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*Ambiguity of Equality in Aristotle’s Practical Thinking*

This paper is a preliminary observation of a broader project of comprehending Aristotle’s “Practical Reason” described in Book 6 of *Nicomachean Ethics*. The project addresses what the status of practical knowledge is for Aristotle and how the difference between knowing and acting occurs. One notable aspect about Aristotle’s practical reasoning is its reliance on perception of the agent for virtuous action. Throughout the *Ethics*, Aristotle insists that there is no uniform rule of action that one should always take. He explains that right action depends on variety of factors such as the agent, her capacity natural and habituated disposition, the object and the range of actions available in the circumstance for the right reasons. As a way to better understand these complex phenomena that Aristotle presents, I specifically examine how perception in practical realm appears. In the realm of politics, the perception of practical reason is most evident in the subject concerning justice and injustice. Thus, I examine the connection between justice and practical reason by looking at his views of justice as equality and how the perception of equality differs. I argue that as practical reason relies heavily on perception and thus appearance, so is the appearance of equality as justice. Moreover, this perception of equality contains an inherent ambiguity which necessarily leads to factional conflict. I do so by first showing that justice is a form of equality as explained in the *Ethics* and move on to the *Politics* to show that equality/justice relies on the perception of the agents of the equality.

1. Justice as Equality

In Book 5 Chapter 2 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes an initial distinction of justice. The two general categories are distributive justice and corrective justice. Distributive justice deals with “distributions of honor or money or any of the other things divisible among those who share in the regime”[[1]](#footnote-1) and the corrective justice involves correcting various harm done. In distribution of honor and money and other divisible things, there can be a more and less and also equal: “whatever sort of action in which there are degrees, the more and the less, there is also the equal. If, then, the unjust is unequal, the just is equal, which is in fact what is held to be the case by everyone, even without argument.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Yet this equality is not a simple arithmetic equality. Just like the discussion of the mean, Aristotle explains that equality is not “simple” equality but a sort of proportion. He explains this idea through a mathematical formulation of equal ratios.

If the ratio among the persons is equal so should the ratio among the things divided be equal as well. If the ratio among the persons are unequal, the things should be divided unequally as well. Aristotle calls this ratio “geometric proportion” and what is just is the proportionate while the unjust is contrary to this proportion. And the term for this just proportion is also called “equal” because it is neither too much nor too less than the proportion. Similarly, in corrective justice, a judge tries to restore equality to those who have been done injustice by inflicting a loss on the offender “thereby taking away the gain.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The importance of proportional equality lies in its function of perpetuating any community. Aristotle explains that:

But in communities concerned with exchange, the just in this sense—reciprocity in accord with proportion and not in accord with equality—holds them together, for the city stays together by means of proportional reciprocity. For either people seek to reciprocate harm for harm—if they do not, that is held to be slavish—or they seek to reciprocate good for good. And if they do not do this, there is no mutual exchange, and people stay together through mutual exchange.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The most basic condition for a community to survive is reciprocity but it is not a simple one-to-one reciprocal exchange but in “accord with proportion.” Any community requires reciprocity for its preservation and in order to do so, the work of each person should correspond to the merit and the worth. “If, then, there is first proportional equality and then reciprocal exchange occurs, the proportional reciprocity spoke of will take place if not, the exchange is not equal and does not endure. For nothing prevents the work of the one person from being superior to that of the other.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The notion of “proportional equality” (*analogia isos*) indicates that prior to exchange, there is some valuation of the work by each agents and requires a shared judgment of its value. This recognition of equality by the members of the community is the basis for its stability. If this equality is recognized, there is justice and if it is not, then there is unrest.

