The good man and the good citizen
in Aristotle's "Politics"

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The distinction between the good man and the good citizen is of
some importance for the understanding of Aristotle's political
type. This distinction, however, does not seem to have been
fully understood. This paper will attempt to throw a little light upon
the subject, essentially by means of an examination of the words used
in the text.

Aristotle begins, in chapter 4 of Book 3,1 discussing the excellence
of the citizen. Just as each man in a ship's company has his own
excellence (ἀρετή - a term to be discussed later) which is peculiar
to him, while each contributes to the same end - the safe passage of
the sea -, so citizens,

"... though they differ, the end which they all serve is safety in the working
of their association; and this association consists in the constitution. The
conclusion to which we are thus led is that the excellence of the citizen
must be an excellence relative to the constitution."

That is, the constitution provides the criterion of civic excellence,
being the end towards which that quality works in the first instance.
And since there are several kinds of constitution,

"... there cannot be a single absolute excellence of the good citizen. But
the good man is so called in virtue of a single absolute excellence. It is
thus clear that it is possible to be a good citizen without possessing the
excellence which is the quality of a good man."

Aristotle continues within the context of the ideal constitution. If
it is impossible for the polis to consist only of good men and each man
must discharge his function well, and if this discharge involves his
excellence, as it must, then, since all citizens differ (in capacity and
function), the excellence of the good citizen cannot be the same as
that of the good man. Civic excellence must be possessed by all the
citizens, otherwise the polis would not be the best (and the context
is the best politeia); whereas the excellence of a good man cannot

1 1276 b 16 - 1277 b 32.
* The translation used here is that of E. Barker (Oxford, 1948).
belong to all, since the citizens of a good city cannot be all good men – the pessimistic opinion of Aristotle. What is more.

"...the polis is composed of unlike elements... It follows upon this difference between the elements of which the polis is composed that there cannot be a single excellence common to all the citizens."

- i.e. all citizens have excellence qua citizens in different spheres. So, taken all in all, the excellence of the good man and the good citizen are not the same. But do the two coincide in some cases? A good ruler is called good and φήσιμος – morally and intellectually wise – and so, in the case of a ruler, the excellence of a good citizen, which he must possess, merges with that of a good man.

"The excellence of the ordinary citizen is different from that of the ruler... On the other hand, men hold in esteem the double capacity which consists in knowing both how to rule and how to obey, and they regard the excellence of a worthy citizen as consisting in a good exercise of this double capacity. Now if the excellence of the good man is in the one order of ruling, while that of the good citizen is in both orders, these two excellences cannot be held in the same esteem."

For the following argument I paraphrase the summary of Newman.3

There are two views. The first is that the ruler and the ruled should learn different things, which is so far correct in that the citizen ruler rules over citizens, and therefore the citizen should not learn the work of unfreely ruled people. The second is that the citizen, in part ruler, should learn how to rule and how to be ruled, i.e. should learn the same things as the ruled, which is correct in so far as the citizen ruler over citizens should learn to be ruled as a free man is ruled – a polis-like rule. Newman thinks we are to see the truth as lying between the two. But Aristotle does not say so and it is hard to see how he could. What would be the mean of these two views?4 What he does say is that the ruler and the ruled have different excellences, but the citizen in a polis must have the knowledge and capacity for both positions:

"The excellence of a citizen may be defined as consisting in 'a knowledge of rule over free men from both points of view'. A good man, like a good citizen, will need knowledge from both points of view."

Then, with the examples of temperance and justice qua elements of excellence, Aristotle shows that the quality required for ruling is different from that required for being ruled. Therefore,

4 The truth does not so much lie midway as combine the two statements.