

Friendship, *ēthos* and equality in Aristotle's treatment of democratic *politeiai*

Amistad, *ēthos* e igualdad en la discusión aristotélica de las *politeiai* democráticas

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to bring to light the role played by concern for the *ēthos* of citizens in the establishment and preservation of regimes by virtuous legislative activity, with special reference to democratic forms of government. To this goal, I will lay stress on the idea of “political friendship” (*hē politikē philia*), which Aristotle explores in his ethical works in relation to the power of virtuous legislative activity to shape the (individual and relational) habits of citizens. An analysis of different types of democratic regimes will show that they lack authentic political friendship. I will also contend that, although democratic measures might occasionally ameliorate and preserve imperfect regimes, Aristotle continues to maintain a negative view of such *politeiai*.

Keywords: regime, democracy, friendship, *ēthos*, equality.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el papel que tiene la atención hacia el *ēthos* de los ciudadanos en la creación y la conservación de los regímenes políticos por

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parte de una actividad legislativa virtuosa, haciendo especial hincapié en las formas de gobierno democráticas. Para desarrollar esta idea, me centraré en la idea de la “amistad política” (*hē politikē philia*), que Aristóteles examina en sus obras éticas en relación con la facultad de la actividad legislativa virtuosa de moldear los hábitos (individuales y relacionales) de los ciudadanos. El análisis de los diferentes tipos de regímenes democráticos mostrará que ellos carecen de una auténtica amistad política. Demostraré también que, aunque las medidas democráticas puedan mejorar y conservar los regímenes imperfectos, Aristóteles sigue manteniendo una opinión negativa hacia esas *politeiai*.

Palabras-clave: régimen, democracia, amistad, *ēthos*, igualdad.

1. Introduction

The notion of *politeia* is used by Aristotle in a wide variety of contexts of discussion. By way of example, in the Book 4 of the *Politics* (hereafter *Pol.*), by treating it as “regime”², he defines it as “an arrangement in cities connected with the offices (τάξεις ταῖς πόλεσιν ἢ περὶ τὰς ἀρχάς), establishing the manner in which they have been distributed, what the authoritative element of the regime is, and what the end of the community is in each case”³ (1289a 15-17). In Book 3, precisely with reference to the idea of its authoritative element, *politeia* is identified with *politeuma* (πολίτευμα δ’ ἐστὶν ἡ πολιτεία), i.e. the governmental body “that has authority over all matters” (πανταχοῦ τὸ πολίτευμα τῆς πόλεως) (1278b 9-11)⁴. Furthermore, as Aristotle makes it clear in Book 4, a treatment of regimes involves an investigation into the socio-economic composition of the people holding office. For the distribution of offices is said to occur “either on the basis of the power of those taking part in the regime or on the basis of some equality common to them – I mean, [the power of] the poor or the well off, or some [equality] common to both” (1290a 9-11). In addition, a well-functioning *politeia* should adopt the rule of law in all matters (“For where the laws do not rule there is no regime”) (1292a 33-35), and create the conditions for the establishment of a proper community (*koinōnia*). The *polis* itself, of which *politeia* is the main qualifying aspect, is defined as a *koinōnia* of citizens

² In this essay I will translate the word *politeia* as “regime” rather than as “constitution” (which is for instance used by Rackham 1944 and Rhys Roberts 1991).

³ Translation by Lord 2013, from which all the passages of the *Politics* mentioned in this essay will be taken, unless differently specified.

⁴ On the nature of *politeuma* as government and “sovereign power”, its conceptual difference from *politeia* and the possibility of an identification between the two concepts see Ventura 209: 139-147. Ventura contends that, in several occurrences of the word in the *Pol.*, *politeuma* means also the *status* of member of the sovereign body itself.

in Book 3 of the *Pol.* (1276b 1-2). Being the “form of the compound” (εἶδος συνθέσεως; 1276b 9), *politeia* appears to qualify the specific way in which partnerships arise and get shaped in a certain city.

In line with the heterogeneity of the functions played within those contexts, the semantic range of the word incorporates a cluster of meanings which, despite their conceptual separateness and reciprocal irreducibility, often appear to be tightly related to one another. For the ideas of ordering of offices, sovereign power, socio-economic position, rule of law, and community, find concrete expression within the framework of legislative activity. This operates not only at the level of distribution of political offices, but also at the level of education, which concerns customs and attitudes of citizens – customs and attitudes that are generally affected by their socio-economic conditions and opportunities [or lack of opportunities] for education in matters of politics⁵. Indeed, *ēthos* qualifies and affects the identity of the sovereign body, as well as the end of each community (the same end that qualifies the specific idea of the just in each city⁶). In this respect, *politeia* can also appear as a system of shared values – not only those establishing the criteria for membership in a certain political community⁷, but also and especially those qualifying the ethical identity of citizens⁸.

The aim of this essay is to bring to light the role played by concern for the *ēthos* of citizens in the establishment and preservation of regimes by virtuous legislative activity, with special reference to democratic forms of government. To this goal, I will lay stress on the ideas of “political friendship” (*hē politikē philia*), which Aristotle explores in his ethical works in relation to the possibility of virtuous legislative activity to shape the (individual and relational) habits of citizens. As it is well known, Aristotle's theorization of democracy and its possible institutional expressions does not exhibit special care for education to virtue, and I do not mean to challenge this assumption in my essay. My main contention, however, is that, despite maintaining a negative view of democracy in general⁹ (and also of different forms of democracy), Aristotle regards certain democratic measures as devices meant to promote and ameliorate political friendships in regimes non strictly democratic (such as oligarchy and *politeia*), fostering habits hospitable to new forms of equality, justice and community in existing regimes. On the other hand, by analysis of different types of regimes

⁵ Cf. Poddighe 2014: 10, 12-13.