Aristotle’s initial presentation of the subject of justice as proportional equality seems to show simplicity and certainty, especially given the fact that he used the geometry and mathematical ratios to convey his point. But he also remarks the difficulty of “applying” this idea in practice. The obvious yet the biggest challenge is what constitute merit and its proportional desert. In *EN* 5.3, Aristotle says:

For if the people are not equal, they will not have equal things. Rather, from this arise fights and accusations, either when people who are equal have or are distributed unequal things, or when people who are unequal have or are distributed equal things. Further, this is clear from what accords with merit, for all agree that what is just in distributions ought to accord with a certain merit. Nevertheless, all do not mean the same thing by *merit*; rather, democrats say it is freedom; oligarchs, wealth; others, good birth; aristocrats, virtue.

What is needed is to have common understanding of what counts as merit in the community for this allows proper division of honor and property which does not result in “fights and accusations.” Hence Aristotle’s initial depiction of equality as measuring ratios mathematically is faced with the problem of perception. It is faced with the problem of the perception of what counts as meritorious. If there is no consensus on the merit that one perceives, proportional equality cannot work. The following discussion examines how perception as part of practical reasoning in political matters works in Aristotle’s discussion of equality and factional conflict (*stasis*).

1. Different senses of equality in Politics

Aristotle’s earlier discussion of equality, especially proportionate equality, was spoken in the context of the most basic necessary requirements for a community to sustain itself. It was spoken in abstract terms with mathematical example. He briefly mentions the word “merit” in the political context but he does not explore it in depth in the *Ethics*. In EN 5.3 Aristotle used the example of house, housebuilder, shoes and shoemaker as an example to show the need for proportional equality. Largely, these are examples of economic exchange and describes proportional reciprocity in a non-political setting but when Aristotle revisits the notion of equality in the *Politics*, he specifies the usage of equality in the context of rule.

In Book 2 Chapter 2 of *Politics*, Aristotle states that,

It is thus reciprocal equality that preserves cities, as was said and equal, for all cannot rule at the same time, but each rules for a year or according to some other arrangement or period of time. In this way, then, it results that all rule, just as if shoemakers and carpenters were to exchange places rather than the same persons always being shoemakers and carpenters. But since that condition is better also with respect to the political community, it is clear that it is better if the same always rule, where this is possible; but in cases where it is not possible because all are equal in their nature, and it is at the same time just for all to have a share in ruling (regardless of whether ruling is something good or something mean), there is at least an imitation of this.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Just as the earlier assertion on equality, a regime requires reciprocal equality for its preservation, but the objective is now on ruling. While Aristotle’s earlier example of shoemaker and housebuilder was used to explain the difference of value that each contributed to exchange, here he examines to what degree a person can legitimately rule over the other. Ruling is analogized to the artisans: if different artisans practice each other’s art, taking turns, and make good products, then in this way, different persons can legitimately rule one another taking turns. If it is better for shoemaker or carpenter to stick to their art for the best result, then so should the rulers and the ruled. Using artisan as an example is deceptively straightforward since it makes little sense to switch their arts so the obvious suggestion would be to have someone who is expert in politics to legitimately rule everyone. Yet unlike the other arts, politics involve an additional consideration. Aristotle says, “it is clear that it is better *if* the same always rule, where this is possible; but in cases where it is not possible *because all are equal in their nature*, and it is at the same time just for all to have a share in ruling…”[[7]](#footnote-7) (emphasis added). While the full meaning of this sentence cannot be explained in detail here, there are some important implication. In general, the rule of same persons doing the same task is better in the sense that each artisan can practice their expertise. Yet such rule is not possible when the nature is equal. It is not merely the skill but a certain equality or inequality of nature which allows legitimate or illegitimate rule. This equality/inequality of nature is important because, just as the proportionate equality of value is what keeps commercial exchange possible, without the acknowledgement of the community on the status of each other’s “nature,” there is conflict. Thus, in the *Politics*, there is a shift of focus from a more abstract mathematical or even economical view of equality to an equality related to ruling.

The next section examines Aristotle’s discussion on factional conflict to show that conflict occurs due to the perception of inequality. The true equality or inequality is not evident but as a result of certain perception. This is to further illustrate that most of our seeing about practical matters rely on perception of individual agents.

