
Book Reviews

Aristotle and the Rediscovery of Citizenship

Susan D. Collins

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In her book *Aristotle and the Rediscovery of Citizenship* Susan Collins turns to Aristotle's political philosophy in search of answers to questions which contemporary liberalism cannot answer, or does not want to answer, concerning the demands the state makes of its citizens and the conflict between the good of the individual and the good of the state. The book is comprised of one rather long chapter discussing liberalism and its contemporary critics and then five shorter chapters investigating Aristotelian moral and political philosophy. The lessons for liberalism are not explicitly drawn and as a result the book feels quite disjointed, to the extent that it might be treated as two separate texts, in fact. One might also judge the two parts independently, in addition to the joint project of the whole. The first provides an insightful critique of liberalism, while the second gives a provocative interpretation of the places in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* where the virtue pursued by the individual and the virtue prescribed by the state come into conflict.

The starting point and motivation for the investigation is a critique of liberalism. Liberalism claims to allow each individual to define and pursue her own conception of the good and might pretend to make no demands on the individual. But critics of liberalism argue that the individual and the state are interconnected more strongly than liberalism might allow: justice, for example, and its cousin tolerance, are required of all. Moreover, these virtues are required of liberal citizens not just as citizens, but as individuals. As Collins neatly puts it "public virtues do not suddenly become private vices, and in contrast to the self-aware pluralist or tolerant liberal, the pious believer and other such "absolutists" appear at the very

least naïve" (p. 171). In this way, "[t]he inculcation of these [liberal] virtues inevitably raises the question of the good simply" (p. 37).

With the question of the good simply the question of the liberal order itself comes under renewed scrutiny. The presuppositions of the state are brought into view: "liberal justice assumes that the individual is of higher dignity or sanctity than the community; . . . it judges free exchange and prosperity to be superior to cultural and religious habits . . . ; . . . it identifies individual labor . . . as compared to need or membership in a certain community, as the true ground of property" (p. 15). The primacy of the individual is itself, somewhat paradoxically, an injunction of the state and thus the state's values obscure its values from scrutiny. Thus Collins contends that it is difficult to ask questions about the liberal framework from within the framework itself and thus we must look elsewhere if we are to discuss them. Collins claims that "it is precisely because Aristotle does not share liberal presuppositions that his thought becomes useful to us" (p. 166, cf. 2, 40) in solving, or at least addressing, the tension between individual and state.

So we turn to Aristotle's political philosophy, as given in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*) and *Politics* (*Pol.*), which readily acknowledges that every regime educates its citizens either explicitly or implicitly, and so does not avoid the issues of individual good versus common good. Collins attempts to trace a continuous path through Aristotle's thought. In sequence, we move from various of the moral virtues (*NE* books 2, 3 and 4) to justice (*NE* 5) to the founding of the polis (*Pol.* 1) to the debate over the good of the polis (*Pol.* 7.1-3) to the debate over political authority (*Pol.* 3) to the life of leisure (*Pol.* 7-8) as illustrated by one of 'social' moral virtues (in *NE* 4). Collins depicts Aristotle as engaged in a discussion of how the political community "authorizes two ends for virtuous action that it also seeks to reconcile: the common good, on the one hand, and moral virtue or moral perfection in its own right, on the other" (p. 45). In order to tackle this problem, Aristotle, as Collins tells the story, makes a series of attempts to slay a quarry that evades capture, moving from moral virtue to political virtue to intellectual virtue and cultural activity in search of an answer. At every stage, the tension between virtue as the good of the individual and virtue as the good of the community reasserts itself and, ultimately, resists resolution.

Collins begins by showing how the individual's pursuit of various virtues can come into conflict with what the city puts forth as the proper exercise of the virtue. There is a dual meaning, Collins claims, to the virtue that the political community espouses for its citizens, in that when it establishes some activity as virtuous it is always pointing "beyond itself" (p. 176). In aiming at the perfection of the citizens and in suggesting to them what they should pursue, the state opens itself up to the possibility that the citizens will go beyond the city's constraints in its espousal of it. On the one hand, it is noble to benefit the community even when such actions involve personal sacrifice. On the other hand, that the city establishes honors for brave deeds points the way to bravery for its own sake. This is first said of courage (p. 53). Courage is obviously beneficial to the city, but also dangerous because "the courageous man may seek to prove his virtue in less than politically prudent ways" (p. 56). And Collins claims that in general, because virtuous activity requires resources and opportunities, virtue can tend toward tyranny, as the individual pursues his own virtue at the expense of other citizens (p. 59, 64).