⁶ Poddighe 2014: 141.

⁷ This aspect is stressed by Ober 1996: 173, who speaks of the “ideology” of *politeia* (here understood as “body of citizens”) without including the issue of the *ēthos* of citizens.

⁸ Poddighe 2014: 12-13, n. 1, who, unlike Ober, stresses the idea of *ēthos* as a distinctive aspect of *politeiai*.

⁹ In this respect, I follow Bertelli 2018. Authors who, by contrast, seem to regard Aristotle as a supporter of democracy and its supposedly liberal principles are for instance Yack 1993, Waldron 1995, and Craven Nussbaum 1990.

addressed by Aristotle in Books 4 and 6 of the *Pol.*, I will try to show that no form of democratic regime seems to present by itself a potential for the education to equality and joint deliberation.

In the first part of this paper, I will briefly address some aspects of Aristotle's theorization of political friendship identifiable in his ethical works and stress that specific conceptions of *to dikaion* lay the basis not only for distribution of offices, but also for the acquisition of habits that shape respectively different ways of sharing in the life of the community. Furthermore, I will argue that the "symmetric" political friendship between equals established in a supposedly virtuous government of the *plēthos*, unlike its corresponding deviation, i.e. democracy, is not rooted in pure arithmetic equality. In the second part I will at first introduce democracy in general terms, pointing to the need for a distinctively democratic education aimed at preserving deviant regimes. Then, I will focus on different kinds of democracy and see if and to what extent political friendship enables us to assess democratic regimes.

2. The *ēthos* of political friendship

In Aristotle's view, concern of virtuous lawgivers for education finds its sense in relation to the search of the conditions enabling human beings to achieve the good life within the *polis*. As he explains in Book 7 of the *Pol.* (1328a 36-37), where the *polis* is introduced as a community of similar people (κοινωνία τίς ἐστὶ τῶν ὁμοίων) aiming at the best possible life (ἔνεκεν δὲ ζῶῃς τῆς ἐνδεχομένης ἀρίστης), not every person can have a share in it, and this is the reason why different cities and several forms of *politeiai* arise (1328a 40-41). For the happiness at stake consists in some sort of perfect activity and use of excellence, and while some persons can participate in it (μετέχειν αὐτῆς), others can do it either to a small extent or not at all. As it seems, Aristotle is not referring here to the obvious fact that, in one and the same city, there might be people endowed with different talents and habits. His argument rather suggests that different communities of similar citizens entertain respectively different conceptions of what a happy life truly is – an idea which is also found in Book 1 of the *Rhetoric*, where he addresses the need for would-be experts in deliberative oratory to consider the specific end pursued by each *politeia*, "since people choose such actions as will lead to the realization of their ends" (1366a 3-5)¹⁰. The orator (just like the good lawgiver¹¹) ought to distinguish the customs (ἤθη), institutions (νόμιμα), and interests which tend to

¹⁰ Tr. Rhys Roberts 1991.

¹¹ The ethical content of good speeches of deliberative oratory is made by the same principles that ought to direct the activity of wise lawgivers. Cf. Garver 2006, chapter 1 (especially 15-17).

the realization of the end of each regime (1366a 7-9)¹². As Aristotle points out here, only the end of aristocracy has to do with both education – presumably education to perfect ethical excellence – and the things prescribed by law (1366a 5-6: ἀριστοκρατίας δὲ τὰ περὶ παιδείαν καὶ τὰ νόμιμα), whereas the ends of democracy and oligarchy are respectively sheer freedom and wealth.

One of the tasks of good legislative activity, however, is that of implementing various forms of educational strategies, depending on the specific character of each *politeia*:

[O]ne should educate with a view to each sort, for the character that is proper to each sort of regime both customarily safeguards the regime and establishes it at the beginning – the democratic character a democracy, for example, or the oligarchic an oligarchy; and the better character is always a cause of a better regime (*Pol.* 1337a 15-19).

As he clarifies in his ethical works, virtuous lawgivers can intervene in the ethical habits of citizens by way of an arrangement of principles and relevant laws designed to promote not only the just (*to dikaion*), but also a corresponding *philia*. Although at *Eudemian Ethics* (hereafter *EE*) 1242a 20-21 Aristotle says that “generally all justice (ὄλως τὸ δίκαιον ἅπαν) is in relation to a friend (πρὸς φίλον)”¹³, he is well aware that friends have an habit to behave justly towards each other, without the need of being coerced by a formal *to dikaion*. What is more, even if conceived as virtuous individual disposition of character, *dikaiosynē* in itself lacks the idea of sharing in life experiences, values, and aims of one and the same community – which is instead powerfully emphasized in the idea of *philia*. This would explain why, as it is generally believed¹⁴, “[F]riendship seems also to hold cities together, and lawgivers to care more about it than about justice”¹⁵ (*NE* 1155a 23-24). What is more, “when people are friends, they have no need of justice, while when they are just, they need friendship as well” (*NE* 1155a 26-28). From a motivational point of view, sharing in the life of the community (especially between people accustomed to treating each other as equal) can create a bond which impersonal justice (for instance, the one practicable between strangers) cannot produce by itself. On the other hand, this is not to say that political friendship is sufficient to replace an implementation of *to dikaion* – which is mainly understood as the order of distribution of offices in regimes on the basis of established principles. To the

¹² As it is worth noting, however, the specific task of the orator is to know *ēthē* of each constitution so as to address people endowed with a specific *ēthos* more persuasively (*Rhet.* 1, 1366a 12-14).