1. Perception of Equality and Factional Conflict

One of the pertinent observations of equality occurs in *Politics* Book 3 Chapters 9 and 12 and Book 5 Chapters 1 and 2. In Book 5, the topic of discussion is on factional conflict. Aristotle tries to show how and why a change of regime occurs. He enumerates four different ways factional conflict occurs and he summarizes by saying that:

Factional conflict is everywhere the result of inequality, at any rate where there is no proportion among those who are unequal (a permanent kingship is unequal if it exists among equal persons); in general it is equality they seek when they engage in factional conflict. Equality is twofold: one sort is numerical, the other according to merit. By numerical I mean being the same and equal in number or size; by according to merit, being equal in respect to a ratio.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Here, Aristotle posits a general cause to factional conflict which is the result of inequality. Just as Aristotle’s previous discussion of the doctrine of the mean required a further qualification that the mean is not a simple arithmetic mean but a mean dependent upon the situation and the agent, here too, there is a differentiation of equality as numerical and according to merit. Numerical equality considers simple equality in number but equality with respect to merit is proportionate equality. The first equality depicts the quantitative view of equality while the latter is qualitative. Continuing, Aristotle adds that there is a general agreement that “justice in an unqualified sense is according to merit”[[9]](#footnote-9) therefore no regime is based on simple numerical equality. The problem is how a community understand the meaning of merit.

At the beginning of Book 5, the origin of the regimes is explained as thus:

It is necessary first to take as a beginning point the fact that many sorts of regimes have arisen because, while all agree regarding justice and proportionate equality, they err about this, as was also said earlier. Rule of the people arose as a result of those who are equal in any respect supposing they are equal simply, for because all alike are free persons, they consider themselves to be equal simply; and oligarchy arose as a result of those who are unequal in some one respect conceiving themselves to be wholly unequal, for as they are unequal in regard to property they conceive themselves to be unequal simply. Then the former claim to merit taking part in all things equally on the grounds that they are equal, while the latter seek to aggrandize themselves on the grounds that they are unequal, since “greater” is something unequal.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This passage shows the problem of perceiving merit. The democrats see one aspect of the merit, namely that each one is equally free, and assumes equality in all aspects. The oligarchs see the difference in property and assumes fundamental inequality between them and those who has less. Aristotle does say that not every aspect of human attributes are worthy of the claim to rule just as height is not a serious standard which deserves a claim to rule. But even if freedom or wealth is, most people focus on single aspect of the merit and overlook other aspects of a human being which deserves attention.

To expand the above observation from the viewpoint of political psychology, this phenomenon shows that when certain perception of equality/inequality is established, then all other aspect of that person is assumed to be equal/unequal (in general) to oneself. This description depicts how certain characteristics overtake and set up a standard where other characteristics are minimized or removed from priority. Thus, if one sees the other as fundamentally equal/unequal, other differences will not merit rule. But because both democrats and oligarchs only see a part of the merit to rule, they are in error.

All regimes of this kind have, then, a certain sort of justice, but in an unqualified sense they are in error. And it is for this reason that, when either group does not take part in the regime on the basis of the conception it happens to have, they engage in factional conflict. Those who are out standing in virtue would engage in factional conflict most justifiably, yet they do it the least of all; for it is most reasonable for these only to be unequal in an unqualified sense. There are also certain persons who are preeminent on the basis of family and claim not to merit equal things on account of this inequality: they are held to be well-born persons, to whom belong the virtue and wealth of their ancestors. These, then, are in a manner of speaking the beginning points and springs of factional conflicts.[[11]](#footnote-11)

All regimes are said to have a certain sort of justice. Justice is in its crudest form is reciprocity and earlier in Book 2 Chapter 2, Aristotle said it is “reciprocal equality that preserves cities….”[[12]](#footnote-12) The preservation of regime has a different requirement than mere excellence. And that requirement is justice. As mentioned earlier, every regime bases some merit and justice but all of them are imperfect.

