; and, second, to explore the nature and implications of the question to which this 'middle' constitution is conceived as the answer.

Within the overall structure of the *Politics*, with Books 1, 2, and 3 all in some sense dealing with general political principles and Books 7 and 8 giving a (very incomplete) account of the ideal state as Aristotle sees it, the chapter with which we are concerned comes from the intervening portion (Books 4-6), which contains some of Aristotle's most characteristic work on politics, concentrating as it largely does on the ways in which actual situations can be managed and improved and on the analysis of actual, contemporary constitutions. At the beginning of Book 4 Aristotle clearly indicates that it is the business of the political theorist to do more than construct ideal states; he should also concentrate on how less exalted political aims can be achieved; and in
the first two chapters Aristotle twice (1288b21-37 and 1289b12-26) sets out a programme of study for political science. It is within the framework of this programme, which involves ascertaining both what constitution suits what particular kind of situation and how specific constitutions can best be preserved, that Aristotle sees the 'middle' constitution as the answer to the question 'which constitution is most common and most choiceworthy after the best?'.

So what is the nature of this 'middle' constitution for which Aristotle is arguing in 4.11? Aristotle begins his exposition by referring us to general principles already enunciated in his Ethics. It was there stated that the happy life is that of unimpeded virtue (EN 1.1101a14-16, 7.1153b9-21), and that virtue is a 'mean' - or, to translate the Greek a bit more literally a 'middleness' (EN 2.1106b36-1107a8); hence the best life must be the 'middle' life, that which achieves the 'middleness' that is possible in each particular case; these same principles therefore must determine the goodness and the badness of a city and of a constitution - the constitution being, as Aristotle puts it, a kind of life of the city. In all cities, he continues, there are three parts - the very rich, the very poor, and those who are in the middle between these. So, given that 'moderation' and 'middleness' are the best, plainly the possession of the gifts of fortune to a middling degree will be the best, since the very rich tend to arrogance and large-scale crime, the very poor to roguery and petty crime, and neither of the two groups is readily amenable to reason. Furthermore, while the poor will not know how to rule but only how to be slavishly ruled and the rich will not know how to be ruled but only how to dominate and tyrannize, the middle men alone will possess the crucial