

CAN A GOOD CITIZEN BE A GOOD RULER? AN ANSWER FROM ARISTOTLE'S *POLITICS*

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. 2. The Citizen and His Distinctive Excellence. 3. Two Competing Reconstructions. 4. Is the Ideal City made by good men? 5. A Final Defence of the Coexistence Thesis.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely believed that the issues of individual goodness and participation in political life are so deeply intertwined in Aristotle's philosophy that no clear boundary can be discerned between the nature of man and his role in the political community.¹ This would seem to find a forceful confirmation in the first Book of the *Politics*, where he defines man as a «political animal».² Nevertheless, to speak of the *good citizen* might not be equivalent to speaking of the *good man*. Evidence of this can be found in the third Book of the *Politics*, where Aristotle draws a significant distinction between the two notions. Unlike the good citizen (*ho spoudaios politēs*), whose excellence consists in an unquestioning allegiance to the prescriptions issued by the rulers (even when such prescriptions fail to achieve the common good of the *polis*), the good man (*ho agathos anēr*) distinguishes himself as an individual in possession of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), i.e. an intellectual excellence employed by ethically virtuous people in their deliberative activity. Such an excellence, as Aristotle claims at *Politics* III, 4.1277 a15-16, is also the marking trait of the authen-

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¹ See for instance D.J. ALLAN, *Individual and State in the Ethics and Politics*, «Entretiens sur l'Antiquité Classique», XI (1965), pp. 55-85, p. 61. As he claims, the good citizen and his relation to that of the good man should not be examined by making abstraction from any qualities of the human soul that are not of social-nature. Cfr. G. BIEN, *Die Grundlegung der Politischen Philosophie bei Aristoteles*, Verlag Karl Alber, Freiburg/München 1973, p. 72, where he suggests that, in Aristotle's lexicon, the adjectives "human", "political" "juridical" are interchangeable.

² *Pol.* I, 2.1253 a2-3; cfr. *Pol.* III, 6.1278 b19; *NE* IX, 9.1169 b18. Quotations of the Greek text will follow Ross' edition of the *Politics* (W.D. ROSS, *Aristotelis Politica*, E Typographeo Clarendoniano, Oxonii 1957) and F. SUSEMIHL – O. APELT (*Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachea*, rec. F. Susemihl, ed. tertia curavit O. Apelt, Teubner, Lipsiae 1912³).

tically good ruler (*ho spoudaios archōn*). If, on the one hand, this suggests the possibility that each and every good ruler, *qua* practically wise, is also a good man, it also implies, on the other, a stark differentiation between the excellence of the good ruler and that of the good citizen, whose commitment in political activity does not demand a display of practical wisdom on his part.

We might wonder, then, why Aristotle appears so eager to establish a distinction between the characteristic excellences of the good citizen and the good ruler. In this paper I shall contend that such a difference represents the starting point of an argument which leads to the following conclusion: there are cases in which even “simple” citizens, although not involved in concrete ruling activity, are potentially good rulers. This attempt will lead me to devote special attention to one of the conceptual frameworks within which the Aristotelian distinction between good man/ruler and good citizen is illustrated: the ideal *polis*. I will argue that the picture of the ideal city offers a strategic perspective in the light of which the idea of someone possessing the qualities of a good citizen and at the same time the characteristic excellence of the good ruler does not appear unreasonable. My contention is that, in the course of Aristotle’s argument, the *purely conceptual* distinction between good ruler/man and good citizen introduced in Book III of the *Politics* gradually leaves room for the possibility of an *actual* coexistence of the two excellences in a single person. Within the ideal city, such a coexistence will be the rule, not the exception.

2. THE CITIZEN AND HIS DISTINCTIVE EXCELLENCE

The distinction between the excellence of the good ruler and that of the good citizen is made by Aristotle in chapter iv of Book III of the *Politics*, in the course of an inquiry into the *polis* and its structural features. As the philosopher in fact explains in the opening lines of Book III, the city – like any other whole made up of parts – is something composite, being made of a multitude of citizens, and the strategy best suited to promote a correct understanding of its nature and distinctive functioning is to undertake a preliminary analysis of its discrete parts: the citizens themselves.³ This is why, within the present framework of discussion, a careful treatment of the issue of citizenship takes on a special urgency.

³ On this point see P.L. PHILLIPS SIMPSON, *The Politics of Aristotle. Translated with Introduction, Analysis and Notes*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1997, p. 75. As Simpson rightly observes, the argumentative strategy followed by Aristotle in Book III of the *Politics* is a concrete instantiation of a methodological principle stated in generic terms in *Pol. I*, 1.1252 a17-21. On this principle, for a correct inquiry into a subject it is necessary to divide a compound into its uncompounded elements (for these are the smallest parts of the whole). Cfr. P.L. PHILLIPS SIMPSON, *A Philosophical Commentary on The Politics of Aristotle*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1998, p. 133.

There are many possible ways of accounting a man as “citizen”, not all of which are equally relevant to Aristotle’s philosophical purposes. In the effort to pin down what seems to be an extremely elusive quarry, Aristotle proceeds by a process of elimination.⁴ The first candidates to be ruled out are the so-called honorary or “made” citizens, i.e. those who have the name but not the distinctive functions of citizens;⁵ these are disqualified on the ground that the mere name is an unnecessary criterion for citizenship. Then, Aristotle dismisses those criteria that appear necessary but not sufficient.⁶ Just to give two examples, citizenship is determined neither by residence in a given place⁷ nor by entitlements concerning private law, e.g. rights to sue and be sued.⁸

As a result of this process of elimination, Aristotle is finally able to lay down a preliminary definition of citizenship, which focuses on concrete activity within the political community. In his words, a citizen is someone who *actually* shares in judgment and rule, that is, one who shares in deciding how the city is to be run or governed.⁹ Even the definition given above, however, has a number of weak points. First, some offices are differentiated by time, so that it is not permitted at all for the same person to hold them more than once or without any interval¹⁰ (*Pol.* III, 1.1275 a23-25). Second, if office is confined to official position alone, that would have the absurd result of denying citizenship to people committed to other tasks of high political relevance, for instance those who speak in the assembly. It would be unreasonable, then, to deny a political role to those who have the most control, simply because there are times in which they do not actually exert a public role and/or because they do not hold official positions.

This is why Aristotle prefers to consider as “citizen” anyone in the city who is simply *entitled* to share in these functions. His being a citizen does not rest on actual participation, but on mere possibility of participation in public offices. In Aristotle’s own words,

«[W]hoever is entitled to participate in an office involving deliberation or decision is, we can now say, a citizen in this city».¹¹

⁴ See *ibidem*, p. 134. For a detailed account of the process of elimination see also F.D. MILLER Jr., *Nature, Justice and Rights in Aristotle’s Politics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1995, pp. 143-148.

⁵ *Pol.* III, 1.1275 a5-6.

⁶ See P.L. PHILLIPS SIMPSON, *A Philosophical Commentary on The Politics of Aristotle*, cit., p. 134.

