

BOOK REVIEW

Aristotle on the Nature of Community. By ADRIEL M. TROTT. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xiii + 239. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-03625-3.

Aristotle's *Politics* claims that the polis or city-state "exists by nature" (*Pol.* 1.2.1252b30). Thinkers as diverse as Marsilius of Padua, Thomas Hobbes, and Martha Nussbaum have struggled with how to interpret such a claim—some finding in it a salutary alternative to existing political theories, others finding in it the basis of deeply wrong-headed political thinking. In *Aristotle on the Nature of Community*, Adriel Trott seeks both to elucidate and to defend Aristotle's claim about the naturalness of the polis by interpreting nature in the *Politics* through the notion of nature as an internal principle of motion (a notion central to the understanding of natural things articulated in his treatise thereupon, viz. *Physics* 2.1).

To say that an entity possesses an internal principle of motion is to say that such an entity, although caused by another entity (for example, a kitten is brought into existence because of the reproductive activities of its cat parents), nonetheless possesses an internal principle of order or self-regulating organization which is the cause of e.g. a kitten's growth, respiration, perception, digestion, learning to use the litter box, and so forth. Anything which is capable of growth, nutrition, and other basic life functions, at least for Aristotle, possesses such an internal principle of motion, which he calls a soul (*psychê*). The major contribution of Trott's book consists in the argument that Aristotle ascribes to a polis—namely, a social, economic, and political entity which comprises other natural entities such as kittens, cows, slaves, and humans—such an internal principle of motion and that his political theory is superior to some modern theories because of its claim that the polis is natural.

Trott's argument thus consists in two rather different strands—one which interprets "nature" in the *Politics* as meaning an internal principle of motion, and a second which defends Aristotle's *Politics* as a work of political theorizing which is superior to theories such as liberalism. The former strand provides the backbone for the book as a whole: chapter one articulates the notion of nature as an internal

principle of motion from texts in Aristotle's scientific corpus; chapter two examines Aristotle's claims about the naturalness of the polis in *Politics* 1.2 based upon the understanding of nature as an internal principle of motion; chapter three expands upon the ways that humans are natural political animals; chapter four draws parallels between humans and poleis as entities which purportedly both possess internal principles of change; and chapter five argues that the deliberation which gives rise to and sustains the politeia or constitution of a polis is the internal principle of motion, or soul, within the polis.

The sixth chapter, a consideration of Aristotle's remarks about slavery and women, seems to fall primarily into the second strand of argument, viz. that which defends the superiority of Aristotle's political theory; chapter two also contains an extended defense of Aristotle against the claim that his thought is either totalitarian or a form of liberal individualism, and chapter four includes a defense of Aristotle's account of freedom as a sort of compatibilism. Throughout, Trott locates Aristotle in an historical debate about the relationship between nature and reason and defends him against alternatives to that schema which one finds in thinkers like Plato, Aquinas, and Hobbes.

No doubt, political theorists interested in critiques of and alternatives to modern liberalism will find much to mull over in this volume. Modern political theorists as varied as Fred Miller, Martha Nussbaum, Jacques Maritain, and Jill Frank have shown in their diverse writings that Aristotle's *Politics* is an enormously rich repository of political ideas and arguments that can take on new lives in many different intellectual ecosystems, often far removed from the 4th century BCE late classical context in which the work was originally written. It seems churlish to complain that such theorizing takes Aristotle out of his original context and makes him into a proponent of e.g. social democracy, neo-Thomism, or libertarian notions of property rights.

By contrast, I suspect that Aristotle scholars—either in classics or ancient philosophy—will find much to argue with and indeed most likely disagree with Trott's claim that Aristotle views the polis as an entity possessing an internal principle of motion. Orthodox readings of the *Politics* generally take Aristotle's claim that the polis is natural to be based on what Trott calls the "telic" argument, viz. the claim that "nature is an end; for we say that each thing's nature—for example, that of a human being, a horse, or a household—is the character it has when its coming-into-being has been completed" (*Pol.* 1.2.1252b32-34 Reeve trans.). To say that the polis is natural, according to the "telic" argument, then, is to say that the polis is

a kind of entity with a specific sort of structure and that further, such a structure contributes to the well-being and living well of its inhabitants.

In this respect, a polis has a different nature than say an empire or a nation state, and that nature may be more or less conducive to the well-being of its inhabitants. Trott's claim, by contrast, implies a similarity between a polis and the kitten with which I began my review: if a polis is natural because it has an internal principle of motion, then the polis is a form of self-regulating super-organism over and above the organisms which it comprises. No doubt, such an organism—just like a kitten—may have an external cause (Aristotle's claim that a polis has a human founder does not make the polis any less natural [*Pol.* 1.2.1253a29-31; cf. pages 62, 124-129]). And there are indeed passages where Aristotle considers what it would mean for a polis to act collectively—for instance, if it agreed to a treaty or entered into an agreement (*Pol.* 3.1.1274b34-36).

At one point, early on, Trott seeks to clarify her argument by noting that she does not “claim that the polis is a biological being. The argument is that this account of nature that Aristotle offers makes the most sense of his claim that the polis is by nature” (18). But it seems hard to reconcile such a heuristic qualification with other assertions she makes, for instance that “the polis has a soul that organizes it as the animal does in such a way that is not merely the gathering of the souls of the parts but an organizing force that puts the parts to work in such a way that organizes the natural thing” (129, commenting on *De Motu An.* 703a28-703b2); or that “deliberation and the constitution together embody the dual meaning of *physis*—the internal principle of change and the essence of the natural thing” (135). No doubt, Trott wants to underscore what she calls in one place the “homologous” structure (132) which she finds in both a polis and a human being: human rational activity is constitutive of what it means to be (and continue to be) a human being and collective deliberation is constitutive of what it means to be (and continue to be) a polis with a participatory constitution. But even if one concedes a parallel here between a person and a polis, talk of a “soul” of the polis seems akin to Aristotle's claim that the constitution or *politeia* is a “sort of life (*βίος τις*) of a polis” (*Pol.* 4.11.1295a40-b1). To say that a polis has a sort of way of life does not entail that it is alive. One also wonders if Trott's emphasis on deliberation as being essential to a polis holds true for all poleis; the *Politics*, of course, is not concerned only with participatory constitutions, but rather all constitutions—including those, like kingship or tyranny—that appear to exhibit no collective deliberation.

Aristotle on the Nature of Community shows, once again, that Aristotle's *Politics* is an almost endlessly rich and timelessly ripe source for political reflection and interpretation. Trott challenges us to take seriously Aristotle's claims about the naturalness of the polis in a detailed and textually-supported fashion. My objections to its central claim do not diminish my respect for the work or undermine my belief that the book is one which scholars of Aristotle's *Politics* will need to examine and debate seriously.

THORNTON LOCKWOOD

Quinnipiac University, tlockwood@qu.edu