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Restoring the Distinctiveness of Politics: On the Political and the Forms of Rule

Abstract: We argue that the current understanding of politics is caught in a tug of war between “economistic” and “postmodern” views, neither of which captures the distinctiveness of political rule and consequently instills confusion among citizens and misplaced expectations from leaders. Drawing largely on Aristotle, who warned precisely against this error, we consider the logic of mastery and contrast it to paternal rule. Then we discuss the voluntary nature of economic activity to distinguish it from the involuntary nature of mastery, before turning to discuss the political proper, which is a combination or mixture of these two that nevertheless makes it qualitatively distinct. These distinctions help us to better appreciate what is a likeness between political and economic, on the one hand, and between political and paternal, on the other while realising that political rule is not exhausted by either economic or paternal alone. The paper seeks to show that political rule finds itself as an in-between condition that balances itself against despotic, mastery, and the kind of care that paternal rule points to.

Keywords: *the political, Aristotle, forms, the economic, ruling*

Introduction

Today’s understanding of politics amounts to an impasse between two typical, but altogether partial, views. The first sees politics as ultimately a matter of interest aggregation while the second considers politics to consist largely of domination or hegemonic control. But neither of these viewpoints captures the complexity and distinctiveness of politics. Rather, each of

these perspectives – the first we might call “economistic” and the second “postmodern” – treats the political indirectly, reduces ruling to a singular form, and thereby fails to capture the fullness of political phenomena and rule. Instead of truly understanding the activity of politics, it is explained away. The consequence of this impasse is that political science lacks a common discourse or language to discuss (and disagree about) the political, while political scientists and citizens fail to understand the fullness of human experience. Instead, the two positions become two camps, increasingly embattled at their respective extremes, which further exacerbates polarisation that is rife across contemporary liberal democracies¹. Given the weight and influence of political and social science today, such disciplinary disputes are no simple academic matter.

This debate over the nature of politics is not without precedent, however. For, in a round-table discussion of the American Political Science Association in 1990, where panelists probed the state of contemporary political science and asked whether it had a “core”, among other things, Ian Shapiro argued the following:

What we disagree about most basically is not what political science is or should be. That disagreement is a mere symptom of what really divides us, namely competing conceptions of what politics is and what it should be. Given this fact, it is inevitable that there will be a degree of contention about both method and object of study, and a comparatively eclectic discipline of political science as a result. But if we all aim our critical capacities more directly at what we take the reality of politics to be and assume the obligation to explain its significance to the uninitiated in non-esoteric terms, at least we might have some confidence that our disagreements will be about something real rather than about artifacts of our own intellectual processes....[I]f there is ever to be a more unified discipline of political science it must surely find its foundation in a measure of agreement on what politics is and what it might in principle become (Shapiro, 1990, p. 38).

Indeed, the fragmentary nature of contemporary political science is a persistent problem that is itself related to the fractured nature of contemporary American democracy (Levin, 2016). Beyond the “economistic” and “postmodern” polarising views of politics, we offer an understanding that does justice to what both of these views (over)emphasise while likewise restoring dignity to politics and political rule, properly speaking.

The approach (or method) adopted in this paper takes as its starting place the present opinions of the two camps of political science to illustrate why they are not satisfactory. We

¹ While there are certainly exceptions, the dominant schools of political science fall into – or certainly tend toward – one or the other of these two camps. We acknowledge that every generalization has its limits, but the purpose of this paper is to begin with common or majority opinion so as to move beyond it to something more representative of the phenomenon itself.

then zero in on the logic that each of these two camps takes to be predominant in political activity, the pursuit of interest or economic exchange, and the pursuit of power or mastery over others, respectively. By illuminating what each of the camps takes to be fundamental, we argue negatively – that is, we begin to disclose what political rule is by suggesting what it is not. This makes way for a more direct and fuller account of the political that encompasses both of these approaches but does not fall prey to their reductionisms. To avoid the reductionist error, we approach political action and political phenomena on their own terms, which is often labelled a phenomenological approach. That is why we take Aristotle as our guide for the latter because he offers a – indeed, the original – phenomenological account of politics (Arendt, 1958; Drummond, 2002; Kontos, 2018; Kress, 2006; Strauss, 1995 [1968], pp. 205–223). Despite the differences between the ancient city and the modern state, the experiential aspects of politics and human action have not changed. Rather than reinvent the wheel, we look to the origins of political science to recover the foundations of political experience—that is, to re-experience political experience, as it were (Arendt, 1958; Strauss, 1995 [1968], pp. 205–223). This method is justified not by mere antiquarian prejudice or interest, but by seeking to recover what has been concealed by political and historical development but is nevertheless expressive of fundamental aspects of politics.

The present impasse has bifurcated understanding into seeing the political as *either* voluntaristic *or* involuntaristic; the original understanding of politics found in Aristotle's work illuminates a way beyond this impasse by considering *both* and seeing something *more* to the political yet. The validity of this method is further justified by its promise to transcend this impasse, which itself has consequences for both citizens and leaders, has implications for the self-understanding of society at large, and thereby shapes possibilities for justice, solidarity, and happiness. Rectifying the dispute between, and the shortcomings of, these economistic and postmodern views of politics and the forms of rule, is an important part of the effort to restore sound civic education for a nation in great need of such renewal (Atwell et al., 2017; Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017).