¹³ Tr. Solomon 1991.

¹⁴ Aristotle introduces this view in the form of an *endoxon*, i.e. an opinion which needs to be critically addressed in properly philosophical investigations in order to be either accepted or rejected.

¹⁵ Tr. Crisp 2004, from which all the passages of the *NE* mentioned in this essay will be taken, unless differently specified.

contrary, Aristotle often emphasizes the tight correspondence between different forms of *to dikaion* and specific forms of *philia*, and he claims that the extent of the *koinōnia* between people is “the extent of their friendship, since it is also the extent of their justice” (cf. *NE* 1159b 25-30). As it might be evinced from *EE* 1241b 10-17, what produces the correspondence between justice, community, and friendship is specifically *to dikaion*. In the context at issue, Aristotle points out that *to dikaion* – as a qualifying element of *politeiai* – is generally said to consist in a certain form of equality (*isotēs*), and that friendship itself resides in some sort of equality (*EE* 1241b 13-14). As he goes on to say:

Now constitutions (πολιτεῖαι) are all of them a particular form of justice; for a constitution is a partnership, and every partnership rests on justice (διὰ τοῦ δικαίου συνέστηκεν) so that whatever be the number of species of friendship, there are the same of justice and partnership; these all border on one another, and the species of one have differences akin to those of the other (*EE* 1241b 14-17).

The above passage suggests that political friendships, although being mainly¹⁶ rooted in the search for utility (cf. *NE* 1160b 11-12; 1242a 6-7, 11-12; 1160a 22-23), admit of qualities and degrees which vary according the way in which equality itself is implemented. In certain regimes, this might involve a display of justice and friendship shaped by the values on which specific forms of distributive justice are grounded (such as virtue, wealth, and freedom in the case of respectively aristocracy, oligarchy, and democracy; cf. *NE* 5, 1131a 26-29). What is more, one of the most distinctive aspect of political friendship, concord (*homonoia*), will assume different connotations depending on different kinds of regime and the corresponding dynamics of power that arise in each of them. As Aristotle says in the *endoxon* proposed in *NE* 1155a 24-26, *homonoia* is regarded as something similar to friendship, and this is what lawgivers mostly pursue¹⁷, being mainly committed to the avoidance of civil conflict (*stasis*). The kind of *homonoia* Aristotle is mostly concerned with is one of *philikon* character (1167a 22), and it does not coincide with having the same opinion on any matter whatever (*homodoxia*; cf. *homonoiein*) – which might occur even among people who do not know each other and are not involved in practical endeavours (1167a 24-26). *Homonoia* is rather achieved “when people agree about what is beneficial, rationally choose the same things, and carry out common resolutions” (1167a 27-28). The political import of that value becomes clearer in the following lines of Aristotle’s argument, where he says:

¹⁶ This does not exclude an attention to various forms of education to virtuous habits or, at least, to practices enhancing cohesiveness. Cf Stern-Gillet 1995: 147-170.

¹⁷ This aspect is stressed by Lockwood 2020, who argues that *homonoia* has a higher relevance in lawgiving activity than *philia*, and involves an interest in the political applications of friendship already in Aristotle’s ethical works.

Things to be done, then, are what concord is concerned with, and of these only those that are important and are such that both parties or all the citizens can get what they want. A city, for example, is in concord when all the citizens think that public offices ought to be elective, or that they ought to make an alliance with Sparta, or that Pittacus ought to govern, when he himself is willing (1167a 28-32).

As it has been contended by some¹⁸, the concept of *homonoia* seems to stress degree of cohesiveness and the collective value of the citizen body rather than the dynamics of interaction between single individuals. Furthermore, as Aristotle himself points out in the following lines of the passage, *homonoia* is able to establish a fruitful cohesion between persons endowed with a high degree of practical wisdom (*hoi epieikeis*) and the less wise people, represented by the *dēmos* (1167a 35-b 1), when they agree that the best persons ought to govern – for it is in this way that each person achieves her own advantage.

On the other hand, Aristotle also emphasizes the fact that, in general, *homonoia* gets established between the *epieikeis* (1167b 4-5), i.e. persons who are in agreement with themselves and desire truly just and useful things. These people are similar in virtue (whatever degree of virtue they possess), and it is plausible to suppose that civic friendship, as a product of wise legislative activity, aims to establish a *homonoia* based on equality and individual participation in the affairs of the *polis*. Participation of citizens would be informed by the propensity to rationally (and actively¹⁹) choose the same things rather than by simply accepting measures established by others (cf. the already quoted 1167a 27-28). As a target of virtuous lawgiving activity, then, concord seems to relate to the possibility of taking measures to reduce the inconvenience of dissimilarity between people, and also to the tendency to establish a relation of symmetric equality between rational agents²⁰.

The idea of friendship between equals evokes the one of the city as *κοινωνία τῶν ὁμοίων* mentioned at *Pol.* 1328a 36-37. This theoretical image, which is invoked in relation to the best city in absolute, seems to find an equally convincing application in the regime grounded in virtuous government of the *plēthos*, where similarity seems to point to an equality of symmetric kind and exclude an equality of proportional kind (the so-called *isotēs kat' analogian* which is typical of the relationship of superiority-inferiority between rulers and ruled²¹). When it comes to friendships of “symmetric” kind aiming at the common interest, the paradigm of a justice grounded in arithmetic equality might not (or, at least, not always) either perfectly fit or exhaust the case of

¹⁸ Cf. Lockwood 2020; Stern-Gillet 1995: 163.