⁷ *Pol.* III, 1.1275 a7-8.

⁸ *Pol.* III, 1.1275 a8-11.

⁹ *Pol.* III, 1.1275a22-23: «*politēs d’haplōs oudeni tōn allōn horizetai mallōn hē tōi metechein kriseōs kai archēs*».

¹⁰ *Pol.* III, 1.1275 a23-25.

¹¹ *Pol.* III, 1.1275 b18-20: «*hō gar exousia koinōnein archēs bouleutikēs kai kritikēs*». I follow Lord’s translation (C. LORD, *Aristotle. The Politics*, Translated with an Introduction, Notes and Glossary, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1984, from which all the passages of the *Politics* cited in this paper are taken, unless otherwise specified. The issue as to whether the definition above should be retained as the definitive one has caused

The account above, just like the previous one, implies that citizenship does not rely on a supposed passive abidance by the laws in force in the political community (an attitude which is also shared by those who do not enjoy the status of citizens, like aliens and slaves). In both cases, citizenship presupposes the capacity (and, as we might hypothesize, even the propensity) of individuals to cooperate towards the well-being of their city through some kind of participation in offices and deliberative activity.¹² Their contribution, however, does not include unrestrained freedom of agency, but is rather confined to compliance with the prescriptions in force in their constitution. Provided that the nature of citizenship is determined by entitlement to participation in office, and offices are distributed on the basis of the distinctive values cham-

a wide debate among scholars. Aristotle's focus on the entitlement (*exousia*) of citizens to political participation, for instance, has led Miller Jr to believe that this concept takes the burden of *Pol.* III, 1 is that of defining the citizens as holders of distinctive political rights (see also F.D. MILLER JR., *Nature, Justice and Rights in Aristotle's Politics*, cit., p. 144). Unlike Miller, Irwin, Schofield and Susemihl-Hicks doubt that this is Aristotle's precise aim (T.H. IRWIN, *The Good of Political Activity*, in G. PATZIG (ed.), *Aristoteles' 'Politik': Akten des XI. Symposium Aristotelicum*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1990, pp. 73-98: 82. M. SCHOFIELD, *Sharing in the Constitution*, «Review of *Metaphysics*», 49 (1996), pp. 831-858, pp. 840-842. F. SUSEMIHL - R.D. HICKS (eds.), *The Politics of Aristotle: A Revised Text, With Introduction, Analysis and Commentary*, Macmillan and Co., London and New York 1894, pp. 359-360). For a reconstruction of the debate see P.L. PHILLIPS SIMPSON, *A Philosophical Commentary on The Politics of Aristotle*, cit., pp. 135-136, footnote 7). Simpson, who tends to adhere to the views of Miller Jr (views to which I subscribe myself), explains that Irwin and Schofield «suppose that the precise definition is the one given earlier (1275 a22-23), namely that the citizen is someone who (actually) shares in judgment and rule or office and not someone who is entitled so to share without actually now sharing. But this view is contrary to what Aristotle actually says at the end of this chapter, as well as to what he says later at 3.5.1277 b34-35. It also entails that someone eligible for office but not now in office is not actually or fully a citizen. This means that citizens who alternate in ruling and being ruled are not really citizens when they are being ruled...» (P.L. PHILLIPS SIMPSON, *A Philosophical Commentary on The Politics of Aristotle*, cit., pp. 135-136, footnote 7). Further suggestions are supplied by Berti and Mossé, who claim that 'indefinite' offices, such as juridical functions or membership in the assembly, grant the right of citizenship, but only those offices held for a limited period constitute 'political participation' in its proper sense (E. BERTI, *La Nozione di Società Politica in Aristotele*, in M. MIGLIORI (ed.), *Il Dibattito Etico e Politico in Grecia tra il v e il iv Secolo*, La Città del Sole, Napoli 2000, pp. 511-528, p. 522. C. MOSSÉ, *Citoyens "actifs" et citoyens "passifs" dans les cités grecques: une approche théorique du problème*, «Revue des Études Anciennes», 81 (1979), pp. 241-249.

¹² As Newman points out in his commentary to *Pol.* III, 1.1275 b18-20, the meaning of "political participation" and the extent to which it can be practiced by citizens is not entirely clear. In particular, he exhibits considerable perplexity over *Pol.* VI, 4.1318 b21ff., where Aristotle considers the case of people who, living under some specific types of tyranny or oligarchy, were regarded as 'citizens' simply in virtue of their entitlement to elect magistracies, without being allowed exercise deliberative authority (W.L. NEWMAN, *The Politics of Aristotle. With an Introduction, Two Prefatory Essays and Notes Critical and Explanatory*, IV volumes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010 [first ed. 1902]. Vol. III, p. 140).

pioned by each *polis*, the excellence of a citizen will derive its specific content from the principles according to which offices are distributed in the constitution of his city. This point is first introduced at *Pol.* III, 1.1275 a38-b5, where Aristotle explains that, as is evident to inspection

«regimes differ from one another in kind, and [that] some are prior and some posterior; for those that are errant and deviant must necessarily be posterior to those that are without error [...] Hence¹³ the citizen must necessarily differ in the case of each sort of regime». ¹⁴

The thrust of Aristotle's talk of citizenship becomes clearer in section four of Book III, where he shifts the focus of attention from the notion of "citizen" to that of "good citizen". In virtue of such a shift, the reader is invited to look at the citizen as a member of a partnership whose specific goal is its own well-functioning. Each citizen is involved in the promotion of such a goal, being required to perform a distinctive function and actively cooperate towards the safety of the community. In this respect, as Aristotle points out at *Pol.* III, 4.1276 b21-29, we might find a noteworthy similarity between a citizen and a sailor. We say that, just as a sailor is a member of a community (*eis tis tōn koinōnōn*), i.e. the ship's company, with its various members and different duties, so too is a citizen. Provided that sailors differ from one another in virtue of the different capacities (*tēn dynamin*) in which they act (one is a rower, another a pilot, another a look-out man; and others again will have other names just according to their capacities), it is clear that the most accurate definition of the excellence of each sailor will be peculiar (*idios*) to each, but it will also become evident that there must be some common account that fits them all, insofar as safety in navigation (*hē sōtēria tēs nautilias*) is the work of (*ergon*) all of them, and the object at which each must aim. Aristotle tells us that what is true of sailors is also true of citizens, for

«Although citizens are dissimilar,¹⁵ preservation of the partnership is their task, and the regime is [this] partnership». ¹⁶

Given that the nature of citizenship is defined by relation to a man's membership in a given political community and to the peculiar task performed by him

¹³ That is, as regimes differ. This concept is well stressed by Barker's translation (E. BARKER (ed.), *Aristotle. Politics. Translated with an Introduction, notes and Appendixes*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1948 [first published 1946]).

¹⁴ «*hōste kai ton politēn heteron anagkaion einai on kath'hekastēn politeian*». Lord's translation conveys the idea that each constitution has the power to affect the nature of citizenship. Such a concept is not enough stressed in an alternative (and, in my opinion, inappropriate) rendering of the passage, which is offered by Barker: «the citizen under each different kind of constitution must also necessarily be different».