The prevalence of both the economistic and postmodern accounts of politics is of rather recent origin, and are the product of contemporary developments, even revolutions, within academic political science. To begin with, the behaviouralist revolution opened the door to an economistic perspective on politics. For example, Harold D. Lasswell, one of the great founders of American behavioural political science, famously argued that politics is about “who gets what, when, and how” (1936). Similarly, David Easton (1953) argued politics was ultimately the “authoritative allocation of values”. The renowned British political scientist, Bernard Crick, defined politics as the “activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and the survival of the whole community” (1964, p. 21). These thinkers were motivated by the idea of finding a neutral perspective on politics. Later thinkers were more forthright in their professions of belief that politics is merely another form of interest aggregation and thus a manifestation of economics, albeit a distorted one (Buchanan &

Tullock, 1965; Brennan, 2016). Some even suggest that much of Robert Dahl's pluralistic thinking about politics rests on the assumption that politics is a form of economics (Dahl, 1957; Swanson, 2007). One can pick up nearly any political science textbook today and find similar definitions of politics therein².

By contrast, and partly in response to these purportedly neutral and economic perspectives, thinkers developed an agonistic view of politics. The postmodernist camp of thinkers takes its point of departure from Nietzsche and includes a variety of genealogical and constructivist approaches (CIT)³. These thinkers engage in their own reductionism that likewise reduces politics to varieties of coercion or domination (Lash, 2014; Nehamas, 1991; Sax, 1989; Queloz, 2017). For example, Bonnie Honig (1993, p. 15) and Chantal Mouffe (2005) claim that politics is about an arena where differences can be confronted or contested. In this respect, the work of Carl Schmitt has been influential to substantiate critiques of liberal political theory (Müller, 2003, pp. 169–180). Others, following Foucault (Brass, 2000) and Gramsci (Prospero 2020), argue that politics is about domination and hegemonic control over “the other”. It includes thinkers like Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, and Frantz Fanon (Rae, 2013; Frazer & Hutchings, 2008). Such a view ultimately sees politics as a form of coercion, if not violence, over the other. Consequently, politics is reduced to a form of rule akin to mastery.

These differences in understanding also beget distinct methodological approaches in political science. The impasse regarding the political is deeply related to the so-called *Methodenstreit*, or methodological science war, which is often likewise divided between two camps known as “naturalism” or “positivism” and “constructivism” or “intepretivism” (Moses & Knutsen, 2012). The different approaches to knowing, which is to say the different methodologies, follow from different assumptions about the phenomena or object of study: “All methodology rests on foundational commitments” (Saleh, 2009, p. 145). Acknowledging the methodological debate, which further indicates the import of the impasse, our ambition is to go back to basics about the political from which follows our own method: a return to the beginning of political science, or the original reflection on political experience. Mitigating the impasse over the political is a necessary first step toward moderating the *Methodenstreit*.

² This approach extends even further into the realm of political philosophy. For, one of the leading schools of thought, that of Rawls and Nozick (Rawls, 1971; 1983; 2001; Nozick, 1974), echoes the economic perspective by sharing with it a rationalistic logic. The analytic school of political philosophy, while normative in orientation, is nonetheless reductionistic in its approach to human action and politics (for the critique of Rawls see: Alexander, 1985; Chantal, 2009; Kelly, 2003; for the critique of Nozick see: Barber, 1977; Coleman et al., 1976; Danley, 1979; Frazer, 2007).

³ These thinkers turn to Nietzsche's genealogical framework, from his *Genealogy of Morals* and his other works on power, and use it to frame relations of power within social structures (Nietzsche, 2006; Nehamas, 1991; Risse, 2001; for application or use of Nietzsche's genealogical approach by other thinkers (i.e., Foucault, Deleuze, etc.) see: Han, 2002; Lash, 2014; Mahon, 1992; Sax, 1989; Stone, 2005).

Aristotle, the father of Western political science, argued that the conflation of all varieties of rule into a single form is a category error that blurs phenomena and consequently distorts our expectations, of both leaders and of politics in general. “Those who think that the natures of the statesmen, the kingly ruler, the head of an estate and the master of a family are the same, are mistaken” (*Politics*, 1.1.1252a7)⁴. The distinctions Aristotle makes between the forms of rule derive from the *quantitative* size of groups ruled, which results in a *qualitative* difference in the type of rule exercised. For example, the ruling of a household or family is different *in kind* from the ruling of a nation. While both the household and the nation are rightly considered forms of community, the type of rule within each of them must be clearly distinguished. Thus, the type of community relations found in each variety of community shapes its form of rule. Insofar as we forget this, we lose sight of what a community truly is, and find ourselves with a distorted view of rule as well.

This claim about the distinctiveness of political rule was deemed sufficiently important that at the beginning of *An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government* (otherwise known as the *Second Treatise on Government*), John Locke likewise reminds readers not to forget it. In setting down what he takes to be “political power”, Locke writes “that the power of the magistrate over a subject may be distinguished from that of a father over his children, a master over his servant, a husband over his wife, and a lord over his slave” (2016, p. 122)⁵. While one individual may be all of these things, the powers of each ought to be distinguished one from the other, and so Locke hopes to “show the difference between a ruler of a commonwealth, a father of a family, and a captain of a galley” (2016, p. 122). Despite these reminders of the first classical political scientist and of one of the first liberal political scientists, many citizens and public intellectuals very often collapse these differences today, not least because political scientists now do so intentionally – their disregard of these distinctions has become axiomatic. In losing sight of what is properly political in human experience, we oscillate between over politicising and under politicising life: we place unwarranted expectations and hope in politics and in our political rulers (i.e., as father-like figures, as household or economic managers, etc.) on the one hand, and we

⁴ All citations to Aristotle’s *Politics* are using both the Bekker numbers and the Book and Chapter numbers (the standard referencing system for the vast majority of Aristotle’s texts) but the general translation of the *Politics* is from Lord 2013, with some alterations of the specific translations made by the authors.