¹⁹ Cf. *EE* 1237a 30, where Aristotle highlights the idea of “feeling friendship in act” (εἰ δὲ τὸ κατ' ἐνέργειαν φιλεῖν).

²⁰ Cf. Pellegrin 2020: 157.

²¹ Cf. *EE* 1238b 21-23.

regimes in which the need for an increasingly inclusive political participation is combined with attention to virtue. To my understanding, this seems to be the case of the *politeia* which, in Book 8 of the *NE*, Aristotle designates as “timocracy” (1160a 34), as the people admitted to ruling office are equal in census. Timocracy is portrayed as a symmetric form of friendship and is compared to *philia* between brothers in the sphere of family-relations – which, in its turn, is compared to *hetairikē philia* (i.e. the typical friendship arising between members of a comradeship). Both types of friendship appear to be based on a form of equality which is not simply “numerical”, given that, in brotherly friendships, the parties are equal not only in age, but also in identity in passion and in character (οἱ τοιοῦτοι δ’ ὁμοπαθεῖς καὶ ὁμόηθεις; 1161a 26-27).

That the corresponding political friendship is the one arising in the timocratic regime suggests that citizens, just like brothers, grow and develop shared habits under the same roots and discipline. What is more, the featuring trait of such form of political friendship, i.e. rule in relays, is prefaced by the claim that the in the timocratic regime citizens “want” to be equal and good (ἴσοι γὰρ οἱ πολῖται βούλονται καὶ ἐπιεικεῖς εἶναι; 1161a 28-29). Although some translators take the verb “βούλονται” to designate either a simple tendency²² to cooperate on equal terms or, alternatively, a treatment that citizens are expected to comply with (independently of their tendencies)²³, the verb itself seems to indicate the willingness of each of the partners in the friendship to secure a reciprocally fair treatment (as suggested by the reference to *epieikeia*). An explicit reference to a virtuous *ēthos* in timocratic political friendship through reference to is found at 1162a 9-14, where friendship between brothers is said to have the same features as those between the members of comradeship, and the bond is even stronger in the case of people similar for *epieikeia* and *ēthos*. These are generally the people who have been brought up together by the same parents, having thus received the same *paideia*.

It is interesting that, although Aristotle treats democracy as a deviation of timarchy in the *NE*, this sort of *parekbasis* appears to be re-evaluated in the light of the place that friendship can have in it. In fact, democracy seems to differ from other deviant regimes which, as Aristotle points out at 1161a 30-32, are characterized by the extremely reduced space of justice and friendship. If, as he goes on to say, this is mainly due because neither friendship nor justice can arise when there is nothing in common between the rulers and the ruled (as is the case of tyranny; 1161a 32-33), a reasonable implication of his view is that democratic friendship and the corresponding *dikaion* seem to allow for a higher degree of community and shared involvement in the life of the *polis* than

²² Cf. Ross’ translation (1991): “tend to”.

²³ See Crisp’s translation (2004): “are meant to be”.

other deviant regimes. Unlike in tyrannical regimes, in popular governments friendship has a stronger role (ἐν δὲ ταῖς δημοκρατίαις ἐπὶ πλεῖον: 1161b 9-10).

In *EE* 1241b 33-36, however, justice underlying democracy is said to be rooted in pure arithmetic equality, without any reference to virtue – as instead it is the case in Aristotle's treatment of timocracy. Despite this notable absence, democracy can be associated to timarchy to the extent that, as he claims at *EE* 1242a 9-11, both political friendship (presumably the one arising in timocracy) and the corresponding deviation qualify themselves not only as friendships, but also as ways of living in community between friends – unlike the other forms, that are grounded on superiority. It is therefore plausible that the numerical equality at the basis of democratic justice, more than the proportional one, is able to develop shared habits, in particular the one to treat one another as equal²⁴. This is what may cause Aristotle to declare that democracy is the least degenerated regime, if compared to other *parekbaseis* (*Pol.* 1289b 5).

3. A democratic education?

Aristotle's qualification of the friendship underlying democratic forms of government as authentically "political" (just like virtuous government of the *plēthos*) does not certainly imply a defense of deviant regimes. For, as he says for instance at *Pol.* 1289b 10, all deviant constitutions are thoroughly mistaken, and it is not right to speak of a deviant regime as better than another (one might rather say that one regime is "less bad" than another). In line with this thought, he regards democracy in general terms as a *politeia* in which sovereign authority is not either directed to the common good or framed in accordance with justice in the proper sense (οὐ πᾶν τὸ κυρίως δίκαιον). Furthermore, deviant regimes like democracy and oligarchy suppress a fundamental distributive criterion: the quality of people. This causes members of those regimes to make many erroneous judgments (1280a 14). Those regimes, speaking in absolute terms, are false (1301a 36), and an arrangement based simply on rule by the people (which is to say, without corrective measures) is not meant to last (1302a 4-5).

On the other hand, evidence disseminated across the *Pol.* displays careful concern for – and, most significantly, a positive assessment of – several democratic tools (e.g. procedures, attitudes, and specific institutions) that might be introduced in non-democratic regimes as devices designed to promote a more efficient functioning of institutions and a higher stability of the whole political community²⁵. Notably, Aristotle's concern for democracy and the

²⁴ On the importance of symmetric equality in the political community see Accattino 1986: 7-9.

