The last two books of the Politics explore the state and constitution which IV.1 calls “that which is best (for the best is necessarily fitting for the body that is naturally the finest and is most finely equipped)” (IV.1.1288a13-14), answering the questions of the “best regime, and what quality it should have to be what one would pray for above all, with external things providing no impediment” (a21). Aristotle’s exploration of the best state in Book VII begins: “Anyone who intends properly to investigate the best constitution must first determine which life is most choiceworthy.” Everything in the Politics so far argues against simply reading off the best constitution from the best life. Therefore a pair of questions. First, how does Aristotle use a consideration of the best life to construct his best constitution in Books VII and VIII? That is, how does the argument of the beginning of Book VII actually work? And second, how is Aristotle able throughout the rest of the Politics to investigate the best constitution without considering the substance of the best life? That is, how do Books VII and VIII fit in with the rest of the Politics? The first question comes first, since we have to understand the argument of Politics VII before seeing how it fits in the rest of the Politics. While he says that knowing about the best individual life will tell us about how to organize the best polis, the argument of VII.1-3, which he calls his preface to the best constitution, moves at least as much the other way around, from the best collective life to the best individual life. Since in these chapters Aristotle relies on analogies between the best life and the best state, I want to see how he avoids the circularities and other fallacies that often accompany such analogies.

The last two books of the Politics explore the state and constitution which IV.1 calls “that which is best (for the best is necessarily fitting for the body that is naturally the finest and is most finely equipped)” (IV.1.1288a13-14), answering the questions of the “best regime, and what quality it should have to be what one would pray for above all, with external things providing no impediment” (a21). Here at the start of Book VII it is called the best constitution (VII.1.1323a14), and the city according to prayer (VII.1.1325b36). Describing such an ideal seems a pointless exercise in fantasy, so different from the down-to-earth character of the rest of the Politics that some commentators immediately infer that it must come from a more “Platonic” pe-
period in Aristotle’s development. For me instead it raises in its most acute form the question of how this inquiry into the ideal, and how political philosophy in general, could be practical. Politics almost by definition seems to be concerned with how to act in non-ideal, constrained situations. Politics is the art of compromise and coercion, and so is by definition circumstantial and contingent. There is a danger that when we abstract from those particular constraints, there will be nothing left for politics to think about—no disputes about justice threatening civil war, no scarcity or luxury to cause bad habits of arrogance or despair. Spinoza is not alone in maintaining that if all people were rational, there would be no need for politics; in most formulations politics is necessary only because of human imperfections.

Aristotle says to start Book VII that the statesman’s judgments about the structure of the best state will be informed by knowledge of the best life. “Anyone who intends properly to investigate the best constitution must first determine which life is most choiceworthy.” But he doesn’t follow through on that plan, and, as I will show, has good reasons for not following it. Books III–VI studied good constitutions without first determining which life is most choiceworthy, and whatever he does here should not vitiate those other inquiries. When he says that the best constitution requires knowledge of the best life, he must accept as a corollary that only an investigation of the best constitution requires that knowledge. The absence of undesirable and constraining conditions obliges the statesman to put the good life into clearer focus than needed, or possible, before.

I have two questions so far about Aristotle’s ideal state. (I am going to call the constitution of Books VII and VIII “ideal,” but that is simply shorthand for the constitution of our prayers or the best haplōs.) First, why does

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1 To recall the analogies between constitutions and biological species Aristotle uses in Book IV, it makes sense to ask about the best democracy or oligarchy, like the best human or best dog, but makes no sense to ask about the best animal, and, in parallel, the best constitution. However, these last books of the Politics do just that. One precedent is the final chapters of the Poetics, in which Aristotle moves from considering the best tragedy to determining that tragedy is the best kind of imitation or work of art altogether.

2 Kraut 2002, 191: “In Books VII and VIII [and] here, alone, in the Politics, he argues for his conception of happiness; having done so, he depicts for his audience the sort of community that can be created for people who have a life that embodies that conception of well-being. In Books IV–VI, by contrast, it is difficult to discern what role—if any—his conception of happiness is playing.” Because Book VII concerns the relation between the end of the polis and its material, it leaves out the moving causes of the polis. Specifically, the ideal polis of Book VII has no history. This constitution emerges out of ideal material conditions. It does not emerge out of other constitutions. The middle books show how one kind of constitution develops out of another, through either political wisdom or revolution, but the ideal state has no etiology.