⁵ It is interesting that Locke 2016 here seems to overlap with what Aristotle argues about these things in the *Politics*. While that might be true, we are not bold to suggest that Aristotle and Locke are fundamentally in agreement about the nature of political rule, the nature of man, or the nature of politics. Those who are hunting for the great “Lockistotle” will need turn to others for comfort and support. While Locke covers the same areas and issues of despotic rule vs political rule, in many ways Locke blurs kingly rule and political rule more than Aristotle does, as well as fundamentally being at odds with Aristotle over the nature and character of paternal rule. Thus, the agreement between Locke with Aristotle on these issues is one more of appearance than in fundamental agreement, as the character of Locke anthropology and his wholly voluntaristic understanding of the nature of political rule puts them far apart on these issues.

excessively deprecate and dismiss politics and our leaders (i.e., as failed masters, flawed CEOs, etc.), on the other hand.

In this paper, we restore some fundamental distinctions about the different forms of rule that remain just as relevant for our day, and we do so in large part by drawing on and explaining Aristotle's insights. Thus, we argue that despite living in modern states and societies – as opposed to the ancient *polis* or seventeenth century English commonwealth – we must not lose sight of the distinctiveness of political rule from other forms of rule. One of the key factors contributing to this loss of distinctiveness, we argue, is the monumental rise of commerce, the now ubiquitous presence of which leads many to *assume* that self-interest is the most, if not sole, determinant factor in ruling and social relations (Manent, 2006, pp. 86–97; Hirschman, 1997; Hont, 2005). For, while the political and the economic tend to overlap in many ways – in terms of both rule and community form – they nevertheless remain distinct in significant ways. Failing to appreciate the combination of difference and identity regarding politics and economics, it is small wonder that many opt either for a view of politics as *wholly voluntary* – according to the logic of the market, or trade – or, in opposition to this view, one that sees politics as *wholly involuntary* – according to the logic of the household, or mastery. The former view is found among libertarians (both conservative and liberal), who argue that legitimate social relations are solely based on free consent, and therefore rule must be reducible to representation. The latter view is found among critical theorists, who argue that all forms of rule are despotic, and therefore social relations ought to be freed of all coercion. In effect, these views mirror one another: they both fail to see that political rule is unique in being a mixture of voluntary and involuntary action, or of both consent and coercion. The logic of politics is therefore both more complex and messier than either exchange or domination, even as it can share in (as well as perversely derail into) both.

In an age that is charged with political expectations – a high degree of political polarisation and division, and an apparent politicisation of all aspects of human life – we must think carefully about the political to restore it to its proper place, so as to improve our political life. Today's tendency, for example, to speak about such things as “office politics”, “sexual politics”, or the “politics of sport”, and the like, betrays our confusion about the political. It is small wonder then amidst this confusion that many citizens are less able to recognise and assess genuine political rule, which in turn reduces the likelihood that potentially good leaders will emerge. On the other hand, by reducing all of political life to economic pursuits and social relations based on interest aggregation or class conflict, we likewise preclude the possibility for genuine civic friendship and lasting social bonds. The restoration of certain basic distinctions is therefore an important first step in proper civic education – an education for both rulers and the ruled, or for statesmen and citizens alike.

We begin by considering the logic of mastery and contrasting it to paternal rule (which is founded upon care). We do this because mastery is the logical view of rule or control that the postmodern/genealogical anti-positivist argument advances and while

paternal rule shares with mastery a similar non-voluntary character, it is its fundamental opposite in terms of logic and character. In contrast to these two differing versions of non-voluntary rule, we address economic activity, which opposes mastery as does paternal rule, but unlike paternal rule is both voluntary and does not necessitate bonds of familiar association. We do these things before turning to discuss the political proper, which we argue is a combination or mixture of these three that nevertheless makes it qualitatively distinct. These distinctions help us to better appreciate what is a *likeness* between the political and the economic, on the one hand, and between the political and the paternal, on the other, while realising that political rule is *not* exhausted by either the economic or the paternal alone. That is to say, we find a way beyond the impasse between the economic and postmodern camps.

The Problem of Mastery and Paternal Care

Genuine communities have obligations and bonds of great duration that rest upon care and trust. To elaborate on this fact, we turn to discuss key passages of Aristotle's *Politics*. For, perhaps better than any other thinker, Aristotle delineates important differences in rulership, which clarifies the place of the voluntary and the involuntary, insofar as rulership can involve one or the other or both. Aristotle begins his examination of the different modes of rule by discussing mastery (*despotike*), which he defines as the rule over slaves. However, the primary focus for Aristotle is the rule over free men or other members of the household (*oikos*). Although slaves are within the household, their relationship to the ruler is not the same as that of either husband to wife or parent to child, two other key relationships Aristotle discusses in the household. Aristotle explicitly critiques those who do not distinguish the female (or wife) from the slave as barbarians (*Politics*, 1.2.1252a35-b9). Mastery, therefore, is especially the rule over slaves and not free, or potentially free, persons (Bates, 2003, pp. 70–78).

The discussion of mastery recalls Aristotle's famous discussion of slavery and mastery where he talks about conventional Greek slavery as well as the slave by nature (*Politics*, 1.4-1.7). This issue recurs later when Aristotle addresses both the natural slave and the natural master (*Politics*, 3.6). Aristotle's real concern, however, is with the nature of mastery simply:

Mastery (*despotike*), in spite of the same thing being in truth advantageous both to the slave by nature and to the master by nature, is still rule with a view to the advantage of the master primarily, and with a view to that of the slave accidentally (for mastery cannot be preserved if the slave is destroyed) (*Politics*, 3.6.1278b33-37).

Although the rule over the natural slave by the natural master is advantageous both to master and slave, in the normal condition of slavery, i.e., conventional slavery (which was

discussed in *Politics*, 1.4, and 1.6-1.7), the master's advantage is served, and the slave is only accidentally advantaged⁶.