²⁵ On the positive influence of democratic elements in Aristotle's theorization of regimes see Lintott 1992: 115.

various forms that this ideal can attain may be better understood in the light of the tasks of good lawgivers and true political rulers (1288b 9-35), such as the rectification of existing regimes – especially of those that do not involve a wide political participation – or the founding *ex novo* of a regime that, to be qualified as good and practicable, requires among its constitutive elements a well-blended compound of democratic and non-democratic features. A correct performance of such tasks presupposes full possession of political science and its requirements, which Aristotle spells out in the opening section of Book 4 of the *Pol.* As he explains, in matters of *hē politeia*, it belongs to the same *epistēmē* to examine not only (i) the best regime in absolute (as he points out, “it is perhaps impossible for many to obtain the best”, 1288b 24-25) but also (ii) regimes fitting for specific cities (the best that circumstances allow), (iii) regimes based on requirements insufficient to qualify them either as the best or as the best possible among existing ones and (iv) the regime which appears to be most fitting for all cities (which is plausibly an attainable one).

As far as the best city in absolute is concerned, the idea that equally virtuous people ought, just in virtue of their equality, be admitted to political offices in relays (cf. 1325b 7-10) fits well with the theoretical image of democracy as an inclusive system of distribution of honours, which is to say, one designed to foster equal participation in the life of the community. The idea of government in relays is rooted in the principle that equality by reciprocity preserves cities, and this necessary occurs between free and equal persons (1261a 31-32). In a similar vein, freedom and equality, which on many occasions Aristotle introduces as defining values of democratic regimes, cannot be exercised by everyone at the same time. This is the reason why (although it would be better if the same always ruled²⁶), in cases in which all are equal in nature (whatever this nature might be), it would fair for all to have a share in ruling power.

Featuring aspects of democratic regimes are also traceable in several general remarks on city and citizenship, which is to say, in observations that do not strictly concern the quality of regimes. By way of example, the *polis* is described not only as a plurality of citizens (1274b 42: πόλις πολιτῶν τι πλῆθος ἔστιν) – an aspect which might be associated to the idea of democracy as a form of government (however deviant) by the *plēthos* – but also as a *κοινωνία τῶν ἐλευθέρων* (1279a 21). The condition of *eleutheria*, which in general terms is a fundamental prerequisite of political activity, is notably one of the criteria adopted by Aristotle to qualify democratic regimes²⁷, being both a criterion of distribution of political offices and an aim to pursue and defend. In a similar

²⁶ Aristotle explains that government in relays represents only an approximation to the more desirable idea of a city in which the same people perform one and a single function over time. On the other hand, this avoids the risks nested in inequality of access to the relevant functions. Cf. Lord 2013, comment to the passage at footnote 7.

²⁷ Cf. 1290a 41-b 1; 1317a 40; 1318a 9-10 (where freedom is associated to equality).

vein, the concept of citizenship itself, which in Book 3 of the *Pol.* he initially articulates in terms of active participation in offices involving deliberation and judgment (a definition which, at a subsequent stage, will be replaced by one that emphasizes the sheer faculty to participate in offices; 1275b 18-19), is by Aristotle's explicit recognition particularly fitting for democracies in general (1275b 5-6).

What might instead render democracy – or simply the introduction of democratic elements – a palatable solution in specific cases is the fact that many people already live under regimes that can be qualified as either “democratic” or as liable to a modification in the direction of that regime. For democracy, besides being presented as government rooted on *plēthos* and the value of freedom, can also be framed in terms of sovereignty of the *dēmos* – i.e. a social dimension encompassing a variety of professional functions generally associated to poor or uneducated classes²⁸. Given that qualities like noble birth and virtue can be found in a few people, regimes like democracy and oligarchies will be more widespread, as Aristotle himself explains at 1301b 40-1302a 3, in the context of a discussion of constitutional changes:

Hence two sorts of regimes particularly arise – rule of the people and oligarchy. Good birth and virtue exist among few persons, these things among more: nowhere are there a hundred well-born and good persons, but in many places the well off are many.

The fittest regime/s for a city characterized by a strong presence of lower classes would have a chance to get firmly established when political experts manage to meet the expectations of the governed people. A telling passage in this respect is 1289a 1-3, where the political expert's capacity of persuasion is said to promote a sense of sharing in the principles underpinning either newly founded or reformed constitutional and legislative arrangements:

one ought to introduce an arrangement of such a sort that they will easily be persuaded and be able to share in it (*κοινωνεῖν*) by the fact that it arises directly out of those that exist, since to reform a regime is no less a task than to institute one from the beginning.

In the light of what has already been said with reference to the relationships between *philia* and *koinōnia* in Aristotle's ethical writings, it seems that the verb *koinōnein* in the above passage might point to the friendship that virtuous lawgivers (and not simply politicians operating at levels distinct from legislative

²⁸ 1291b 18-25; Cf. 1272b 9, where *dēmos* is opposed to “those in power”. In the ideal city, craftsmen and traders are not constitutive “parts”, but mere “accessories” of a *polis*, since their life is opposed to virtue (1328b 39-41; 1329a 19-21; 1278a 17-21). On this aspect see Accattino 1986: 41-42.

activity) try to produce by incentivizing *homonoia*, i.e. an agreement on institutional arrangements. More specifically, people accustomed to democratic practices and procedures – even in cities which, by themselves, cannot be regarded as properly democratic²⁹ – will likely be more inclined than others to accept democratic correctives of existing institutions, even more so in the light of their willingness to be involved more extensively in political affairs³⁰. The ideal of a like-mindedness grounded in uniformity of views concerning the regime, however, is replaced in the *Pol.* by the more realistic view that, to the goals of a stable preservation of a certain regime, lawgivers ought to realize the following goal:

[S]imply speaking, whatever things in the laws we say are advantageous to the regimes, all these preserve the regimes, as does the great principle that has often been mentioned – to keep watch to ensure that the multitude wanting the regime is superior to those not wanting it (1309b 16-18).