¹⁵ That is, dissimilar in the capacity in which they act.

¹⁶ «*anomoion ontōn, hē sōtēria tēs koinōnias ergon esti, koinōnia d'estin hē politeia*».

within it, it becomes evident that the distinctive virtue of a citizen rests on his supposed ability to comply to the goals of the constitution and to perform his assigned role in it in the best possible way. This is why, as we read at *Pol.* III, 4.1276 b30-31,

«[...] the excellence of the citizen must be an excellence relative to the constitution (*diō tēn aretēn anagkaion einai tou politou pros tēn politeian*). If, then, there are indeed several forms of constitutions, it is clear that it is not possible for the virtue of the excellent citizen to be single, or complete virtue (*dēlon hōs ouk endechetai tou spoudaiou politou mian aretēn einai, tēn teleian*)».¹⁷

The message Aristotle is trying to convey here is that different constitutions require different types of “good citizen”;¹⁸ this seems to presuppose that each constitution provides the criterion of civic excellence and, all the same, the end towards which each citizen ought to work. Furthermore, we may observe that his view of excellent citizenship has no special relationships with the ethical qualities of the individual. Citizens will be deemed good only in relation to the capacity to perform their specific role in the *polis* and so contribute to its general well-functioning. Notwithstanding the diversity of roles covered by citizens in a given community, what gives them their shared status (which is also what promotes cohesion among them) is mainly the contribution of each to an agreed goal: safety in the working of their partnership (*Pol.* III, 4.1276 b28-30).

3. TWO COMPETING RECONSTRUCTIONS

We may now ask in what respect the typical excellence of the good citizen differs from that of the good man. The first comparison between the two excellences is made at *Pol.* III, 4.1276 b30-38, from which we learn that it is manifestly possible to be a good citizen without possessing the excellence that constitutes a good man. After claiming that, due to the wide variety of constitutions, the virtue of the excellent citizen cannot be single or absolute, Aristotle explains that, by contrast,

«the good (*agathos*) man is a man so called in virtue of a single absolute excellence».¹⁹

¹⁷ My own translation. Lord translates *politeia* as “regime” and *pros tēn politeian* as “with a view to the regime”.

¹⁸ On this point see R.G. MULGAN, *Aristotle's Political Theory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1987 (first published 1977), p. 57; cfr. A.W.H. ADKINS, *The Connection between Aristotle's Ethics and Politics*, in D. KEYT - F.D. MILLER JR. (Eds.), *A Companion to Aristotle's Politics*, Blackwell, Oxford 1991, pp. 75-93, p. 88. Adkins points out that «Aristotle does not emphasize the point, but since some kinds of constitution are bad, being a good citizen under some constitutions might require one to be a bad man». See also R. KRAUT, *Aristotle*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, p. 363.

¹⁹ *Pol.* III, 4.1276 b33-34.

The nature of such an excellence is revealed only in *Pol.* III, 4.1277 a14-16, where we read that the good ruler, being at the same time a good man, is good in virtue of his *phronēsis*. Aristotle does not take pains to offer an accurate illustration of *phronēsis* in the *Politics*, and its nature and contribution towards the achievement of the human good are simply relegated to the background. Despite the absence of an in-depth treatment of *phronēsis* here, he holds practical wisdom to play a crucial role in concrete political life, and the views he carefully outlines in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are still at work in the *Politics*. In *NE* VI, 5.1140 b4-6 *phronēsis* is described as a true disposition accompanied by rational prescription, relating to action in the sphere of what is good and bad for human beings. The core of *phronēsis* is a correct form of reasoning (*orthos logos*), which, by dealing with things that can be otherwise (*NE* VI, 2.1139 a13; cfr. 4.1139 b30-31), just like actions and situations, has the power to change human life in the direction of happiness. Aristotle expends a great deal of effort to prove that *phronēsis* has seminal applications in the field of politics. As the intellectual excellence responsible for virtuous deliberative activity (See *NE* VI, 5.1140 a25-28; cfr. *NE* VI, 8.1141 b8-10), *phronēsis* acquires a profound political significance if we consider that, through exercise of such a virtue, good politicians make choices directed to the well-being of both the whole community and each of its members. By providing well-ordered patterns of virtuous communities and constitutions, the distinctive *phronēsis* of virtuous rulers supplies the citizens with a sound guide towards the achievement of virtuous goals.

Having said that *phronēsis* is the defining excellence of both the good man and the good ruler, it is now necessary to consider in which way it contributes to clarifying Aristotle's intentions in the first stage of the argument outlined in Book III of the *Politics*. Before embarking on this task, it might be useful to offer a schematic subdivision of section iv in four different steps:

Step 1: Laying down the question: is the virtue of the good citizen the same as that of the good man? (1276 b16-18).

Step 2: Finding an answer. Generally speaking, it is not the same virtue. The virtue of the good citizen is relative to the nature of the constitution, whereas that of the good man depends on an absolute virtue (1276 b18-34).

Step 3: Answering the same question by reference to the ideal city. It seems that, even within such a framework, the virtue of the good citizen cannot be the same as the virtue of the good man (1276 b34-b12).

Step 4: Only in one case the good citizen is also a good man: when the good citizen can also be a good ruler (1277 a12-b32).

On the basis of such a preliminary subdivision, let us try to reconstruct the sense of the Aristotelian argument. A first possibility is that the real focus of

his investigation is the distinction between ‘good citizen’ and ‘good man’. The claim might then be, for instance, that the difference between the good citizen and the good ruler is not in need of theoretical demonstration, being adopted by Aristotle simply as a starting point towards a justification of the view that, unlike the good man, the good citizen cannot be *phronimos*. So conceived, a possible reconstruction of the argument would be the following:

P(1) The characteristic excellence of the good ruler is the same as the excellence possessed by the good man (as implied by *Pol.* III, 4.1277 a14-15; cf. *Pol.* III, 4.1277 a21).

P(2) Citizens, however good, cannot rule, especially because they do not possess the same virtue as the one proper to excellent governors (which is implied by *Pol.* III, 4.1277 a20-25, where it is explained that the ruler and the ruled have different sorts of excellence).

1,2: (3) The characteristic virtue of the good citizen is not the same as that of the good man (see *Pol.* III, 4.1277 a22-23).