Mastery is the rule over slaves, be they natural slaves or conventional slaves, rather than the rule over free men or members of the household (*oikos*). Although slaves are within the household, their relationship to their rule is not the same as that of either husband to wife and parent to child. Aristotle explicitly insults those who do not distinguish the female (or wife) from the slave as barbarians (*Politics*, 1.2.1252a35-b9). Many feminist critics take this line as an equation on Aristotle's part of women and slaves (Okin, 1979, pp. 73–96; Brown, 1988; Elhstain, 1981). Yet clearly the intention of this passage is a criticism of those who do equate women and slaves. Therefore, the feminist critics who use this passage to condemn Aristotle blunder by their failure to read what he in fact says. The reason they misread him here and other passages is that they merely assume he is unquestionably hostile to women and therefore they are not obliged to pay any attention to the rhetorical context of what is said and how it is said. However, there is a growing number of scholars who now argue against this negative view of Aristotle and his position on women, that he merely treats them as subordinate and inferior in their reasoning ability and judgment, and that they are little more than children or slaves (Brown, 1988, pp. 32–51; Saxonhouse, 1982, pp. 202–219; 1992). These scholars have not only seriously addressed the woman question in Aristotle but also shown Aristotle is nowhere as guilty as the above Feminist scholars argue (Levy, 1990; Bradshaw, 1991, pp. 557–573; Swanson, 1992, pp. 44–68; Nichols, 1991, pp. 29–35)⁷. At any rate, mastery is ultimately a matter of rule over slaves and not free, or potentially free, persons.

The discussion of slavery in *Politics* 1 mostly centres around a discussion of natural slavery. The argument of natural slavery is the position that by nature there exist some people who are incapable of self-governance, and these people – for their own good – need to be ruled by those who do know their good. What defines the natural slave is a defect in their foresight and thus the rule over them is the natural rule of the foresighted over those lacking in foresight (*Politics*, 1.2.1252a30-35). Yet the problem of natural slaves is that although they do exist it is not all that clear who they are:

Nature indeed wishes to make the bodies of free persons and slaves different, as well [as their soul] – those of the latter, strong with a view to necessary needs, those of the former straight and useless for such tasks, but useful with a view to a political way of life (which is itself divided between the needs of war and those of peace); yet the

⁶ This statement is all he says about mastery at *Politics* 3.6, yet this point only deals with who is generally advantaged and not specifically about the character of mastery. For that we must again turn to *Politics* 1.

⁷ For the best two general summaries of the debate about Aristotle's treatment of woman, see Mulgan (1994) and Lindsay (1994).

opposite often results, some having the bodies of free persons while others have the souls. It is evident, at any rate, that if they were to be born as different only in body as the images of the gods, everyone would assert that those not so favored merited being their slaves. But if this is true in the case of the body, it is much more justifiable to make the distinction in the case of the soul; yet it is not as easy to see the beauty of the soul as it is that of the body. That some persons are free and others slaves by nature, therefore, and that for these slavery is both advantageous and just, is evident (*Politics*, 1.5.1254b27-55a3).

Thus, although nature intends to distinguish between the bodies of natural slaves and free men, it does not always do so. Because of this problem, it leads us to question the assumption that the possessor of the slave's body is also in fact the possessor of the slave's soul. Because of the mix-up with bodies, one is not confident that there is not a corresponding mix-up with souls (Yack, 1993, pp. 62–70).

This problem of the difference of the body and soul is one of knowing the real nature of the thing rather than its appearance. It is primarily an epistemological question that has great implications for politics. For, because cannot easily delineate between the soul of a free man and the soul of a natural slave – and by implication, the soul of the natural ruler and the naturally ruled – then there would be no real similarity between mastery (*despotike*) and political rule. But because there exists a gap in the ability of humans to perceive the true souls of others – in that nature does not simply distinguish between them – political rule is fundamentally different in kind from mastery⁸.

To restate, mastery (*despotike*) is the type of rule that benefits the rulers, who are the masters, whereas the slave (or subject) if they are benefited at all, are benefited only accidentally. As such, this kind of rule is *involuntary*, in that one does not see that anyone would agree to the arrangement “where they work and while others [who don't work] eat” (*Politics*, 1.5 and 1.6; Locke, 2016, pp. 132–133). Thus, mastery is wholly at odds with the principle of economic rule, which precludes coercion, as we will see in the next section. We

⁸ This leads also by implication that because nature does not clearly delineate between natural slave and free person, it also does not delineate between natural ruler and ruled. Given this then it is not likely that the best form of political rule for human beings would be the establishment of a natural ruler – as what is discussed in the last chapters of *Politics* 3 – but rather a form of rule which treats ruler and ruled as generally equal persons – although not perfect equals.

The failure of nature to clearly distinguish natural slaves from free men leads to an interesting discovery regarding political rule as a distinctive form of rule. Insofar as the natural ruler is the rule of the foresighted over those who lack foresight, political rule is not to be understood as this form of association between master and slave. Thus, politics is not the same as the rule of natural slaves. Aristotle clearly distinguishes political rule as a form distinct from the rule of the foresighted over those lacking foresight; in fact, he argues it consists of a different type of association (*Politics*, 1.2.1252a24-b27).

can therefore distinguish (with Aristotle) between two different kinds of relationships or human activities. It is important because politics cannot simply be defined as coercive or involuntary activity – the political and the economic are *not* simply contrasted in the way that mastery and trade are. Rather, politics, or political rule, is a mixture of the voluntary and the involuntary (*Politics*, 1.7). Thus, politics is ever and always a mode of trying to avoid treating rule as solely an exercise of coercion or force (which would turn it into despotism or mastery) or reducing itself to a form of mere trade or exchange.

