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Aristotle and the Politicizing of Music

Aristotle was not a citizen of Athens, though he took up residence there at the age of seventeen. In Athens, citizenship was hereditary, in that, if both parents were citizens, the children were eligible for citizenship when they turned eighteen.¹ Born in Stagira, Macedonia, in 384, Aristotle forever remained a Stagirite. In 367 he left home to attend Plato's Academy, remaining in Athens for the better part of his life as student and then as teacher. At Plato's death in 347, and after some travelling through Asia Minor, he moved to Pella in Macedonia, where he became Alexander's tutor from 342-336. He returned to Athens in 336 and in this second Athenian sojourn set up his own school, the Lyceum. At Alexander's death in 323, Athenians rebelled at Macedonian control, and opinion turned sharply against this non-citizen for his association with Alexander. The philosopher self-exiled to the island of Euboea that same year, "lest Athens sin twice against philosophy," he is reported as saying. He died in exile in 322.

We are free to speculate about the connection, or if there be any connection, between his non-citizen status and the writing of his Politics (*politeia*), the uniqueness of such a work in the fourth century B.C.E, and then the special role of music, a topic which concludes his Politics. Only music will be considered here. He took up the topic of citizenship in the third book, where he refers to his own situation, that of a non-citizen, resident alien, or metic (*metoikos*).

*"...a citizen is not a citizen because he lives in a certain place, for resident aliens and slaves share in the place...resident aliens in many places do not possess even such rights completely, for they are obliged to have a patron, so that they do but imperfectly participate in citizenship, and we call them citizens only in a qualified sense."*²

He is clear that *polis* is a flexible term. The broad term *polis* may be used to mean *state*, but "...we need only remark that the word *state* is ambiguous." Walls do not create a city or a state, "...for you might surround all Peloponnesus with a wall...;" walls are neither necessary nor

¹ "Citizenship belongs to persons of citizen parentage on both sides, and they are registered on the rolls of their demes at the age of eighteen." Aristotle, Athenian Constitution, Ch.42, section 1.

² Politics Bk.III, 1275 a 7-14. The Greek noun, *politeia*, has a range of meanings: the life of a citizen, citizenship, administration, government, polity, state, constitution, and commonwealth. Does the title Politeia intend such conceptual flexibility?

sufficient.³ Neither do geographic parameters matter, because a state is “...a community of families and aggregations of families in well-being, for the sake of a perfect and self-sufficing life.”⁴ His terminology is striking: *community (koinonia)*, *well-being*, *perfect*, *self-sufficing*. This is a lofty, almost-Platonic necessary condition for the existence of a true state, one which would be an outcome of individuals achieving *arête* (virtue, excellence.)

But individuals are not sovereign. How is excellence achievable? Aristotle held that humans are able to thrive only in a political community, even if that community, presumably, is corrupted. In any case, Athens was necessary for the flourishing of life. Still, its necessity being granted, no particular individual is necessary to the political community. While Aristotle probably accepted the eternal return of species or types, he would not accept that of individuals.⁵ Even if a polity were threatened by corruption, it still must be dominant, precisely because it is necessary for the individuals attached to it. His expectations for *polis* are lofty, even while seeing Athens as degenerate; and such expectations would be reasonable to the extent that individuals within the city pursue *arête*.

The ideal or correct political forms require that the governors are the best, *aristoi*. The *aristoi* are those, in whatever type of constitution, who have achieved the excellence to which everyone should aspire. Once the power falls to people less than excellent, the form of government becomes corrupt or deviant. When the *basileus* (king) is not *aristos* he is a tyrant. When the group of rulers are not *aristoi* they are oligarchs. And when the polity is not run by a public of *aristoi*, it is the deviant form, which he calls democracy, the rule of the *demos* (common people). By these terms Athens would become a true polity to the degree that increasingly-more individuals sought to achieve *arête*, a goal and an achievement he had described in his Nicomachean Ethics. “Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.”⁶

³ Bk.III, 1276 a 23-26

⁴ Bk.III, 1280 b 35

⁵ Deborah Kamen argues against the common view that there were only three status groups in Athens, identifying ten distinct groups. Status in Classical Athens (2013). This complex social reality would be a clear challenge to the achieving of Aristotle’s goal.