The above-sketched reconstruction holds by itself a substantial degree of plausibility, especially if we consider that, as emerges in steps 1,2 and 3 of our initial scheme, Aristotle insists on the idea that the good citizen cannot be identical to the good man, and not to the good ruler. Despite this, I believe that the argument, so re-phrased, fails to account for the remainder of Aristotle’s discussion in section 4. In the first place, it would not justify the fact that the notion of ‘good man’ is gradually left aside throughout the argument and gets overshadowed by a treatment of the relationships between the good citizen and the good ruler and their respective intellectual faculties. In fact, unlike the good ruler, whose peculiar excellence is *phronēsis*, the good citizen committed to political activity confines himself to displaying a right opinion (*doxa alēthēs*) about the things deliberated on by the ruler/rulers (*Pol.* III, 4.1277 b25-30). Within such a context, *phronēsis* is not mentioned with reference to the good man, but rather to the good ruler. Secondly (and perhaps most crucially), the latter reconstruction would not explain the reason why, in the remainder of his discussion, Aristotle sets out to illustrate the difference between good man/ruler and good citizen within the framework of the ideal *polis*. Had he really intended to focus on the conceptual distinction between the excellence of good man and that of the good citizen, he could probably have better brought such a distinction to light within the context of any existing, imperfect city, where the good citizen does not necessarily have to comply with the dictates of a virtuous constitution.

In the ideal *polis*, by contrast, both good rulers and good citizens operate in view of a shared end: ethical excellence. Even if we assume (as some Aristotelian scholars do; see section below) that not every good citizen is a good man in the ideal *polis* (this is the assumption that I am attempting to undermine in this paper), his lack of practical wisdom would not be as evident as in the

case of a citizen of a imperfect *polis*, whose participation in political life is simply addressed to the safety of the constitution and not specifically designed to the promotion of ethical excellence. This is why I believe that Aristotle is not inclined to highlight differences between the good citizen and the good man, but he is rather keen to offer theoretical support to the distinction between the good citizen and the good ruler. An alternative (and possibly more pertinent, on my view) reconstruction of Aristotle's argument might run as follows:

P(1) The excellence of the good citizen is not the same as the excellence of the good man (*Pol.* III, 4.1276 b18-35).

P(2) The excellence of the good man is the same as the excellence of the good ruler (as implied by *Pol.* III, 4.1277 a14-15; cf. *Pol.* III, 4.1277 a21²⁰).

P(3) The excellence of the good ruler is *phronēsis* (*Pol.* III, 4.1277 a15).

1,2: (4) The excellence of the good citizen differs from that of the good ruler.

4,3: (5) A good citizen, *qua* citizen, is not taken to be *phronimos*.²¹

According to the reconstruction sketched above, Aristotle's reference to the excellence of the good man would simply be instrumental to a clarification of the difference between the good citizen and the good ruler. In the sections that follow I shall argue that such a reconstruction not only is consistent with, but also explains the reason why Aristotle adopts the ideal *polis* as a suitable framework for discussion. I will propose that Aristotle's discussion of good citizenship and virtuous governance in the ideal city gradually discloses a crucial characteristic of the perfect community: its capacity to guide each and every citizen towards complete ethical goodness and, all the same, the ability to make each of them a potentially good ruler. My contention is that, although a member of the perfect city, *qua* citizen, does not need to exhibit full ethical excellence, he might still possess all the requisites for wise ruling activity. The semantic distinction between excellences, in other words, would not imply the impossibility of a good citizen being endowed with both excellences, even though these cannot be displayed at the same time and in the same contexts. It is my understanding that ethical goodness is not specifically determined by exercise of ruling activity, but, *vice versa*, it proves to be the legitimate ground of ruling activity.

²⁰ It ought to be noted that the identity between the two excellences is introduced here as a hypothesis, but its validity is never questioned in the *Politics*.

²¹ As I hope to make clear in the rest of this paper, the conclusion expressed at point (5) does not of necessity imply the absolute impossibility of a citizen possessing *phronēsis*. Rather, it might simply mean that, as a citizen, one does not need to have *phronēsis* and that, in case he has it, he does not have to employ it at the level of mere citizenship.

4. IS THE IDEAL CITY MADE BY GOOD MEN?

In *Pol.* III, 4.1276 b35ff. Aristotle proposes to analyse the difference between the excellence of the good citizen and that of the good man within the framework of the ideal *polis*. As implied in *Pol.* III, 4.1276 b35-37, the ideal city constitutes *only one* of the eligible frames of discussion in the light of which the distinction at issue may emerge, and Aristotle does not appear keen to explain whether each frame is of equal value to the others. Yet, we might reasonably wonder whether the perfect city is capable of throwing a specially powerful light on the distinction at issue. Different answers might be offered to the questions above, depending on the view one has about the nature of Aristotle's ideal city. One possibility is that the perfect city is seen as a form of community entirely made by good citizens who, although lacking the characteristic excellence of the good man, are nevertheless well-inclined to contribute to the maintenance of ethical virtue (i.e. the central value endorsed by the constitution). On this possibility, it might be hypothesized that the ideal *polis*, although not representing the only eligible framework for discussion, is chosen by Aristotle simply to enforce his supposed belief that no good citizen, *qua* citizen, can possess the characteristic excellence of the good man. I shall call that view "the incompatibility thesis" (*IT*), because it expresses the impossibility of a good city (even the ideal one) being entirely composed of good men. According to this thesis, not every citizen of the ideal *polis* is a good man and a potentially good ruler.

A different view is one which presents the perfect *polis* as one in which each and every citizen possesses excellence in a complete sense, being therefore a good man and also a potentially good ruler. This is the view to which I subscribe and in support of which I shall offer evidence below. I call this the "coexistence thesis" (*CT*), since it argues for the possibility of a coexistence between the excellences of the good citizen and of the good man/ruler in one and the same individual.

Against the *CT*, supporters of the *IT* might object that, at least in the first stage of his discussion of the ideal *polis*, Aristotle seems firmly intent on excluding the possibility of a community made of good citizens being at the same time good men. He claims at *Pol.* III, 4.1276 b37-1277 a1,

«[i]f it is impossible²² for a city to consist entirely of excellent persons, yet if each

²² A textual problem can be detected in *Pol.* III, 1276b38. Bernays alters the *adynaton* ('impossible') and gives *dynaton* ('possible') (J. BERNAYS, *Aristoteles' Politik. Erstes, zweites und drittes Buch mit erklärenden Zusätzen ins Deutsch Übertragung*, Hertz, Berlin 1872). However, as Rackham suggests, even in that case, the general sense of the sentence would remain unaltered. Assuming the possibility of a perfect state, not all its members would be good men; rather, they all might be *spoudaioi* citizens (H. RACKHAM, *Aristotle, Politics. Translation*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 1977 [first published 1932], additional note to 1276 b38, p. 275).

should perform his own work well, and this [means] out of virtue, there would still not be a single virtue of the citizen and the good man, since it is impossible for all the citizens to be similar».

Understandably, many scholars and commentators have read the passage above as incontrovertible evidence that not even within the frame of the ideal *polis* will we find an identity between the excellences. One such commentator is Develin, who in his article *The Good Man and the Good Citizen in Aristotle's "Politics"*²³ sets out to show that the excellence of the ruler and the excellence of the ruled do not coincide, not even within the framework of the ideal *polis*,²⁴ whose well-being mainly depends on a well balanced diversification of functions.²⁵ As Develin claims, Aristotle believes that a man *qua* ruler will not be able to display the same range of skills as a man *qua* common citizen, i.e. *qua* ruled. On his view, the excellence of *the good man* and that of the *good member of a polis* coincide in a perfectly virtuous city *exclusively in the case of the ruler*; if that is so, then Aristotle would have to maintain that, aside from the ruler, no member of a political community can be a good man.