It is possible that, by adopting a less ambitious goal, i.e. consent of the majority, Aristotle does not mean to discredit the value of *homonoia* understood as general concord, and that complete like-mindedness between citizens and rulers in political matters might continue to act as a regulative ideal. It is not perhaps a case that in Book 2 of the *Pol.*, which tries to examine the underpinnings of the best regime in absolute, Aristotle says with reference to the Spartan one, “[I]f a regime is going to be preserved, all the parts of the city must wish it to exist and continue on the same basis” (1270b 20-22).

Just like the ideal of *homonoia*, equally regulative might be the value of an education consonant to the nature of each regime and disciplined by the actualization of correct institutional measures. The search for a democratic education finds its sense in the light of three requirements, the same ones that those who set out to exert the highest offices ought to possess: respect of the existing constitution (whatever that constitution is), capacity in the duties related to the office, and virtue and justice (*dikaiousunē*) – i.e. the just (*to dikaion*) fitting in each constitution (1309a 33-37).

The loyalty of a political expert towards a deviant regime like democracy³¹ can on the one hand be displayed through the elaboration and practical implementation of an array of legislative measures that try not to distort the nature of the existing regime. On the other, an education fitting to the regime will be needed, as Aristotle declares at 1310a 13-19:

²⁹ See 1292b 12-16, where Aristotle addresses the issue of non-democratic regimes applied in cities where democratic practices are nevertheless in force thanks to habit and education.

³⁰ Cf. 1270b 25ff. where, with reference to the Spartan regime, Aristotle points out that the reason of its stability is that the *dēmos* is involved in valuable judicial activity.

³¹ See 1309a 34, where loyalty is framed in terms of *φιλίαν πρὸς τὴν καθεστῶσαν*.

But the greatest of all the things that have been mentioned with a view to making regimes lasting – though it is now slighted by all – is education relative to the regimes. For there is no benefit in the most beneficial laws, even when these have been approved by all those engaging in politics, if they are not going to be habituated and educated in the regime – if the laws are popular, in a popular spirit, if oligarchic, in an oligarchic spirit.

The passage seems to imply that the value of *homonoiā* does not emerge only in the act of a joint agreement of citizens on a proposed arrangement of laws and institutions; indeed, it also emerges in a hopefully stable habit of respect towards those laws and institutions. Furthermore, education ἐν τῇ πολιτείᾳ is not one that enjoins adherence to the distinctive value(s) of the *politeia* to an exasperated degree, for instance by satisfying expectations of personal utility (in terms of either honour or material profit) that might prove dangerous for the preservation of the regime. For such expectations, although being potentially consonant to the values in force in the constitution, might be misinterpreted – as it might happen for instance in those democratic regimes in which citizens understand freedom as liberty to act as one pleases, disrespectfully of both the laws and the interests of other people (cf. 1317b 12-13). Alternatively, the values championed in a certain regime might be individually pursued to such an extent that not only the search for the common interest (which is characteristic of righteous regimes), but also the one for the overall balance of the regime – however deviant this might be – would be either jeopardized or compromised (for instance, when accumulation of money exasperates inequalities between rich and poor, leading to revolutions).

As Aristotle explains in 1310a 19-23:

But to be educated relative to the regime is not to do the things that oligarchs or those who want democracy enjoy, but rather the things by which the former will be able to run an oligarchy and the latter to have a regime that is run democratically.

Although every deviant constitution, *qua* deviant, forgives the right mean (1309b 19-20), it is still possible to speak of an inner balance within deviant constitutions themselves, i.e. the one enabling their own preservation. This is going to become an appropriate target for wise lawgiving activity operating in imperfect conditions.

4. *Philia* and types of democracy

In Book 4 of the *Pol.*, Aristotle's concern for an understanding of democracy in general terms appears to be replaced by the attempt to inquire into the possibility of different forms of democracy. This is supposedly justified by the need for lawgivers and politicians to analyze existing political circumstances in view of a transformative intervention, which in its turn goes in the direction of a more stable balance of deviant regimes. As Aristotle explains at 1289b 28-38, the plurality of regimes is due to the existence of different (social and professional) parts in the city. As far as the *dēmos* is concerned, this is generally made by unarmed people, and it might include farmers, people involved in marketing, and mechanical workers. It might therefore be surprising that the taxonomy of the fifth types of democracy³² provided in 4.4 omits any reference to different qualities of *dēmos* (although this aspect will be stressed in 4.6 and 6.4). Another notable absence is represented by the complete omission of references to *philia* – which are instead introduced with reference to both polity and the regime grounded in the prevalence of the middle class. We might therefore wonder if the treatment of political friendship provided by Aristotle in his ethical works is totally irrelevant for an understanding of his taxonomy of democratic regimes.

The first type of democratic regime illustrated by Aristotle is characterized by a valorization of the ideals of equality and freedom. For its distinctive law establishes that

there is equality when the poor are no more preeminent than the well off, and neither have authority, but both are similar. For if freedom indeed exists particularly in a democracy, as some conceive to be the case, as well as equality, this would particularly happen where all share in the regime as far as possible in similar fashion.