Before speaking more directly about political rule, another word about paternal rule is in order. After dealing with mastery in *Politics* (1.4-1.7), Aristotle addresses the remaining two forms of rule in the household, namely parental rule and marital rule (*Politics*, 1.12.1259a36-39). He says that rule over either a wife or children is fundamentally different from mastery because both are forms of rule over free persons (*Politics*, 1.12.1259a40). However, Aristotle underlines that the two are “not the same mode of rule” (*Politics*, 1.12.1259a40; Yack, 1993, pp. 62–70). The nature of paternal rule is found in the care of the child, that is to say, it manifests itself in the desire to secure benefit and the well-being of the children that are produced. That is why parents often sacrifice their own interests and even well-being for the sake of (and for the benefit of) their offspring. So much is rightly called “care”, and is directed to the other. It is a form of love, as not only Aristotle and Plato argued, but so too did Augustine and the Scholastics (de Rougemont, 1983; Lewis, 1960). It is also the basis of both paternal and kingly rule. Socrates and Plato argued that political rule was akin to an art or craft (*techne*), which is done for the sake of the object of the art or craft. Aristotle slightly disagreed, arguing that political rule is for the common benefit of both ruler(s) and ruled – that is to say the ruler and the ruled should commonly benefit from ruling. Therefore, Aristotle saw a difference between paternal rule and political rule, as paternal rule is done for the benefit of the ruled, while political rule is done for the benefit of *all* who are members of the given political community. Thus, when political rule fails to benefit the whole community but instead benefits one part at the expense of another, or when the ruler rules for their own benefit as well as in the interest of those who put them into power, political rule slides into despotism⁹. That is why tyranny is a form of mastery over the ruled and is hardly a form of political rule at all (*Politics*, 1.7; Locke, 2016, pp. 226–232; Rousseau, 1978, pp. 49–52; Newell, 2013; 2016).

The mistake of a great many modern and postmodern thinkers is their conflating of the political and the despotic. For example, while Max Weber discusses various forms of rule, he is inclined to define power as the “probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance” (Weber, 1978, p. 53). Such a one-dimensional view of power can be found in the works of Michel Foucault, to take

⁹ Also, it is interesting that Aristotle presents an account similar to that of which he makes regarding political rule at *Politics* (1 and 3) in his account of friendship found in *Nicomachean Ethics* 8, especially in chapters 6 through 12 (Bartlett & Collins, 2011; Yack, 1993, pp. 33–42, 109–128).

one obvious and popular example. In speaking of the effects of a “political field” upon the body, Foucault writes, that “power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault, 1995, p. 25). And Foucault builds on this case to speak of the political as overwhelmingly seeking to control and even punish: “At the point of departure, then, one may place the political project of rooting out illegalities, generalizing the punitive function and delimiting, in order to control it, the power to punish” (1995, p. 101).

Similarly, this equating of power and politics with coercion and the involuntary is found throughout feminist thought, with the assertion that all paternalistic rule is despotic and unfree in character. The feminist argument is that insofar as paternal rule is not altogether voluntary and contains a degree of inequality in it, the power relationship between the male and the female invariably becomes one of despotic rule. At its logical conclusion, the argument is illustrated by feminist theorists such as Andrea Dworkin, who claim that “[s]ome men do not have all those kinds of power [i.e., social, economic, political and physical] over women; but all men have some kinds of power over all women; and most men have controlling power over what they call *their* women... The power is predetermined by gender, by being male” (2006, p. 159). Catharine MacKinnon similarly writes that “women/men is a distinction not just of difference, but of power and powerlessness” and she adds: “Power/powerlessness is the sex difference” (1989, p. 123). But in treating every opposite-sex relationship in this reductionistic, even hypostatized, way, such thinkers fail to distinguish between genuine human possibilities¹⁰.

Clearly, the despotic relation is one where the controlling or ruling party benefits in the relationship and the ruled party does not, but by no means are all male-female relations reducible to domination. For in the case of genuine patriarchal rule, *care* is in fact involved, just as in paternal rule it is for the sake of the ruled not the ruler. After all, a parent wants what is best for their child. Only a perverted or corrupted parent would put their own benefit over those of their children or use their child as an instrument for their own benefit. Similarly, only a perverted husband would want other than what is best for his wife. Thus, the feminist attributes the abusive marital or parental relation to be the norm; such thinking takes the exception and makes it the rule. Similarly, the post-modern political thinker errs by conflating the political with the despotic to attribute the abuses of political rule as the norm. Thinkers from Aristotle, who asserts political rule is wholly different in kind from mastery, to John Locke, who asserts the same claim, all recognise this important distinction – even if

¹⁰ Another way that the feminist argument distorts the problem of despotism, the problem with despotism is not the imbalance of power between the ruler and the ruled, but the direction of benefit and the failure that the ruled is being benefited by the rule of those who have more power. Thus, the injustice and the despotic character is thus not about the degree of relative difference in power or the lack of equality of power among the parties but the character of who is benefiting whom and how.

for very different reasons and to achieve very different ends (Yack, 1993, pp. 33–60). Before turning to elaborate political rule directly, we now discuss the nature of economics.

The Economic

In thinking about the fundamental difference between economics and politics, one is often confronted with a very standard dichotomy, namely between voluntary consent and coercion. In fact, we tend to not even perceive economic rule as a form of rule. Rather we tend to think of it merely as a form of relation or network of interactive relations. Another tendency is to say that economic rule is merely a matter of voluntary exchange among consenting individuals, and understand politics (or political rule and perhaps all rule) as the act of using coercion or force to compel one, few, or many actors to do what another one, few, or many actors desire to be done. However, while this captures something important about economic rule, it ends up distorting our understanding of political rule and thereby prejudices the argument in favour of the claim of economics, for the appeal of consent over coercion by free peoples hardly needs explaining. What is more, two further errors of significance follow from an application of the economic perspective to politics: first, there is an overemphasis on the individual at the expense of the group, and second, that all non-voluntary activity is seen as illegitimate. We must therefore seek a more neutral understanding of the economic.