⁶ Nicomachean Ethics, Bk.II, 1107 a. The last paragraph of N.E. provides a transition into the Politics.

We thus have an intriguing type of symbiosis: A genuine state is possible, perhaps, to be created by the achieving of *arête* by the individuals; and the individuals achieve *arête* only within the state, governing their lives according to the expectations and concerns of the city, as articulated in the constitution. But, at the same time, Aristotle sees humans as rational animals whose goal is a virtue/ excellence that is a necessary condition of happiness (*eudaimonia*), an activity in accordance with virtue. These two mandates, viz. the stability of the constitution as well as the excellence of the individuals, have to be coalesced. He calls for an educational program which is the same for all: reading and writing, gymnastics, drawing, and music. The first three are useful and ignored; music, however, is different.

His argument begins with a basic principle, “...the first principle of all action is leisure,”⁷ and music can provide some of what leisure (*schole*) requires. *Schole* means a learned discussion, a disputation, a lecture, or a place where lectures are given.⁸ He has also made it clear, in De Sensu, that hearing has an eminence, helping to argue for the special role of music. “...sight is per se more valuable so far as the needs of life are concerned, but from the point of view of thought...hearing is the more important...Hearing has the greatest share in the development of intelligence...”⁹ Aristotle is clearly prioritizing intellectual activity for rational animals.

The existing practice in Athens is “perplexing.”¹⁰ While music most commonly is considered a source of pleasure, Aristotle argues for a more noble use than pleasure alone, because music is received in a unique way by the soul.¹¹ Emotions are a function of the soul, and the rhythms and tunes of music correlate to the range of emotions that the soul is capable of recognizing and enjoying. Both cognitive and affective aspects must co-exist in the soul, since emotions may both emerge from cognitive interpretations of experience and also generate or alter cognitive experiences. These are intentional also, in that the soul has the capacity to attend to states of affairs outside itself. Aristotle himself is an example: the execution of Socrates led

⁷ Politics, Bk. VIII, 1337 b 30-32

⁸ Aristotle uses the term as “learned discussion,” while Latin and Romance languages, as well as our English word ‘school’, mean primarily a building or a place for instruction. He uses the verb *scholazo*.

⁹ Section 1, 437a, p.47.

¹⁰ Politics, Bk.VIII, 1337 a 35-40

¹¹ Music was one element in *mousike*, which included all the art forms believed to be gifts from the Muses. Aristotle’s use of the word is limited to harmonies and melodies widely used for educational, ritual, and recreational purposes.

him to fear for his life and go into exile. “The emotions are all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgements, and that are also attended by pain or pleasure. Such are anger, pity, fear and the like, with their opposites.”¹²

Music is an imitation (*mimesis*) of emotive qualities, a function that no other area in the education of the young can provide; life “presents” phenomena of sense to a musician who, in turn, “re-presents” them to his listeners. “Rhythm and melody supply imitations of anger and gentleness, and also of courage and temperance, and of all the qualities contrary to these, and of the other qualities of character...”¹³ The objects of the sense of hearing offer representations of character that are received by the emotions and thus by the soul. The various tuning patterns (*harmoniai*), as in the lyre, evoke different emotions and states of mind, thus helping to form the moral character of the soul.¹⁴ It follows that music instruction and performing should be introduced into the education of the young, but only to allow them to become good judges of music while not endangering their growth in virtue. Performance is not prioritized because its end is all-too-often something other than virtue, maybe remuneration, maybe the pleasing of an audience, maybe vainglory.