In like manner, Kraut maintains that, on the account of good man and good citizen provided in Book III of the *Politics*, not even in the ideal city will an individual *qua* citizen be provided with the set of competences required for the correct performance of a virtuous ruling activity.²⁶ Viewed in this light, the framework of the ideal city would encourage us to believe that even in a case of absolute ethical and administrative perfection, the roles held respectively by simple citizens and rulers remain separate. Both Develin and Kraut read the passage as proof that the excellence of the good citizen cannot be identical with that of the good man, firstly because it is impossible for a *polis* to be entirely composed of good men, secondly because the roles and capacities of citizens and rulers that result are differentiated. In particular, Develin defends his view by calling upon Aristotle's idea that the rulers and the ruled should *learn* different things. As Aristotle explains in *Pol.* III, 4.1277a16-21, some people believe that the training of the ruler should differ from that of the good citizen. With regard to this view, he quotes Euripides, who says:

«No subtleties for me, but what is needed for the city»,

which, as Aristotle himself claims, suggests the need for special training for the ruler. Of course, a similar stance appears reasonable if we consider that,

²³ R. DEVELIN, *The Good Man and the Good Citizen in Aristotle's Politics*, «Phronesis», 18 (1973), pp. 71-79.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

²⁶ See R. KRAUT, *Aristotle*, cit., pp. 364-368. However, as he makes clear at p. 186, this view does not hold good in Books VII-VIII of the *Politics*, where the ideal city seems to be described as one in which all citizens possess a correct understanding of well-being and have the equipment needed to live an ethically virtuous life. Cfr. also pp. 359-360.

with a view to a sound ruling activity, a would-be ruler should primarily focus on and learn how to cope with the specific aims and methods of good governance.

On the other hand, it is important to notice that being a good ruler does not and cannot exclude being a good citizen for Aristotle. To begin with, in *Pol.* III, 4.1277 b10 ff. he claims that, in order to become a good ruler, one should first learn how to be a good citizen. There is in fact a form of rule of the sort which is exercised over persons who are similar in birth and in freedom to rulers. This sort of command is called 'political' rule and this is what the ruler must learn by being ruled and obeying, just as in the military sphere one learns to be a commander of cavalry by serving under other commanders. Most crucially, as he concludes:

«[H]ence this too has been rightly said – that it is not possible to rule well without having been ruled». ²⁷

One might suppose that, by mentioning the view that citizens should also be able to rule, Aristotle is simply implying that citizens should not learn the work of all kinds of ruled persons, ²⁸ and not that the training they receive should make them potentially good rulers. I prefer to adopt a stronger reading, and suggest that the passage above highlights an important connection between the two excellences under examination, offering significant support for the *CT*: a ruler will never be good unless he has first become a good citizen. This is the point I wish to defend in the remainder of this paper. First, let me deal with the potential objection that, even admitting that my view is correct and that this is sufficient to show that each and every good ruler must possess the characteristic excellence of the good citizen, it is nevertheless not enough to argue that a good citizen of the ideal *polis* should necessarily possess the characteristic excellence of the good man. In response to that objection, we might once again make reference to *Pol.* III, 13.1283 b42-1284 a2, where it is asserted that, in the ideal city, citizens should also be able to rule:

«A citizen in the common sense is one who shares in ruling and being ruled; but he differs in accordance with each regime. In the case of the best regime, he is one *who is capable of and intentionally chooses being ruled and ruling* ²⁹ with a view to the life in accordance with virtue». ³⁰

A similar suggestion had first been presented in the form of a generally held

²⁷ *Pol.* III, 4.1277 b10 11-13: «*dio legetai kai touto kalōs, hōs ouk estin eu arxai mē archthenta*».

²⁸ Such a view is held for instance by Newman. See W.L. NEWMAN, *o.c.*, p. 164.

²⁹ My emphasis. A similar point was already made by Plato in *Laws* I, 643e.

³⁰ «*polites de koinēi men ho metechōn tou archein kai archesthai esti, kath'hekastēn de politeian heteros, pros de tēn aristēn ho dynamenos kai proairoumenos archesthai kai archein pros ton bion ton kat'aretēn*».

view at *Pol.* III, 4.1277a25-27, in which Aristotle was outlining competing views bearing on the excellence of the good ruler and that of the good citizen:

«[At the same time,] the capacity to rule and be ruled is praised, and the virtue of a citizen of reputation is held to be³¹ the capacity to rule and be ruled finely».

The passage at *Pol.* III, 13.1283b42-1284a2, cited above, shows that the opinion at issue is neither rejected nor accepted with any reservations, but fully endorsed by Aristotle. Further support for this stance is offered in the last section of Book III, where the philosopher returns to the “former speeches” (*en de tois prōtois logos*; *Pol.* III, 18.1288 a37) and once again says that the virtue of man and citizen is necessarily the same in the best city.³² It is evident that, by “former speeches” Aristotle is not referring to section 13, which is too close to the conclusion, but to the very outset of the discussion on the excellence of the good citizen and that of the good man, i.e. to sections 4-6.³³

On my reading, all the passages I have just mentioned confirm that the impossibility of a simultaneous exercise of the two excellences does not hinder the logical possibility of a coexistence of both excellences in one and the same individual. Just as citizens, although equipped with the right of citizenship, do not continuously take part in political activity, the citizens of the ideal *polis* might not engage in ruling activity and still retain the *phronēsis* proper to the good man/ruler. The idea of a perfect city whose members, besides being good citizens, are also good men and therefore potentially good rulers is not dismissed after the end of Book III, but seems to be sustained in Books VII-VIII of the *Politics*, where such a city is portrayed as a community in which each and every member would be enabled to lead an authentically virtuous life, rather than merely professing an unquestioning allegiance to the virtuous prescriptions issued by wise rulers.³⁴

Aristotle’s best state, as sketched out in the later books of the *Politics*, seeks to attain a very ambitious goal: that of guaranteeing the most desirable way of life for each citizen,³⁵ rather than ensuring happiness to a restricted num-

³¹ As Lord points out in his edition of the *Politics* (p. 254, footnote 16), the text is somewhat uncertain. Lord reads *dokei mou* with Bernays and Newman instead of *dokei pou* («the virtue of a citizen is surely held») with Jackson and Dreizehnter.

³² *Pol.* III, 18.1288 a 38-39: «*tēn autēn anagkaion andros aretēn einai kai politou, tēs poleōs tēs aristēs*».

³³ This point is well made by Thurot, in M. THUROT, *La Morale et la Politique d’Aristote*, F. Didot, père et fils, Paris 1823, p. 108. Cfr. F. SUSEMIHL - R.D. HICKS (eds.), *The Politics of Aristotle*, cit., p. 368.