This form of democratic regime, which involves an equal participation between the rich and the poor and – at least in its intentions – aims at avoiding discrimination between classes³³, does not reappear in the treatments of democracy pursued in 4.6 and 6.4, where higher attention is devoted to different professional and social classes and to the contingencies that affect their active or missed participation in the democratic political life. As several scholars have assumed, this fact might be interpreted as evidence of a distinctively ideal nature of the first

³² A different view is held by Chambers 1961, who claims that democratic regimes can be reduced to four types.

³³ Cf. Newman 1902: 176.

democratic regime, which might therefore retain a priority in axiological terms over the remaining forms³⁴.

On the other hand, the remainder of Aristotle's treatment of the first form of regime at 1291b 31-34 would exclude that an equal participation of rich and poor in political offices determines an agreement on the measures to adopt, for this arrangement would end up by bestowing power to the lower classes (notably, the poor are higher in number than the rich). What is more, given that no reference is made either to the kind of people composing the *dēmos* and the *gnōrimoi* (i.e. the notables) and their capacity to affect democratic outcomes, it would be impossible to establish whether the democratic regime at stake is to be qualified as the best one³⁵. As it is made clear in 1292a 25-26 and 1318b 11-12, the best democracy can be established only in cities in which the *dēmos* is mainly constituted by farmers, who cannot take part in politics due to their need to work in view of their own survival. The idea of poor people kept away from the political life does not seem to match the theoretical framework on a regime in which both the poor and the rich *actively* take part in offices, rather than being simply *entitled* to them. To the contrary, the farmers' lack of free time for politics would encourage the tendency to put the law in charge and to meet only for necessary assemblies (1292b 27-31). To my understanding, this sort of "rule of law" is not related to the law introduced in the first democracy described at 1291b 31-34³⁶ – which rather expresses a generic principle of equality in participation and freedom perfectly compatible with a form of government in which the masses take active part in politics.

A procedural aspect of the first form of democracy that, in my opinion, disqualifies it from being a positive regulative ideal, is the one represented by the majority principle. Being rooted in arithmetic justice (and corresponding equality), this principle asserts that whatever is agreed and resolved by the majority of citizens should be authoritative (1318a 18-22), and is therefore likely to prevent the criterion of virtue from affecting election of offices. This, in turn, would entail the risk of a majority made by uneducated defenders of extreme democratic measures. Virtue, by contrast, is mentioned by Aristotle only with reference to a democracy approaching a well-balanced regime, such as a *politeia* or an aristocracy in which persons are elected on the basis of assessment (cf. 1318b 25-39).

The emphasis on freedom and equality put in the theorization of the first democratic regime is premised in a form of *to dikaion* rooted in arithmetic equality – the same conceptualized in 1317b 1-4:

³⁴ This is for instance the view of Mulgan 1991; Fortenbaugh 1976, and Schütrumpf-Gehrke 1996: 287. See also Bertelli-Moggi 2014: 206-207, who seem to explore this possibility, although raising some objections.

³⁵ Simpson 1998: 305.

³⁶ For a different view see Bertelli-Moggi 2014: 207.

One aspect of freedom is being ruled and ruling in turn. The justice that is characteristically popular is to have equality on the basis of number and not on the basis of merit; where justice is of this sort, the multitude must necessarily have authority, and what is resolved by the majority must be final and must be justice, for, they assert, each of the citizens must have an equal share.

Having an equal share in power on the basis of numerical equality neither involves the capacity of equal people to fruitfully interact in view of shared decisions (as is for instance the case of the condition of government by the *plēthos* theorized in 3.11³⁷) nor does it prevent sovereignty of one class over another. In fact, in the first democracy theorized by Aristotle, the *homonoia* that can be established is far from resting on unanimous agreement, nor is the *plēthos* involved in political activity made by persons who, by gathering together, become one person (ἕνα ἄνθρωπον) in relation to thought and custom (περὶ τὰ ἦθη καὶ τὴν διάνοιαν), as Aristotle figures it in 1281b 5-7 with regard to the possibility of a government by many, non-excellent people.

As for the remaining four types of democracy, the sequence in which they are introduced does not seem to mirror specific historical evolutions of the democratic regime in Athens³⁸ – not to mention the fact that the unqualified equality between rich and poor described in the first kind of democracy does not even seem to match the most extreme democratic forms³⁹.

Not even the second form of democracy seems identifiable with a specific historical phase of Athenian democracy. This is the one in which “offices are filled on the basis of assessments, but these are low, and it is open to anyone possessing the amount to take part, while anyone losing it does not take part” (1291b 39-42). At least formally, Solon’s law concerning the distribution of charges according to census was still in force⁴⁰. Unlike the first democracy, which stresses the effective participation of rich and poor citizens, the second one is grounded in a pure faculty of participation (*exousia metechein*), one established according to the principle of *timēma*. On the one hand, the existence of a census limit, however low, might be interpreted as an oligarchic measure⁴¹, one that means to exclude a part of the city from ruling office. On the other hand, reference to a very low limit might indicate a willingness to offer a wider, more inclusive participation than oligarchic regimes. Not even in this case, however, would democracy appear as a model of good functioning and stability. Although the establishment of a minimum census level might prompt citizens to treat each other as equal according to the law (thus

³⁷ With reference to *Pol.* 3.11 cf. Lindsay 1992, who speaks of a “qualified form of democracy” based on a communicative interaction by the persons composing a multitude. In my opinion, this idea does not fit the model of the “first democracy” thematized in Book 4.