A careful education was necessary, and here we see Aristotle balancing two approaches: in one he is the empiricist, writing of Athenian education in terms of boys and impugning what are considered vulgar occupations; in the other, he is something of a visionary, not writing of what is actual practice, but presenting norms of what should be done in Athens. The education of boys who would hope to become citizens should be educated in what will be useful and necessary, e.g. reading and writing, gymnastics, drawing, and music in moderation. “There can be no doubt that children should be taught those useful things which are really necessary, but not all useful things...”¹⁵ Surveying Athens, he admits that Athenians who must work may well do hard work that deforms the body, causes illness, and lack time or energy for intellectual achievements.

¹² Aristotle, Rhetoric, Bk.II, Ch.1, 20-22.

¹³ VIII, 1340 a 19-20

¹⁴ VIII, 1340 b 1-5

¹⁵ VIII, 1337 b 4-5

Some work may be vulgar/illiberal but the city cannot do without it. What Aristotle has to do is acknowledge it while transforming it. ¹⁶

Clearly, his vision of what is possible for Athens-the-polity is normative. The passage at 1280 b 35 (as above) presents a striking picture with its words, viz. community, well-being, perfect, self-sufficing. At the very outset of Book VIII he opens education to all, no one being excluded: "...it is manifest that education should be one and the same for all, and that it should be public, and not private..." ¹⁷ And again, "Neither must we suppose that any one of the citizens belongs to himself, for they all belong to the state..." ¹⁸ Implied is the idea that Athens will not be truly excellent unless every individual is striving for *arête*. Non-vulgar activities, also termed *liberal*, are those in which a person learns anything for his own sake, or for the sake of friends, or with a view to intellectual excellence; the latter is necessary because rationality is the distinguishing feature of the human and is a necessary condition of achieving *arête* and *eudaimonia*. The playing of music by a slave at his master's banquet, on the face of it, would be classified as vulgar; presumably the slave would have been ordered to play. But, if at the same time, the slave plays for his own benefit or chooses to entertain his own family and friends who are present, the same music is not vulgar but rather liberal. The music itself is neutral: the intention of the performer is what matters. "The object also which a man sets before him makes a great difference; if he does or learns anything for his own sake or for the sake of his friends, or with a view to excellence, the action will not appear illiberal."¹⁹ Distinguished as he is by rationality, man must desire and work to achieve *arête* that begets *eudaimonia*; a deliberate, lifelong intention to achieve these is a necessary condition of success. What matters is intentionality; hard work will always be necessary, but appropriate motivation, i.e. knowingly striving for *arête* under the guidance of right laws, will be transformative. But it is difficult to get from youth up a right training for virtue if one has not been brought up under right laws...for this reason their nurture and occupations should be fixed by law."²⁰

¹⁶ Harry Adams faults Aristotle for denigrating hard work. Aristotle lacks "...an adequate appreciation of these vulgars' necessary and substantial contribution to the good life of the polis." Still, he analyzes at length Aristotle's picture of the "vulgar rich," who invert "...true noble values with false, ignoble and 'common' ones." Clearly wealth does not bring true excellence. Pp.133-152

¹⁷ VIII, 1337 a 22

¹⁸ VIII, 1337 a 28

¹⁹ VIII, 1337 b 15-20

²⁰ Nicomachean Ethics, 1179 b 31-35

Music has a serious purpose, primarily because all individuals“...belong to the state, and are each of them a part of the state...”²¹ Music education in Athens, as Aristotle sees it, is unsatisfactory because there is disagreement about the goal of all education: Is the goal knowledge? Is it virtue? Is it whatever is useful? Carefully guided by good laws, Athenians should use leisure well, because leisure is the primary purpose, the first principle of all action. Work, of course, is needed, but it is inferior to leisure; the superiority of leisure is its status as an end, a goal for all manner of work, ends always being superior to means to that end. Leisure is not to be confused with amusement (*paidia*), a distinction that Aristotle makes unapologetically. Amusement provides rest and relaxation (*anapausis* and *anesis*), but these are needed only after activities and work that are vulgar. Amusement, rest, and relaxation are not worthy and suitable goals to substitute for *arête* and *eudaimonia*. Accordingly, then, music must not be performed or enjoyed for the sake of amusement, rest, or relaxation. Rather, “...the pleasure of the best man is the best, and springs from the noblest sources...”²² He is the best man who has an intellectual enjoyment of music, the enjoyment that is able to correct what Aristotle sees as a decline in music education that can do harm to the constitution of Athens.

