A Note on Aristotle's Absolute Ruler

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According to Aristotle in the Politics, absolute rule, i.e. rule unrestricted by law, can be justified only in the case of a man or men of transcendent virtue. Though Aristotle is clearly influenced by the arguments in Plato’s Statesman, he gives much more emphasis than Plato does to the relative as distinct from the intrinsic qualities needed in an absolute ruler. To qualify him for absolute rule, a man's virtue would have to be not only very great but also far beyond that of the other members of his city. The problem to be discussed in this note is the terms in which Aristotle describes this relative superiority of the absolute ruler.

The most commonly accepted view is that the ruler's virtue must surpass that of all the others put together. This interpretation has been developed most fully by Braun who sees the justification of absolute rule as an application of what he calls Aristotle's 'Summierungsprinzip' or summation principle. This is the principle Aristotle uses when he compares the political claims of two groups of people by summing their respective qualities. For example, by applying this principle, he is able to give some support to the claim of the many to participate in deliberative and judicial decisions. Individually, the many may be inferior judges compared with the few best men, but collectively, when their individual contributions are added up,

2 Aristotle includes the possibility that there may be more than one candidate for absolute rule (1284 a 3-8, 1332 b 16-23). However, as he combines his discussion of absolute rule with a discussion of kingship (Book 3, chapters 14-16) some of his arguments apply only to a single absolute ruler, the Absolute King. Cf. V. Ehrenberg, Alexander and the Greeks, Oxford 1938, pp. 71-6. This discrepancy does not affect the present point at issue which is how superior a man has to be in order to qualify either as a single ruler or as a member of a group of absolute rulers. But see below, note 9.  
3 So Newman, Vol I, pp. 275-6, H. von Arnim, Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Aristotelischen Politik, Vienna 1924, pp. 72, 82; W. D. Ross, Aristotle, London 1949, p. 255, uses the word 'transcends' which is more appropriate.  
they may be superior in judgment. According to Braun, Aristotle holds that absolute rule is justified when the merits of the ruler or rulers exceed the sum of those of all the other members of the city. This interpretation, however, is open to serious objection. It is nowhere unambiguously spelled out by Aristotle. Furthermore, it is contradicted by the one passage where Aristotle does clearly specify the extent of the absolute ruler’s superiority.

There are three passages where Aristotle mentions the extent of this superiority:

(i) 1284 a 3-11 el δὲ τις ἔστιν εἶς τοσοῦτον διαφέροντα κατ᾽ ἀρετῆς ύπερβολήν, ἢ πλείους μὲν ἐνὸς μὴ μέντοι δυνατοὶ πλήρωμα παρασχέσθαι πόλεως, ὡστε μὴ συμβλητὴν εἶναι τὴν τῶν ἄλλων ἀρετῆν πάντων μηδὲ τὴν δύναμιν αὐτῶν τὴν πολιτικὴν πρὸς τὴν ἑκείνου, εἰ πλείους, εἰ δ᾽ εἰς, τὴν ἑκείνοι μόνον, οὐκέτι θετέον τούτων μέρος πόλεως. ἀδικήσουσιν γὰρ ἀξιοῦμενοι τῶν ἵππων, ἀνιποῖο τοσοῦτον κατ᾽ ἀρετὴν ὅπες καὶ τὴν πολιτικὴν δύναμιν ὅσπερ γὰρ θεὸν ἐν ἀνθρώπωσι εἰκὸς εἶναι τὸν τοιοῦτον.

(ii) 1288 a 15-19, 24-28 ὅταν οὖν ἡ γένος ὅλον ἢ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἐνα τινα συμβῇ διαφέροντα γενέσθαι κατ᾽ ἀρετὴν τοσοῦτον ὅσθ᾽ ὑπέρεχεν τὴν ἑκείνου τῆς τῶν ἄλλων πάντων, τότε δικαιοῦ τὸ γένος εἶναι τούτῳ βασιλικῷ καὶ κύριον πάντων, καὶ βασιλέα τὸν ἑνα τούτων ... οὔτε γὰρ κτείνειν ἢ φυγαδεύειν οὐδ᾽ ὀστρακίζειν δὴ ποι τὸν τοιοῦτον πρέπον ἔστιν, οὔτ᾽ ἐξίουν ἔρχεσθαι κατὰ μέρος· οὐ γὰρ πέρπικῳ τὸ μέρος ὑπέρεχεν τοῦ παντὸς, τῷ δὲ τὴν τηλικαύτην ύπερβολὴν ἔχοντι τούτῳ συμβέβηκεν.

(iii) 1332 b 16-23. εἰ μὲν τοῖς εἰσαγαγὸ τοσοῦτον διαφέροντες ἄπεροι τῶν ἄλλων ὅσον τοὺς θεοὺς καὶ τοὺς ἠρωοὺς ἱγιούμεθα τῶν ἄνθρωπῶν διαφέρειν, εὐθὺς πρῶτον κατὰ τὸ σῶμα πολλῆν ἐχοντας ύπερβολῆν, εἶτα κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν, ὡστε ἀνακυρισθησθον εἰναι καὶ φανερῶν τὴν ύπεροχὴν τὸς ἀρχέμενος τὴν τῶν ἄρχωντων, δὴλον ὅτι βέλτιον ἂν τοὺς αὐτοὺς τοὺς μὲν ἄρχειν τοὺς δ᾽ ἀρχέσθαι καθάπεξ.

Of these passages, the first gives the most precise account of the necessary extent of superiority. Men’s ἀρετή and πολιτική δύναμις must be so outstanding that they cannot be compared (μὴ συμβλητὴν) with that of the others. συμβλητὸς has, for Aristotle, a clear, technical meaning. Two things are συμβλητά if they can be compared on the same scale either as fractions of one another or at least as greater than or less than or equal to one another. The appropriate qualities of the absolute ruler must therefore be on quite a different scale from

5 1281 a 39-b 21.