³⁴ The issue is discussed by R. KRAUT, *Aristotle*, cit., pp. 359-361.

³⁵ This ideal is explicitly stated in the opening lines of Book VII, where Aristotle, by setting out to establish the nature of the best city, stresses the necessity of offering a preliminary investigation of the best kind of life. Given that the best state is that which can realize the greatest happiness, the first question to pose for a sound investigation of the nature of

ber of them (*Pol.* VII, 9.1329 a24-25). As indicated at *Pol.* VII, 1.1323 b20-24, the amount of happiness which falls to the lot of each individual man is equal to the amount of his goodness and wisdom and also to that of the good and wise actions performed by him. On this premise, if the citizens of the ideal city were not endowed with the characteristic virtue of the good man/ruler, they would be denied the opportunity to live a happy life in a properly Aristotelian sense.

The characteristic virtue of the members of the ideal city, then, will not depend (either primarily or exclusively) on the quality of the constitution. As we read in *Pol.* VII 9.1328 b37-39, a state run by an ideal constitution has for its members men who are just *in absolute terms* (*dikaious andras haplōs*), and not in relation to a particular standard.³⁶ It is true that, in the passage above, the main focus of his interest is not a distinction between man/ruler and citizen, but an opposition between virtuous men and people devoted to manual work or commercial activities. What he means to stress, after all, is the idea that citizens should never live a vulgar or a merchant's way of life (*oute banauson bion out'agoraion*), as this sort of life is ignoble and contrary to virtue. Nevertheless, the account Aristotle provides here may give us some inkling of the quality which the good member of the ideal *polis* – no matter whether he is a ruler or one of the ruled – should never lack and which other individuals can afford to miss: the set of virtues which qualifies a given individual as a good man. Conceived in absolute terms, virtue cannot rely on simple loyal citizenship, and obedience of citizens to the law, when not backed up by possession of authentic moral goodness, can hardly have a claim to the character of absoluteness and be acceptable as the mark of complete goodness.

5. A FINAL DEFENCE OF THE COEXISTENCE THESIS

What has been proposed so far certainly endorses the view that the ideal city is not simply made of citizens obedient to the laws in force, but of individuals who are able and willing to achieve ethical perfection. It is important to note, however, that the evidence brought forward so far is not sufficient to establish the validity of this view. To begin, it might be questioned whether the conception of the ideal state emerging from Book III is the same as that sketched in Books VII-VIII. As Kraut, for instance, suggests,³⁷ it is not necessary to believe that each book of the *Politics* is expressing the same views about the ideal state. Different books might be handling the problem of the ideal city by

the best state is concerned with the kind of life which proves capable of assuring the most perfect happiness.

³⁶ See E. BARKER, *Aristotle. Politics*, cit., p. 353, footnote 3: «i.e. the particular standard of an oligarchy, or a democracy, which has its own and lower-conception of justice».

³⁷ See R. KRAUT, *Aristotle*, cit., pp. 359-361.

adopting different points of view, and each might explore a different aspect of the issue. Kraut himself believes that the third Book faces the problem of the ideal city from the perspective of existing constitutions and of the highest degree of perfection these can achieve compatibly with their imperfect nature, whereas Books VII-VIII explore the nature of the ideal constitution as a mere logical possibility, or as a regulative ideal – not necessarily actualisable in concrete political life – towards which existing communities should be guided.³⁸ If this is true, one might argue that the *CT* is valid for Books VII-VIII, but not in Book III, which means that, at least in Book III, good citizens are not generally good men and are not therefore entitled to ruling activity.

A second problem which still needs solution is that when, at *Pol.* III, 4.1276 b37-40, the excellence of a good citizen is presented as one which cannot be identical with that of a good man, Aristotle prefaces his claim by specifying «if it is impossible for a city to consist entirely of excellent persons». Even more worryingly, what is presented as a simple working hypothesis is turned into an affirmative statement in the lines that follow:

«[yet if each should perform his own work well, and this [means] out of virtue,] there would still not be a single virtue of the citizen and the good man, *since it is impossible for all the citizens to be similar (epeî de adunaton homoious einai pantas tous politas)*».³⁹

At least on a first reading of the passage above, finding a valid justification for the *CT* appears an extremely arduous and problematic task. One possible strategy is to insist on the idea (frequently expressed by Aristotle, as we have already seen) that the citizens of a well-run city should also be able to rule, and that such an idea clashes with what has been asserted in the passage above.⁴⁰ Paradoxically enough, profitable suggestions towards a defence of the *CT* come from two supporters of the *IP*: Susemihl and Hicks. Although eventually ruling out the possibility of a city whose members are all endowed with the distinctive virtue of the good man/ruler, the two scholars realize that the picture of good citizens endowed with ruling capacities might jeopardize the consistency of their thesis. To avoid the risk of contradiction, they postulate that in *Pol.* III, 4-6, while asserting the impossibility of good citizens being at the same time good men, Aristotle was still full of doubts and uncertainties on the matter, and that only at a subsequent stage of his reflection he came to formulate a definitive view on the relation between the good citizens and the good men (Book III, 13 and 18). On their reading, then, *Pol.* III, 4.1276 b37-40 would just express a provisional and erroneous belief, which Aristotle never had the chance to revise and make consonant to his overall argument.⁴¹

³⁸ See *ibidem*, p. 193.

³⁹ My emphasis.

⁴⁰ Such a clash is stressed for instance by M. THUROT, *La Morale et la Politique d'Aristote*, cit., p. 108.

⁴¹ In the course of their account, Susemihl and Hicks mention the possibility that Aris-

It seems to me, however, that it is still possible to construct a sound defence of the *CT*, without being compelled to charge Aristotle with inconsistency. In order to explain this possibility, I believe it is necessary to resort to Aristotle's approach to conducting a philosophical discussion. On his view, the initial stage of *any* correct inquiry (practical or theoretical) is to set out and pay careful attention to "what seems to be the case"⁴² in the area under investigation. Each philosophical discussion begins from a preliminary exposition of what appears to (or, in the context at issue, of the beliefs entertained by) all or the majority or the wise,⁴³ followed by a critical analysis which raises logical or philosophical puzzles⁴⁴ (called *aporiai*) that jeopardize the validity of the

totle's genuine discussion at *Pol.* III was wholly or for the most part lost, and that sections 4 and 5 are wholly or in part a spurious interpolation. They dismiss such an hypothesis on the ground that «it would be such a desperate and violent step». See F. SUSEMIHL and R.D. HICKS, *The Politics of Aristotle*, cit., pp. 368-369.