To begin with, the economic rule is a specific type of human action which deals with the exchange of goods and services. Economic rule is an activity by which humans engage in obtaining what they need or want by exchanging with other humans. To simplify matters we may state that the basic act underlying the economic aspect of human life is that of “trade”, which begs the question: what is a “trade”?¹¹ We may start by considering it as an act consisting of two individuals: a buyer and a seller. Trade is therefore a situation consisting of two people who voluntarily agree to engage in a transaction. Each actor wants something from the other, and for each side to agree with the trade they must believe that they are benefiting from it. If one or both sides do not agree, there is no trade. Such being the case, there cannot be any coercion involved, because if the exchange is not done voluntarily then it is not a trade but some other form of activity – one requiring a different name as an act of coercion. As Montesquieu underlined, “commerce is the profession of equal people”, and the privileges of nobility or people with ranks lead to “all sorts of monopolies”, which the laws must prohibit (1989, p. 53). So, to reiterate, the reason why each party agrees to the exchange is that each believes they are getting what they want and need and that the price they are paying for it is fair or at least acceptable; each believes that the ratio between cost and benefit of the given trade is acceptable to them. This is the mutual meeting of individual

¹¹ We are not emphasizing production for two reasons: 1. It is not the primary aspect of economics, even if economists consider it important and, 2. Production is not employed as a structure to explain human socio-political relations more broadly in the way that voluntary exchange is.

self-interest often discussed by economists, which Adam Smith made famous in his butcher, baker, and brewer example.

But some might object that one of the two actors could be mistaken in their understanding of benefit or utility in the thing being traded. The concept of the trade operates firmly in the view that all valuations by each actor will be highly subjective, this is to say that there is no true objective basis of establishing the true value of anything (be it a good or a service)¹². Each actor will give their own value to the item or service involved. And they will have a range where the cost of that item or service is acceptable or unacceptable. That is to say, each actor will assess if the cost or price involved for the item or service is within the range of what they are willing to accept or not. If both actors come to an agreement, then the trade occurs. If they fail to reach this agreement the transaction is not undertaken.

To be sure, we often speak not only of such simple transactions or trades, but of the “economy”. However, what we are in fact talking about is merely the aggregation of all the trades that are occurring in a given market. Thus, the basic unit of all this activity that generates the economy are all the various trades within the given market. What is a market? A market is simply a given place – albeit the location may not necessarily be physical – where individuals come to buy and sell their goods and services to each other. It is the context where buyers and sellers feel they are able to engage in trades without the fear of either being defrauded or threatened. Thus, for the market to work, the parties must believe that the market will help ensure the absence of force and fraud, or that should either occur corrective or rectificatory justice will be meted out – the transgressive parties will be punished and those who have been harmed have what was taken restored or see that the guilty party is punished. There must be, as Hayek once said, “known rules of the game” that are enforced, so that the “individual is free to pursue his personal ends and desires” (2001, p. 75). Now, those policing the market might emerge from among the market participants or they could be outside actors – like the government – who do the job either with or without the consent of those who engage in the buying and selling activities of the market. But again, under normal circumstances, or under the conditions of what Smith calls “natural liberty”, things operate as follows: “Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way, and to bring both his industry and capital into competition with those of any other man, or order of men” (1982, p. 687).

¹² While we recognize the tradition of “the just price” this question produced more problems than solutions and was ultimately resolved when early modern thinkers postulated the solution to the just price problem through the instrument of consent of the parties (as found in the works of Hobbes and Mandeville, for example). This solution was initially supplement by Locke’s labor theory of value approach which only led to more problems than it presumed to resolve (insofar as this begat Marx’s work, for example, in *Das Kapital* and “The German Ideology”). The original problem was, however, finally addressed by Jevons, Walras, or Menger, with the marginal revolutionaries (Blaug, 1998, pp. 277–308).

As markets are merely an agreed space for the activity of trading, individual or particular markets can therefore occur within a larger or more general market. Thus, there can be markets within markets, where the one market is a subset of the larger one. There can also be separate markets; that is, markets that have no interaction or trades between them where each market is independent of the other and operates separately absent relations to or with the others. But then there are other separate markets that have a rather limited interaction with other markets. Yet the minute that separate markets have no limitations or constraints of interaction between them, one has in fact now created a new market, where those other separate markets are subsets of this new common market.

For our purposes, the salient point is that markets are locales of exchange where there are multiple layers and levels of sub-markets, which in their localised environment is merely the market that occurs within that specific locale. And the economy is but the total aggregation of all the exchanges that are occurring in any (or even all) given market(s). Markets may fall within the borders of countries or may transcend them, as signalled by the distinction between domestic and foreign trade, suggesting that economic exchange is not inherently bound to particular political rule. To quote Smith again: “A merchant, it has been said very properly, is not necessarily the citizen of any particular country. It is in a great measure indifferent to him from what place he carries on his trade; and a very trifling disgust will make him remove his capital, and together with it all the industry which it supports, from country to another. No part of it can be said to belong to any particular country, till it has been spread as it were over the face of that country, either in buildings or in the lasting improvements of lands” (1982, p. 426). Considering this, it is worth recalling that for Smith, we are all merchants in a commercial society.