He has little to say about the technicalities of music; clearly his goal is grander. Although two of his students rank among the first musicologists, i.e. Aristoxenus and Theophrastus, Aristotle does not qualify; his interests lie elsewhere. Andrew Barker sums up his position: Aristotle’s comments on harmonic science “...are scattered here and there...almost all of them are brief...his grasp on some of its concepts and procedures was a little uncertain.”²³ The characteristics, structures, and performance of music are less important than the goal, and music must be rescued from sensuality.

Aristotle the visionary responded to Aristotle the empiricist. Athens must do more than survive; she must flourish, even while surviving may be difficult. As a Macedonian living in Athens as a resident alien, he was surely sensitive to the threats against Athens and all Attica presented at this time by the anti-Persia ambition of Philip II. Stability was essential, despite the defeat of the Athenian-led forces at the Battle of Chaeronea in 338. The Politics, written after

²¹ VIII, 1337 a 25-30. If Deborah Kamen is correct about the size and diversity of the Athenian population, we must give more attention on Aristotle’s words *all individuals*.

²² VIII, 1337 a 8

²³ Barker, The Science of Harmonics in Classical Greece, p.328

this defeat, challenges Athens not only to remain a hegemon in her residents' lives but, more importantly, to become excellent. Whatever his complete motivation in Book VIII, the goal envisions a moral and intellectual excellence which grows in tandem with that of all the individuals living in the city. To accomplish this goal, everyone must be brought under right laws; "...for this reason their nurture and occupations should be fixed by law..."²⁴ His optimism bespeaks a cultural reformation and legal control that are hard to imagine, but his seeming reliance on legislation is clear. His introduction of music into his vision, however, does make a positive difference.

Hearing is the only perception (*aesthesis*) which can influence the character and dispositions of a person. "For every tune, even if it has no words, has nevertheless character; but neither colour, smell nor flavour have it."²⁵ Listening to music, a rational person perceives what the music is imitating. A piece of music may be an image of anger, as in mimesis, for example; the musician is not angry and neither are the listeners. But still the listeners perceive the anger. The different harmonic modes could affect people differently but Aristotle did not reject any of them outright.²⁶ He did favor the Dorian mode because "...it produces a moderate and settled temper, which appears to be the peculiar effect of the Dorian."²⁷ This unique type of perception is the work of a human soul, the form of a person and, even though the soul is without parts, it is capable of both rational and emotive activity. The emotional appeal of music is persuasive and, more importantly, is constitutive of dispositions and thus politically useful.

Music instruction of the young and performance for all residents should be shaped by a concern for the constitution; to the extent that tastes improve, so too will the constitution. Growing levels of *arête* in the population must affect the constitution; good souls produce good constitutions. In Politics VIII, music is embedded with political concerns. Aristotle decries the emphasis on music-for-pleasure and seeks to urge a recognition of the unique service that music can provide. His work here was unprecedented; while Plato and Pythagoras had more to say about music, neither was notably concerned about the Athenian constitution. It seems reasonable to conclude that Aristotle's political interests were here joined to a long-term concern for Athens.

²⁴ Nicomachean Ethics, 1179 b 31-35

²⁵ Aristotle, Problemata, Bk.XIX, section 27

²⁶ Barker, p.348

²⁷ VIII, 1340 b 4-5

Given both his emphasis on virtue and happiness and what seems to be a concern for the stability and endurance of Athens, as well as his unique thesis on emotion, his unprecedented attention to music's possibilities makes sense. He must have understood how determined Philip II was to invade Persia, taking all of Greece along with him in the effort. At the battle of Chaeronea in 338, Athenian and Theban forces, fighting for Greece, were defeated, Attica thus coming under Macedonian control. Then, in 336, when Alexander inherited the throne, Aristotle, in all likelihood, understood what his former protégé was capable of, and how all of Attica would never be the same.

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