1. Ambiguity in Perception of Equality

So far, I have shown that equality is not an evident fact about human beings but dependent greatly on the perception of merit which can be variable. The general judgments that people broadly cast is twofold: people are generally equal because they are free and people are generally unequal because of inequality in property. Once a certain perception of equality or inequality is formed, all the other features of that person is subsumed under it. In this section I show two examples of ambiguity present in determining the equality and merit to rule. The first is the difference between oligarchs and aristocrats. Although Aristotle distinguishes the two with the latter being a better version of the former, he does not distinguish the two explicitly in discussing factional conflict. I argue that the reason for this is because they are difficult to distinguish in practice i.e. in their outermost appearance and how they are commonly perceived. This shows the ambiguity inherent in deciding who deserves merit and who does not. Secondly, I look at the role political philosophy plays in *Politics*. While many implications can be drawn out from the examination of political philosophy, I look at the role that philosophy plays to show the ambiguity as well as the difficulty involved in perception of equality.

1. Case of Aristocracy and Oligarchy

Throughout Book 4, Aristotle differentiates aristocracy and oligarchy as two different regimes with oligarchy being a deviant version of aristocracy. Yet when talking about factional conflict, aristocracies are prone to similar attack as the oligarchies.

In aristocracies factional conflicts arise on the one hand on account of there being few who partake of the prerogatives, which was said to be what effects change in oligarchies as well; this is because aristocracy too is in some sense an oligarchy. In both, the rulers are few, and though it is not on account of the same thing that they are few, aristocracy too is at any rate held to be a sort of oligarchy on account of these things.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The reason these two regimes are both vulnerable to attack by the democrats is not whether it is the rule by few through virtue or few through property but the fact that those who partake of the prerogatives are few. In practice, both oligarchy and aristocracy can be equally attacked because of the fact that the few rules, regardless of how the few is constituted. This shows that the virtue of the rulers are not guarantors for peaceful coexistence. The factions start from those who do not share in the prerogatives but think they deserve them. In other words, regardless of the actual virtue of the rulers, if the other’s perception of the aristocrats do not find them meritorious and thus unequal, the aristocrat’s claim to rule will be challenged. This is more so the case for oligarchs.

1. Role of philosophy

Earlier, I discussed proportionate equality from Book 5 Chapter 3 from the *Ethics*. There, Aristotle used a mathematical formulation of ratio to show equality of two things of differing value. The appearance and perception of equality/inequality gives way to its ambiguity. Equality, far from applying an abstract principle, is closer to perception where a person immediately sees and feels the equality/inequality of the situation. Of course, one is capable of changing or educating or criticizing this initial perception to arrive at a more accurate understanding of equality of the situation. I tried to show that equality is closer to perception because it is the basic or the most salient viewpoint of evaluation to which the other characteristics of a person is overshadowed such as freedom of property. When a person sees another as fundamentally equal, the differences which makes a person “unequal” does not seem so different to the point that it merits superiority. Conversely, if a person “sees” the other as inferior, they will always see them as inferiors regardless of other equal qualities. This is said to be an incomplete understanding of justice. Aristotle says that “For all fasten on a certain sort of justice, but proceed only to a certain point, and do not speak of the whole of justice in its authoritative sense.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Understanding of justice and equality is not an apparent or obvious knowledge. In *EN* 5.9, Aristotle says: “Similarly too, people suppose that to know the just and unjust things is in no way to be wise, because it is not difficult to comprehend what the laws say (but these are not the just things, except incidentally). But how the just things are done and how they are distributed—this is indeed a greater task…”[[15]](#footnote-15) He continues to say that, even for a physician, there are varieties of subject matters to learn in order to study health. The implication of this statement is that knowing what is truly just is even a more daunting task. Just as he questions the conventional view of justice as obeying the laws, he questions the conventional understanding of equality. Just as health requires knowledge of different things, analogously, in order to understand equality, it is simply insufficient to understand equality as defined by freedom or property only.