Before we finish off our discussion of trade, we need to deal with the question of actors that engage in trade. Now here we are faced with the fact that whereas the basic unit of trade is universal (the act of exchange between two parties, buyer and seller) the actor involved in the trade need not be the same level of actor. This is to say, the variety of actors in a trade may be a single individual, or a family or household or estate, or a firm (a partnership or association set up to engage to either produce something or engage in collective commercial activity), or some form of political unit. Thus, these different sets or levels of interactions, which seek to accomplish different things, are all nevertheless a whole set of trades, which are nothing more than the trade between two parties concerning an exchange of some good or service. The aforementioned logic holds despite the increase in quantity of actors or the collective or compound nature of the agents.

So, when we look at trade as the fundamental basis of what underlies economic rule, we see that it is an exchange where both parties who are engaged in the trade *must benefit* in the activity and that exchange must be made by consent or voluntarily, which means there can be no coercion or force involved. Nor can there be any fraud or intentional deception involved. And given the subjective nature of valuation, as long as the parties consent to the trade and believe they are benefiting, trade transpires. No party would agree to the exchange

if they thought they were not going to benefit or if the cost of the trade was not worth the perceived value of what is to be traded for. Thus, economic activity rests on the assumption of mutual benefit and voluntary consent of the parties involved.

This description of the economic rule is a return to basics, and yet certain fundamental errors follow when thinkers adopt the view that “community” operates in the same, or in a fundamentally similar, way to the “market” as here described. Here we need to distinguish community from society, for community is the natural association of people who share a common life together and interact with one another daily – whether at the level of the household, the village, or a larger community. On the other hand, society is the interdependency of various actors engaged in forms of shared utility – be it in an exchange of labour, service, or commodities. The concept of society emerges at least in part because of market relations (Durkheim, 2013) Whereas the basic unit of the market is found in the act of trade or exchange at a given moment, the nature of community extends beyond the present grouping to those from the past (i.e., ancestors and progenitors) as well as to those who are yet to come in the future (i.e., posterity). Thus, the levels of interaction within a community are far, far more complex than those in a market. By this we do not mean to argue that the market lacks complexity, but that market relations are always only between buyer and seller even if significantly aggregated, while the nature of community interactions always involves the total set of parties in relation to each other. Moreover, trade is an activity that may recur but is effectively episodic: its time-horizon is restricted to the present. This contrasts with a community that has obligations and bonds of greater duration that rest upon care and trust. Thus, these relations or bonds are not reducible to the voluntary and therefore bear a thicker sense of membership. As J. S. Mill writes, one of the conditions of “permanent political society” “has been found to be, the existence, in some form or other, of the feeling of allegiance, or loyalty” and whatever type of constitution or government the society may have, nevertheless there must be “*something* which is settled, something permanent, and not to be called into question” (1963, p. 922). Therefore, any attempt to apply what is valid regarding a market to exhaustively appreciate or understand a community is wholly problematic, for they are not identical in their makeup or basic structure.

The Political

Having addressed mastery, paternal care, and economic relations, we now turn to politics more directly, to draw out the distinction between economic exchange and community, and thereby economics and politics, even more. What, after all, is politics? Such a question raises a great deal of contention. As suggested above, some argue that the way politics differs from economics rests in the fact that politics involves some level of coercion in its operation. Yet the place and role of coercion is not the only distinguishing characteristic of the political from the economic, for political activity operates in a different environment than economic activity. In other words, while the market is the place of trade and economic activity, politics

likewise has its unique locus, which is rightly called the human community. And it is this human community that we must understand to appreciate the emergence and distinctiveness of politics (Yack, 1993, pp. 25–40; Bates, 2003, pp. 76–78).

It is useful to return once more to Aristotle's *Politics* for an account of how politics emerges and to what end it seeks to secure or provide for human beings. After he addresses parental and marital rule (*Politics*, 3.6), Aristotle continues his discussion of the character of political rule, beginning with the nature of the offices of the political community. He notes that the offices tend to be held in turn and claimed on the basis of merit, when the regime is “established in accordance with equality and similarity among the citizens” (*Politics*, 3.6.1279a8-10).

Aristotle says that the above distribution of the offices was not always how they were distributed, and he provides an account of how political rule has developed over time:

Previously, as accords with nature, they claimed to merit doing public service by turns and having someone look to their good, just as when ruling previously they looked to his advantage. Now, however, because of the benefits to be derived from common [funds] and from office, they wish to rule continuously, as if they were sick persons who were always made healthy by ruling; at any rate, these would perhaps pursue office in a similar fashion (*Politics*, 3.6.1279a10-16).

Political rule only tends to deviate from ruling and being ruled in turn, when the one who rules has a character which needs to be always ruling. Therefore, if one wishes to maintain the situation in which ruler and ruled will alternate between each other, it will be necessary to keep from the ruling offices those who desire to rule in order to fulfil some need or hunger lest political rule degenerate from the principle of ruling in turn.

Yet those people who need to rule in order to fulfil their character need not be completely dangerous to political life or the political community. Such persons can be made to become servants of the common advantage, or the common good – that is, of the political community by binding honour and the things that the ambitious desire to the rewards for serving the political community (Yack, 1993, pp. 51–84). In this way, does Aristotle agree with Publius, the author of the *Federalist Papers*, that the good of the political community is tied to the industry of the ambitious (Publius, 2001, pp. 267–272). But this must be done in a way that will prevent the ambitious from turning their rule into mere self-aggrandisement rather than for actual public benefit. The best way to ensure the public benefit as the actual end of their rule is to maintain the principle of rotation of ruler and ruled. The perpetuation of this principle – that the ruler and the ruled will in some fashion be alternated in turn – will prevent anyone or a small group from perpetuating self-benefitting rule.