In general, for Collins, nobility always involves some "self-forgetting" (p. 53, 63, 173) on the part of the individual, even as the individual aims at the noble for the sake of his own virtue. There is always a sacrifice, whether it be of opportunities for ethically virtuous action, or of person or property (liberality is described as involving a "loss" p. 58), or, as we shall see, of contemplation or culture or of opportunities for political exercises (when not actively in power). Collins is right to say that the means to virtue might be had at the expense of others (p. 58) but does not do much to explain how the longing for the noble gets out of hand. By highlighting the presence of the noble in the discussion and its sudden disappearance from the discussion of justice, Collins is perhaps arguing that the ethical virtues have independent motive forces (such as might force a conflict with the good of the city). One might alternatively hold that action is only virtuous (for the individual) and aims at the noble if it conforms to what the city allows. There's no discussion of the nature of the non-rational part of the soul, of the longing or longings for the noble in virtuous actions, perhaps because Collins will find the various mechanisms by which they might be curtailed—justice, practical wisdom and others—lacking, as we shall now see.

With this “dual” understanding of the noble in hand and having interpreted various of the ethical virtues accordingly, Collins naturally moves (in Ch. 3) to justice, along with magnanimity, as the virtues which offer a potential resolution of the tension between virtue as the good of the polis and virtue as the good of the individual. Justice, both general and particular, Collins claims, has its orientation toward others. As such, it places limits on the unrestrained exercise of various of the virtues which individuals do not otherwise have. However, our hopes for a resolution are unfulfilled, Collins maintains, for the mean demanded by justice is given by law, and since the law cares for the common advantage and not the good of the individual, justice cannot resolve the tension between the common and individual good.

In order to maintain that justice does not resolve the tension in the state’s espousal of moral virtue, Collins must oppose the idea that justice has its own specific other-directed impulse, such as the love of gain at the expense of others. (p. 77, p. 77 n. 14) Rejecting this position is important to her argument, since a pre- or at least non-political justice which is other-directed, threatens to cut off, almost by stipulation, any tension between one’s own good and the good of the community. Her first argument to this effect is that there are other virtues which pertain to gain, so justice cannot be the proper perfection pertaining to gain. The “other virtue” mentioned is liberality. But liberality pertains to the dispensing of goods, not to their acquisition, and so there need not be any overlap. Another argument is that justice is relative to the regime. This will come as a great surprise to many, as it means that one might be just if one conforms to the edicts of a deviant regime. Collins relies on a quote from Aristotle to the effect that ‘justice is not a mean’ (*NE* 1134a1, p. 76). However, Aristotle says only that justice is not a mean in the same way as the other virtues are means, which leaves much more room for maneuvering than Collins would suggest. Moreover, elsewhere Aristotle writes that “those who seek the just are seeking the mean” (*Pol.* 1287a32-b5; cited by Collins on p. 143.)

While the law draws the limits to virtue in its own interest, it does decide what is equitable on the basis of merit, which is what is truly valuable (p. 84), even though it cannot allow unfettered pursuit

of what it points to as virtuous. Collins therefore moves (in Ch. 4) to an examination of the intellectual virtues in *NE* 6 and 10, both practical and theoretical wisdom, which in turn provide a bridge to the discussion of the good life for polis and individual in *Pol.* 7. 1-3. Next, since we as political scientists are examining how the human good is reflected in the law, and in particular in the structure of the regime itself, we are further brought (in Ch. 5) to an investigation of *Pol.* 3. Here, Collins finds that virtue, (now including ruling) is still at odds with individual virtue, since politics requires being ruled, but being ruled requires refraining from exercising the virtue of practical wisdom in order to let others perform the activity (p. 115). Further, the political life is unfree, because it requires ruling for the sake of others (p. 129-30). And thirdly, that because each claim to political authority, including that of virtue, is partial, "no regime can accommodate the common advantage in the full sense" (p. 141).

As a quasi-resolution to all of these clashes between individual and civic virtue, Collins suggests that the cultural activity suggested by the educational program of the *Politics'* best regime is a compromise of sorts, between the good of the individual and the polis, between political and philosophical activity (p. 116-7, 146). Such activity "manages to preserve the political community as a community of free persons under the law and to redirect those most ambitious with respect to virtue to higher and more self-sufficient action than those to which the political community on its own terms would point" (p. 117).

Collins describes this life of leisure (from *Pol.* books 7 and 8) as a middle ground between the demands of the law and one's individual pursuit of virtue. By calling it a 'middle ground' Collins denies that this perspective resolves the tension between virtue as good for the polis and virtue as the good of the individual. Virtue in the form of philosophy still does not make peace with politics, since politics and philosophy compete for authority (p. 117) and politics is an impediment to philosophy (p. 146). Thus, Collins argues that the political community's authorization of justice (p. 95) or moral virtue (p. 98) as our perfection is in tension with the privileged position given in the life of the individual to *theoria* (contemplation) or liberal culture more generally.

Again, Collins does not, to my mind, adequately address competing positions. In this case, she does not mention the strategy discussed in the *NE* book 6, that practical wisdom makes provision for scientific activity. In this way, in different senses, both practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom are "superior". This strategy can be seen to be repeated concerning the polis in its relationship to cultural activity: intellectual culture might not help preserve the community, but it is nonetheless the goal of the community. Aristotle exploits the very difference between 'what the polis encourages or demands for the sake of the survival of the polis' and 'what the polis encourages or demands as the end of life' to settle any tension between the two.