The complexity of equality requires that there is some way to explore in depth what makes true equality. In 3.12 of the *Politics*, Aristotle says that

The political good is justice, and this is the common advantage. Justice is held by all to be a certain equality, and up to a certain point they agree with the discourses based on philosophy in which ethics has been discussed; for they assert that justice is a certain thing for certain persons, and should be equal for equal persons. But equality what sort of things and inequality in what sort of things—this should not be overlooked. For this involves a question, and political philosophy.[[16]](#footnote-16)

This passage contains the only occurrence of the term “political philosophy” throughout this work and seems to suggest the unique subject matter of political philosophy. Part of that subject matter is to investigate the equality and inequality of things. He then follows the discussion of the different claims to rule and shows that not each characteristic of a person is fully and infallibly worthy of rule. The problem of discerning equality is the problem of discerning a merit to rule over others and because human life is composed of various needs such as the need to preserve oneself and community as well as the need to attain higher goods, it requires an insight into the order of ends/goods as well as their combination. The complex nature of equality may well be one of the reasons why Aristotle posits a need for political philosophy and to persuade his audience that equality is not a simple phenomenon.

An example of political philosophy rectifying the notion of equality is found in *Politics* 2.7, where Aristotle criticizes Phaleas who proposed a simplified design for a city. Phaleas emphasized equal property for all citizens in the hopes of curbing factional conflict. Aristotle says this proposal is problematic not only because equal property can mean equal luxury (which is impossible to actualize) or equal penury but moreover, that desire for property is not the only source of conflict but desire for honor as well. Aristotle notes that “… factional conflict occurs not only because of inequality of property, but also because of inequality of honors, though in an opposite way in each case; for the many engage in factional conflict because possessions are unequal, but the refined do if honors are equal—hence the verse “in single honor whether vile or worthy.””[[17]](#footnote-17) The justice of regime requires the proportionate equality of not only property but honors as well. Property is relatively easier to distribute by measuring its quantity but honor is much less tangible than property. Thus, Aristotle seems to suggest one of the tasks of political philosophy to be measuring the proportionate equality of merit and its honor.

In addition to desire for honor as a source of conflict, Aristotle remarks that desire itself is a problem. On the nature of desire, he states that “… the nature of desire is without limit, and it is with a view to satisfying this that many live.”[[18]](#footnote-18) He proposes an interesting set of remedy to this problem. “For the one, a minimum of property and work; for the other, moderation. As for the third if certain persons should want enjoyment through themselves alone, they should not seek a remedy except in connection with philosophy; for the other [pleasures] require human beings.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The first two remedies are moral while the most self-sufficient form of pleasure was said to be philosophy which is in accord with his earlier discussion in the *Ethics*. While the mention of philosophy in this section is not identical with the subject matter of political philosophy, one aspect of philosophy points to a transformative understanding of things (e.g. desire or equality) which help navigate an agent to a broader array of possibilities and a clarification of the matter at hand. Aristotle does give practical suggestions for moral and political predicaments but he is also keenly aware that philosophy is needed to clarify and grasp such fine distinctions.

1. Summing Up

One of the unique requirements of thinking about practical reasoning in the political context entails that one cannot simply seek the good but to keep in mind the common good. In doing so, one has to understand the various parts of the city and how each interact with one another. The broadest parts are described as the poor many and the rich few. The dynamic between them always harbors a seed of conflict because of the perception of equality each have. Moreover, because equality appears through perception, the predominant way of “seeing” equality/inequality emphasizes certain characteristics over others. This paper tried to show that equality involves perception in such ways. Also, because the prevalent perception of equality is not fully correct, philosophy, specifically political philosophy, has the task of clarifying true equality.

1. Aristotle *Politics* trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013)1130b 30- 1131a2 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 1131a 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 1132a 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 1132b 32 - 1133a 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 1133a 10-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Aristotle *Politics* trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013) 1261a 31 – 1261b 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 1261b 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 1301b 26-32 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 1301b 36 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 1301a 26-34 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 1301a 36 – 1301b 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 1261a 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 1306b 23-26 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 1280a 9-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 1137a 10-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 1282b 19-23 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 1266b [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 1267b 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 1267a [↑](#footnote-ref-19)