⁴² Aristotle uses two distinct words to indicate what appears to individuals: *phainomena* and *endoxa*. Both words are employed in EN VII, 1.1145 b2-7, where (just before undertaking his treatment of the problem of *akrasia*) he prefaces his discussion by claiming that «here, as in all other cases, we must set down the appearances (*phainomena*) and first, working through the puzzles, in this way go on to show, if possible, the truth of all the beliefs (*endoxa*) we hold about these experiences». On the relation between *phainomena* and *endoxa* see R. KRAUT, *How to justify Ethical Propositions: Aristotle's Method*, in R. KRAUT (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Blackwell, Oxford 2006, pp. 76-95, p. 78: «we can safely assume that in our NE VII,1 passage Aristotle uses his terms *phainomena* and *endoxa* to refer to the same things». The word *phainomena* is specifically designed to indicate observed data in scientific investigations (see M. CRAVEN NUSSBAUM, *Saving Aristotle's Appearances*, in M. NUSSBAUM - M. SCHOFIELD (eds.), *Language and Logos: Studies in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1982, pp. 267-293, pp. 268-269). Instead, *endoxa* usually express general beliefs about given subjects. Besides *phainomena* and *endoxa*, Aristotle also uses the word *legomena*, i.e. "the things said". See for instance EN VII, 1.1145 b8-20, b10-15 and 19-20). On the nature of *ta legomena* see G.E.L. OWEN, (1986), *TITHENAI TA PHAINOMENA*, in M. NUSSBAUM (ed.), *Logic, Science, and Dialectic (Owen's collected papers)*, Cornell UP, Ithaca, NY 1986, pp. 239-251, p. 240: «the *legomena* turn out as so often to be partly matters of linguistic usage or, if you prefer, of the conceptual structure revealed by language».

⁴³ See *Topics* I, 1.100 b20-21. Aristotle does not always reveal whose views are those he sets out (see R. KRAUT, *How to justify Ethical Propositions: Aristotle's Method*, cit., p. 79). However, he seems to be keen to show that such views allow us to hit upon the truth. On his view, human beings have a propensity to the truth (see *Rhetoric* I,1.1355 a15-18), but their mind can reach or get close to it only if properly oriented. However, as Kraut points out at 79, even though everything that is an *endoxon* has something to recommend it, that does not guarantee that all of the *endoxa* are error-free. As he claims, it will be the task of the theoretician to turn "that mixes bag of truths, near-truths, and falsehoods-all of them deriving from "reputable" sources (that is, from people who have some claim to credibility) – into something that meets higher intellectual standards".

⁴⁴ On what is generally regarded the second stage of the method, see G.E.L. OWEN, *TITHENAI TA PHAINOMENA*, cit., p. 241. He explains that the *aporiai* that Aristotle sets out are not unexplained or recalcitrant data of observation, but logical or philosophical

starting assumptions. The final stage of the investigation is a retrieval of the initial observed data/beliefs through an explanation which offers a theoretical justification of such beliefs. Under the new intellectual frame, the initial beliefs will appear in a different light, and they will certainly prove to be more reasonable than at the beginning of the discussion.⁴⁵

If Aristotle is really applying this methodological strategy (generally labelled “dialectic”) to his analysis of the virtues of the good citizen and the good ruler in Book III of the *Politics*, in the first stage of his discussion he might want to enter a belief which is likely to get a favourable reception from his readers, i.e. the impossibility of a city being exclusively composed of good citizens who are at the same time good men (*Pol.* III, 4.1276 b36-7). That belief, presented in a hypothetical form, would also be supported by the fact that, from a purely semantic point of view, the excellence of the good citizen and that of the good man cannot be absolutely the same (*Pol.* III, 4.1277 a22). In the second stage of his argument, however, Aristotle might question the validity of the starting hypothesis and successively re-formulate the hypothesis itself on a new basis. If he is really following a dialectical procedure, at the end of his argument he will still be able to subscribe to the starting hypothesis, by giving it, though, a different and a more theoretically profound sense. This process, however, presupposes the liability of the starting hypothesis to a plurality of readings and perhaps also some ambiguity of expression.⁴⁶

Notably, the hypothesis of the impossibility of citizens being at the same time good men and good rulers is liable at least to two different interpretations. The initial expression “if it is impossible that”, rather than merely stressing a logical and/or empirical impossibility, might simply indicate a very rare occurrence. As we read for instance in *De Caelo* I, 11.280 b11-14, the adjective ‘impossible’ (*adynaton*) is itself ambiguous:

«‘Impossibility’ has two uses: first, where it is untrue to say that the thing can ever come into being and secondly, where it cannot do so easily, quickly, or well».⁴⁷

In the argument of the *Politics* in question, the notion of impossibility might be employed in Aristotle’s dialectical argument to show that what appears im-

puzzles generated by expositing some of the things commonly said. Cfr. M. NUSSBAUM, *Saving Aristotle’s Appearances*, cit., p. 276.

⁴⁵ See G.E.L. OWEN, *TITHENAI TA PHAINOMENA*, cit., p. 239: «The phainomena must be collected as a prelude to finding the theory which explains them». See also Nussbaum, Cfr. NUSSBAUM, *Saving Aristotle’s Appearances*, cit., p. 268: «Aristotle’s phainomena need saving. This implies that they are in trouble, or under attack. First, on the level of the text itself, the phainomena are in danger of vanishing altogether».

⁴⁶ On the ambiguity of endoxa see R. KRAUT, *How to justify Ethical Propositions: Aristotle’s Method*, cit., p. 81-82. Cfr. G.E.L. OWEN, *TITHENAI TA PHAINOMENA*, cit., p. 245.

⁴⁷ «to d’adynaton legetai dichōs. ē gar tōi mē alēthes einai eipein hoti genoit’an, ē tōi mē radiōs mēde tachū ē kalōs».

possible at a first sight is, after careful examination, only something extremely difficult to realize, and, what is most important, not impossible at all in the ideal city.

If Aristotle is really undertaking a dialectical investigation, what we should expect in the second stage of the argument is to see the validity of the claim above questioned by observations which would stand in apparent contradiction with them. Does the remainder of Aristotle's argument give grounds for criticism of its starting assumption? As it might be observed, Aristotle's belief that the citizens of the ideal *polis* should be also able to rule might be read as a powerful objection to the *IT*. Evidence of this is supplied in the already mentioned *Pol.* III, 4.1277a25 ff., where Aristotle, just after apparently supporting what we have called the *IT* (*Pol.* III, 4.1277a20-25), introduces a view which might put the validity of the starting assumption at risk:

«At the same time, the capacity to ruler and be ruled is praised, and the virtue of a citizen of reputation is held to be the capacity to rule and be ruled finely» (*Pol.* III, 4.1277 a25).

It might be wondered whether Aristotle is inclined to leave the conflict unresolved. Although in his conclusive remarks (*Pol.* III, 4.1277 b30 ff.) he vigorously confirms that *phronēsis* is the only virtue proper to rulers, the *CT* does not seem to be rejected. Had Aristotle meant to rule it out, he would probably have tried to offer evidence against it, as he usually does in his dialectical investigations when he deals with theses in need of emendation. In contrast, at *Pol.* III, 4.1277 b32-33 he makes room for the possibility of several interpretations of the relationship between the good man and good citizen:

«Whether the virtue of the good man and the excellent citizen is the same or different, then, and *in what sense* (*pōs*) it is the same and *in what sense* (*pōs*) different, is evident from these things».