³⁸ For different views on the matter see Bertelli-Moggi 2014: 206.

³⁹ Bertelli-Moggi 2014: 206.

⁴⁰ Bertelli-Moggi 2014: 206.

⁴¹ Cf. Schütrumpf-Gehrke 1996: 288.

neglecting existing differences in matters of wealth), this would not necessarily involve active participation – as in the case of friendships between people acting together and willing to treat each other as equals (for instance in the timocratic regime introduced in the *NE*). It is in this respect that, as I believe, the missed reference to an active participation – which is a distinctive trait of friendships, even of those of political kind – might qualify the second type of democracy as flawed in relation to the first one, as well as in relation to any righteous regime. What is more, adding a low income as a criterion for distribution of offices might allow for an inclusive participation of the poor which, if not counterbalanced either by an equal numerical presence of the rich or by a strong presence of the middle class⁴², risks to produce the same imbalances of power that might occur in the first regime.

The same risk is entailed by the third form of democracy, which is briefly mentioned at 1292a 1-2 and is characterized by the rule of law. This is a friendship that admits as a criterion for participation, the status of citizen – this being accorded only to those of unquestionable birth. On the one hand, the idea of persons coming from parents who share life in the same territory, cultural habits, and laws might evoke the idea of a political friendship of timocratic kind – which, as we have already seen, is compared to the friendship between brothers similar in age and in the condition of sharing the same roots. Not even in this case, however, does Aristotle provide any clue on the possibility of a political friendship leading to like-mindedness in decisional processes. The rule of law characterizing this sort of regime might certainly discipline access to citizenship and political activity, but doubts may arise in relation to the capacity of *any* law to curb potentially damaging habits. A similar view can be expressed with reference to the fourth kind of democracy, which seems to differ from the third only with regard to absence of a careful attempt to scrutinize the aspect of descent in the establishment of citizenship rights⁴³. That form of democracy, which appears to find significant correspondences with historical examples of democratic regimes⁴⁴, would appear to be more inclusive than the previous one, precisely because of the absence of a rigid control in the allotment of those rights. Even in this case, then, we might wonder whether the rule of law might be able to counterbalance the risks nested in an uncontrolled participation of citizens. Although the treatment of the first four types of democratic regime does not allow us to establish the extent to which the rule of law is able to save regimes from dissolution, we may safely assume that Aristotle's concern for

⁴² On the role of the middle class in ameliorating democratic regimes see Canevaro-Esu 2018. The authors argue that the socio-economic mixing of the rich, the *dēmos* and the *mesoi* represents a measure for the assessment of the constitutions described in the *AP* and their supposed abidance by the rule of law.

⁴³ See Simpson 1998: 306.

⁴⁴ Cf. Bertelli-Moggi 2014: 209.

the rule of law in this context is regarded as a positive aspect of democratic regimes. This concept appears clearer in relation to the latter type of democracy, in which absence of the rule of law risks to destroy the anatomy of the regime itself. For the fourth democracy consists in an unregulated government of the *plēthos*, is marked by the predominance of assembly decisions over the laws responsible for the constitutional and institutional arrangement of a certain city.

When the rule of law is not activated, demagogues arise (1292a 8-10). Unlike lawgivers who, through the *nomoi*, are meant to produce friendship and *homonoia* between rulers and ruled, demagogues incite the implementation of decrees that betray the spirit of the laws. Most crucially, absence of authoritative law encourages despotic tendencies, which make people more sensitive to the seductions of flatterers – i.e. those doomed to become demagogues. Keeping those flatterers in esteem, as Aristotle does not fail to emphasize, approximates this form of democracy to a true tyranny.

We might wonder how demagogues can be the main responsible for the sovereign authority of popular decisions over the law (as it is suggested at 1292a 8, 24), if at 1292a 24-26 demagogues are said to arise when the rule of law has already been dismissed⁴⁵. This vicious circle might be broken once we assume that demagogues only bring to completion a process that has already begun with the exercise of citizen of a non-despotic power. It is plausible that an *ēthos* reluctant to the values of political virtue and friendship, if encouraged by flatterers, would strengthen the motivation necessary to subvert a regime otherwise based on the rule of law, one in which *nomoi* and *psephismata* are not in competition. If that is the case, uneducated *ēthos* of the many, possibly accompanied by either weakness or absence of lawgivers with a concern for virtue and friendship, would appear to be the main factor involved in the raise of the latter form of democracy. The only form of political *homonoia* allowed in that form of democracy would probably be a shared disrespect of the rule of the law, not a real interaction of the many.

To conclude, each form of democratic regime can be both framed and assessed in relation to flaws in political friendship and like-mindedness among citizens. In fact, the kind of *to dikaion* that shapes their institutional arrangement does not offer the chance of an integration of point of views between equal people endowed with at least some degree of virtue, nor does it assume that numerical equality is combined with an *axia*, as it happens in righteous regimes like the timocracy outlined in Book 8 of the *NE*. The principle of numerical equality not supported by an adequate *ēthos* is doomed to incur in the dissolution itself of democratic regimes. On the other hand, if assumed as a regulative ideal, civic friendship between equal people can be adopted by virtuous lawgivers in the activity of preservation of democratic constitution themselves, with a view to a transformation respectful of their task of loyalty to existing regimes.

⁴⁵ The problem has been noticed by Simpson (1998: 307).

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