Who is Aristotle's Citizen?

CURTIS JOHNSON

Introduction: The Nature of the Problem

When Aristotle confronted the task of defining “citizen” at the beginning of Book III of the Politics, the difficulties in doing so adequately must have seemed formidable. There was, first, the simple fact of constitutional diversity: states differ, and so too, therefore, do citizens in those states. Further, there was diversity of usage: people do not always agree who is to be called a citizen. Then there are those anomalous cases of citizens who acquire or lose the title of citizenship in an “exceptional manner” such as citizens by adoption, or citizens who have been disfranchised. Anomalous also are those states in which either people not admitted into a share of office are nevertheless called citizens (the “subject citizen” of 1278a16-17); or people who, while they do have access to certain offices, still are denied the title of citizen, as was the case, for example, of some of the officeholders at Marseilles (1321a31). Finally there is a fundamental problem concerning what is right or just: regardless of who citizens are in any particular case, to whom in justice should the title of citizenship be given? Should it be given to all who are alike and equal, and therefore to the multitude in most states because in most states the people are equal in nature; or should it be reserved to the few who truly deserve to rule permanently because of their superior virtue?

All of these factors present difficulties to the philosopher because the aim of defining is to find a common, unchanging essence in a world of enormous diversity. For Aristotle, moreover, since the essence of an object is to be found within the actual and existent, a good definition is not free to ignore the variation and diversity of the world; it must be so cast as to fit every case yet without itself becoming varied and diverse. A definition, in other words, must itself be one and yet be capable of covering many different and dissimilar cases. It must, further, be “correct”. While it cannot ignore common usage, which varies from one state to another, it must nevertheless find whatever is best and universal in the way the title is used and conferred.
Who, then, is Aristotle’s citizen? Does Aristotle succeed in overcoming the difficulties and providing a definition of citizenship that is everything that it should be? In particular, does his definition succeed, as he evidently believed it should, in identifying that “common nature” (to koinon)⁸ which enables it to describe who citizens are in all states alike? We believe that it comes close to realizing this goal, but falls a little short. The nature of the case, and particularly the different practices of different city-states in Greece, made complete success impossible.⁹ We also believe that Aristotle understood this problem, and accordingly devoted the first five chapters of Book III to showing the relation of anomalous cases to his own perfected definition. To understand Aristotle’s definition of citizen, therefore, and to see how he arrived at it, is at the same time to illuminate a number of obscurities in Book III.

Part I: The Definition of Citizenship

First, let it be observed that Aristotle sets out to define the citizen “in the complete sense” (ton haplōs politēn: 1275a19), that is, he who lacks no qualification for sharing fully in all of the entitlements of citizenship. By thus limiting the scope of his enquiry Aristotle avoids having to deal with a number of difficult cases: those who are too young to share in citizenship, those who are too old, and citizens who have been exiled or disfranchised either rightly or wrongly (1275a15ff). He thereby is able to get directly at the question of who a citizen is “pure and simple”. But even by excluding the difficult cases mentioned above, the task is still not free of problems. Aristotle has still to propose, and then reject, two preliminary definitions before arriving at the citizen “in the complete sense”.

There are three definitions of citizen in Book III, chapter 1. The first is (III, 1.6 1275a23-24): “a man who shares in the administration of justice and in the holding of office” (metechein krisēs kai archēs). The second is (III, 1.7-8 1275a33): “those who share in indeterminate office” (politas tous houtō [aoristos archē] metechontas); by “indeterminate office” Aristotle means, specifically, the offices of judge in the courts and member of the assembly. The third, final definition is (III, 1.12 1275b19-20): “he who enjoys the right of sharing in deliberative and judicial office” (archēs bouleutikēs kai kritikēs).¹⁰ These three definitions are the core of the chapter: everything else in it is an attempt to show why each of the earlier definitions is inadequate. Let us examine Aristotle’s account of these inadequacies.