I take the claim above to show that, although there is an unquestionable sense in which it is impossible for good citizens to be good rulers, there is another in which the impossibility fades away. This could imply that Aristotle is seriously ready to accept as a real matter of fact, and not only as a mere hypothesis, the idea that good citizens cannot be at the same time good men, but he also needs to specify the extent to which accepting it is reasonable. On the one hand, it is impossible to consider the excellence of the good citizen – *qua* citizen – to be the same as the excellence of the good man – *qua* man, and this is the respect in which a good citizen cannot be at the same time a good man; on the other hand, different excellences do not mutually exclude each other, even though they cannot be performed at the same time and in the same political context.

Further aid to the *CT* is offered by *Pol.* III, 4.1277 a2-5, where Aristotle, after stating that the virtue of the good man cannot be found in every citizen, speci-

fies *ei mē pantas anagkaion agathous einai tous en tēi spoudaia polei politas*. In line with his own reading of the whole argument, Kraut renders the Greek *ei mē* and the subsequent words as follows: «if it is necessary that not all the citizens in the excellent city are good men». ⁴⁸ However, this is not the only admissible rendering of the sentence. The Greek phrase *ei mē* also means “unless”; ⁴⁹ so translated, Aristotle’s argument would assume a totally different meaning. On this reading, good citizens would generally differ from good rulers, «unless all the citizens of an excellent city are necessarily good men». ⁵⁰ The adverb “unless” seems to pave the way for the idea that a city can actually be made of exclusively good men. Although such a condition is highly unlikely to take place in existing constitutions, that possibility is perfectly reasonable within the framework of the ideal *polis*. ⁵¹ Understood in this sense, the adverb “unless” would launch a vigorous challenge to the generally recognized opinion that perfect excellence is a target achievable only by an exiguous number of individuals, even in the ideal *polis*. It is not unreasonable to suppose, then, that an authentically good city should endeavour to turn each citizen into a good man and a potentially good ruler.

Furthermore, the picture of an ideal city made of good men seems to fit well with Aristotle’s insistence on the fairness of the government in relays. ⁵² In *Pol.* II, 2.1261 a33 it is asserted that the well-being of every city depends on each of its members rendering to the others an amount equivalent to what each receives from them. As they cannot all rule simultaneously, they must each have office for a temporary period. In a similar fashion, as Aristotle explains in Book III (16.1287 a11-13), the sovereignty of one man over all of the other members of a state is not natural wherever a state is composed of equals. That is why these people believe that justice for equals means their being ruled as well as their ruling, and involves rotation of office.

Resort to government in relays is reasonable both in those imperfect communities in which it is difficult to establish whether some members are superi-

⁴⁸ See R. KRAUT, *Aristotle*, cit., p. 365, footnote 11.

⁴⁹ See J. LIDDLE-SCOTT, *Greek-English dictionary*, s.v.

⁵⁰ See for instance B. JOWETT, *Aristotle: Politics. Translation*, in J. BARNES (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, (2 vols.), Princeton University Press, Princeton 1984; E. BARKER, *Aristotle. Politics*, cit.; P.L. PHILLIPS SIMPSON, *The Politics of Aristotle. Translated with Introduction, Analysis and Notes*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1997.

⁵¹ See W.L. NEWMAN, *Aristotle: Politics*, Vol. III, cit., pp. 156-157, footnote 37. As he explains, the passage at issue implies that «the citizens will not be alike if they all possess the virtue of a citizen, but [that] they will, if they possess in addition the virtue of a good man».

⁵² On the issue of government in relays and the rotation of magistracies on which it rests see G. CAMBIANO, *Aristotele e La Rotazione del Potere*, in M. MIGLIORI (ed.), *Il Dibattito Etico e Politico in Grecia tra il v e il iv Secolo*, La Città del Sole, Napoli 2000, pp. 529-544.

or to the others⁵³ and in those cities in which no individual is effectively better qualified than the others. Also, if the good citizens of the ideal city were not necessarily good men, we would not be able to understand how a ruler, once having quit his role, can benefit from the rule of the people who have replaced him;⁵⁴ their substitutes should in fact possess the same qualities as those of their predecessors. Only possession of *phronēsis* entitles individuals to claim ruling positions in the ideal city.

It is now time to formulate some brief conclusions. My contention is that the distinction between good man and good citizen illustrated in Book III of the *Politics*, if considered in isolation from the remainder of Aristotle's discussion, draws attention away from what I take to be the central theme of his discussion: each citizen should strive to become a good man, and this is what happens in the ideal *polis*. On the basis of the identity between the excellence of the good man and that of the good ruler established by Aristotle, we might suppose not only that a good ruler will *necessarily* be a good man, but also that *any* good man would be a potentially good ruler, had he the chance to attain a ruling position and develop some specific knowledge of politics, of its aims, methods and constitutions.

While being ruled, truly wise people do not lose their *phronēsis* and complete ethical virtue,⁵⁵ nor is their having only a *doxa alēthēs* about what is good for the *polis* to be explained in terms of a supposed incapacity to elaborate solutions in view of the instantiation and preservation of justice and virtue in the community; rather, *doxa alēthēs* marks the *status* of an individual as 'simple citizen', i.e. a role which does not require the troublesome task of deliberating well on important political issues. As I read the argument, Aristotle's interest is not so much on the distinction between good citizen and good man, but on that between good citizen and good ruler. The distinction he draws is part of an attempt to show that only in one case, that is, in the ideal city, is each and every citizen expected to become a ruler.

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⁵³ See *Pol.* VII, 14.1332 b27-29.

⁵⁴ See *Pol.* III, 6.1279 a3-8.

⁵⁵ See P.L. PHILLIPS SIMPSON, *Philosophical Commentary on The Politics of Aristotle*, cit., p. 145: «It does not follow from this [i.e. the fact that the excellence of the ruler differs from that of the ruled] that the good man is only a good man when ruling, as if, absurdly, he were to lose prudence when he left office. Rather what follows is that the virtue by which he is a good man will only be the same as the virtue by which he is a good citizen when he is actually ruling. When he is ruled his virtue as a good citizen will be different, and his virtue of prudence will not be exercised (at least not in ruling the city)».

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims to explore both the nature and the purposes of the Aristotelian distinction between the ‘good man’ and the ‘good citizen’ outlined in Book III of the Politics. Unlike the excellence of the good citizen, affected by the quality of his city, the excellence of the good ruler, which Aristotle identifies with that of the good man, rests on an absolute standard: the possession of practical wisdom. I shall argue that Aristotle’s argument, rather than stressing the impossibility of a city being entirely constituted of morally excellent men, is ultimately designed to show that, in the case of the ideal city, all the citizens of the ideal polis are at the same time potentially virtuous rulers. The defence of this thesis involves critical engagement with those scholars who deny the possibility of the two excellences coexisting in one and the same individual.*

KEYWORDS: *Ancient political philosophy, Aristotle’s Politics, common good, ethics, the good citizen.*

FORUM I