There's no need to posit an attitude that is at once respectful of the law yet superior to it if one holds that the law itself recognizes the superiority of culture. There need be no dispute between the law and either practical or theoretical wisdom on account of wisdom being an other authority (as Collins states on p. 117). There's no evidence for this. Even if we are talking about a gap between the law as written and as applied with the benefit of practical wisdom, the law needs guidance only insofar as it is not sufficiently specific. Wisdom is not a competing but a complementary source of authority. (See p. 87.)

A critique such as this would also make the final chapter (Ch. 6) otiose. In it, Collins goes beyond even the cultural activity of the *Politics*' best regime and returns to the *NE*, and where before her claim was that the goals of the city and the individual could come into conflict, now she argues that two of the virtues of social interaction, tact and wittiness, combine to produce a Socratic, ironic or "comic" perspective that outstrips even the perspective of the best regime's educated citizen. The benefit of this perspective is that when we inhabit it, we appreciate both the need for political authority and yet realize its limits, so that neither do we despair in the face of the difficulties of political life nor rebel in the face of its authority. Being neither dogmatically committed to, nor alienated from the law, a "witty" attitude allows us to admit that the law is necessary without being captive to its seriousness. For the *NE*'s social virtues of tact and wit Collins derives an answer of sorts to the quandary of the *Politics*. High-minded fanatics of virtue are quarantined within the walls of culture, where they might safely pursue their own internal activity,

while those with the requisite ironic distance can endorse its authority even as they wrestle with its limitations.

Collins is arguing that, for Aristotle, virtue and politics, the good of the individual and that of society, are ultimately not reconcilable, except in the weak sense that irony can be construed as a virtue. Collins says that "irony acknowledges the power of our opinions regarding what is noble and good even as it calls these opinions into question." (p. 163) Socrates is the figure who embodies this position for Collins, but in the *NE*'s discussion of truthfulness, Socrates is mentioned by name and his irony is not a virtue but an deficiency, in contrast to the straightforwardness of the intermediate person. What is a vice on one level is turned by Collins into a virtue at another, but there is no discussion of how to make this transformation and so Collins seems to have gotten made a misstep in her treatment of truthfulness. Perhaps, Collins feels that this transformation of irony from vice to virtue cannot be said explicitly by Aristotle, as he values philosophy unrestricted by politics, but who is engaged in political philosophy for an audience of would-be politicians. The rest of the chapter (Ch. 6) piles on a number of suggestive ideas and ends abruptly.

Does this Aristotelian investigation show how liberalism might "defend its own moral and political principles"? (p. 7). Aristotle does "address the question that is in principle left open by liberal thought: the question of the highest human good" (p. 2) and he shows us "the possibility that the best life consists in noble and just action in behalf of fellow citizens" (p. 173). Self-reflective liberals can thus learn from Aristotle that virtues—justice and tolerance in liberalism's case—are to be thought of as the highest good and the good of both state and individual, and that issues of various types will arise in "the relation between the right and the good" (p. 41). For example, Aristotle is said to provide "much-needed clarity about law as the vehicle by which human beings first come to know and seek the good" (p. 174). Or again, that, since the question of whether the political good is the human good is not one that he can resolve, according to Collins, so, neither can liberalism hope to resolve it.

Such frank admissions of the state's influence and role might help liberalism face up to the realities of its own impositions. But

since liberalism's virtues are overtly other-directed, it is not clear what the initial discussion of the ethical virtues gains us. Or again, should liberalism handle the irresolvable tension in the same ways as Aristotle is purported to advise, directing its most ambitious citizens towards philosophy and culture and encouraging (in others) the adoption of an ironic attitude? It's not clear. In general, the book cries out for a thorough exploration of what lessons liberalism should take from Aristotle in how it might justify itself, rather than merely that it must justify itself. As liberalism's interpreter of Aristotle, Collins is not interested in learning how a liberal state might justify to its citizens that they pursue courage or political activity or culture (though she does laud Aristotle's discussion, including the moral virtues, as revealing "the full meaning of citizenship" (p. 173).) In specifying and justifying its own vision of the good, the liberal state has no intention of heeding Aristotle's arguments for various components of the virtuous life, for this would change liberalism beyond recognition.

The fact that Aristotle does not share our liberal presuppositions might thus be as much an obstruction to such instruction as it is a blessing which makes him a source of applicable wisdom. At the least, it certainly necessitates a careful negotiation of the distance between Aristotle's political theory, and the presuppositions of Greek civic life, and liberalism's own way forward. *Aristotle and the Rediscovery of Citizenship* begins with an incisive critique of liberalism's self-induced theoretical blindness and provides a provocative "non-resolved" interpretation of Aristotle's political philosophy, but does not clearly make good on its stated objective.