Concerning the nature of those who seek to rule, common opinion tends to hold that those who seek public office do so for their own self-interest. This view of the motive of self-interest by the public-spirited person is generally very narrowly understood in crude

economic terms (Downs, 1957; Buchanan & Tullock, 1965). The many who hold such a view will commonly ask, why would anyone spend far more money obtaining a political office than what that office gives as a salary? The usual assumption held by common opinion is that the officeholder will use his office for his own economic aggrandisement through graft and corruption. Now it is true that graft and corruption do occur in politics, yet rarely are they an exclusive motive for entering politics. Corruption is not an end, but a means to an end – the perpetuation of rule, of maintaining power.

Therefore, the common view that greed is what motivates those who seek rule is insufficient, if not incorrect because the need to hold office is symptomatic of something else. It could be an outlet for grand ambitions, such as in Alexander, Caesar, Hitler, or Stalin. Or it could be necessary to fulfil the emotional needs of those seeking political power – they need to seek the recognition of others to feel good about themselves. It could also be a combination of the two (Faulkner, 2007; Newell, 2013; 2016).

The need to seek the recognition of others is what Aristotle understands to be the pursuit of honour. Those who desire honour will tend to seek public offices as a means of achieving honour through public service. Others will enter the military offices and seek honour through heroic deeds. Let us not forget the real source of that honour, namely the common people who make up the majority of the political community. Yet those who seek honour tend to despise the praise of the many, seeking instead the praise of the noble and honourable. It is the irony of the pursuit of honour, in that its true source is something which those who pursue it either dislike, dishonour, or despise. However, the true source – the political community which is mostly composed of the many and the vulgar – is masked by public purposefulness, that the deed is done not merely for one group within the political community but for the common good of the whole community (Strauss, 1964, pp. 11-12, 30-35, 45-49). The curious and complex nature of honour and honour-seeking, therefore, further distinguishes political rule from mastery and from economic exchange – that is, from wholly involuntary and altogether voluntary forms of interaction.

Thus, political is the form of rule that seeks the mutual advantage (of both rulers and ruled) of those who share a common life together. This mutual advantage is not merely material advantage (although it is necessarily a part of it because absent such advantage living at all would be difficult) but it includes all things that facilitate *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing – that is, the well-being that helps us to be fully human. Political rule seeks to bring about such benefits or goods to those who are active members of the political community, which is to say, to citizens. Ideally, it is the rule over a free people, and thus a form of rule wholly through the consent of the governed. Yet, it is also realistic enough to realise that sometimes people can be in error of what they want and choose things that harm themselves and others, in which case the community will use coercion of some kind to either constrain people from harming others or themselves or to make sure people do what they agreed to do (especially when doing so will be unpleasant to themselves or they mistakenly don't think they will be benefited). But the use of coercion for such purposes

needs must be limited or exercised reservedly, otherwise things derail into rule over the unwilling rather than the willing. To be sure, if coercion constantly needs to be exercised then such rule becomes less and less distinguishable from despotic rule. There is no perfect formula to determine just when such a line is crossed, such that debate over the very status of political rule becomes a part of political life itself. The political bears within it an inextricable element of uncertainty, but this does not detract from its dignity.

As already suggested, politics is a situation where the question of who should rule is raised and remains an ongoing deliberation, for it is never self-evident, or automatic, as to who should rule. In other words, it is neither purely natural, nor simply paternal; nor, for that matter, is it altogether obvious by way of contract. Insofar as the question is raised, and deliberation carries on, there is a distinctiveness to the political from the economic and the despotic. And it is in this very activity of deliberation that the dignity of politics is found.

Conclusion

This essay is an effort in restoring our understanding of the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the political form, and alerting us to the danger of collapsing political rule into other forms; politics remains unique – a middle ground that intersects with the voluntary and the involuntary. This comes especially to light by way of a comparative method, as demonstrated herein, by contrasting politics with the alternative forms of rule. In the work of Aristotle, as discussed, we find a more direct encounter with political experience and the various forms of rule; thus, returning to him not out of antiquarian interest or ancient prejudice, but as a guide to return to political things themselves, we recover fundamental and comparative categories no less significant and delineable in our own experience, today.

One need not become “Aristotelian” to think politically, however, given the potency of economic activity in modern life, there is a tendency to long for politics to be reducible to the wholly voluntaristic, and a concomitant reaction that holds any involuntary obligation, bond, or action as altogether despotic. Thus, the two dominant approaches we highlighted at the outset fail to engage with each other, and otherwise fall short of a proper comparative method due to their reductionistic tendencies. Consequently, by way of a comparative method, we come to see that politics is what the French political thinker, Pierre Manent, calls the “great mediation” – it mediates between the paternal orientation of the household and the individualist orientation of the marketplace (Manent, 2006; Shelley, 2020). The two camps thus stand at an impasse as each fails to appreciate this mediating aspect of the political and they therefore tend further toward the extremes; the impasse is only exacerbated as is the polarisation and fragmentation of communities.

One additional consequence of this impasse is an inability to grasp, and appreciate the growth of, *administration*. For, the only way to understand its challenge is to contrast it with political rule, which is perhaps one of the most significant transformations of modern politics – a topic beyond this essay but necessitating further research (Hamburger, 2014).

A proper and comprehensive account of the forms of rule is a first step toward revitalising civic education, again another topic beyond this essay, but one which the arguments here would strongly commend. It is so because there can only be politics where there are citizens, and citizens where there is a political community which operates and is governed in the spirit of political rule.

In a world without citizens and only consumers, there is economics and administration only, or in a world without citizens and only subjects, there is domination and mastery only. So, the two opposing camps of contemporary political science ultimately come to the same irresolvable outcome. The current environment under which much of the industrial world operates is more conducive to subject consumers rather than citizens, which is why some now argue that the very concept of citizenship is dying. It is even more the case in a world where the “true meaning of this word has almost been entirely lost among modern men. Most of them mistake a town for a City, a bourgeois for a citizen. They do not know that houses make the town, but citizens make the City” (Rousseau, 1978, p. 54).

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