The Impartial Community:

Aristotle and Rawls on Economic Inequality

Submitted to the Faculty of Political Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for a degree with honors.

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Defense: March 30, 2015

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Submitted: March 17, 2015

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Acknowledgements

This paper is the result of a tremendous amount of teaching, advice, and support from an enormous number of people all the way back to the beginning of my academic journey. Specifically, I would like to thank Dr. Bickford for her insightful comments, tremendous support, and considerable patience during this process, Drs. Larry Goldberg and Stephen Leonard for introducing me to political theory, Dr. Douglas Mackay and (soon to be Dr.) Andrew Tyner for their draft feedback, Dr. Stephen Hill for his suggestions, and everyone – especially my parents, housemates, and friends – who helped me finish this project.
Chapter I

A Surprising Alliance

Too often, dialogue on economic inequality fails to seriously consider the moral implications of economic inequality. This is unfortunate, because a conversation that does not situate economic inequality within a broader moral and political perspective must inevitably devolve to narrowly-tailored conceptions of economic welfare and growth or, worse still, unreasoned anxieties about too much or too little inequality. This intellectual impoverishment does not owe to a lack of thinking on this subject; economic inequality has fascinated political, economic, and philosophical thinkers for millennia. Two such thinkers are Aristotle and John Rawls.

Most scholarship quite correctly views these thinkers as representing – perhaps even epitomizing – two separate and fundamentally different approaches to philosophy. For good reason: their respective accounts of virtue, metaphysics, history, science, and religion differ enormously. But on this subject, I argue, the two have a common framework for evaluating inequality. This similarity has much to tell us about the two thinkers – but so do their differences in motivation for and application of their common ideas.

This paper’s claim is that Rawls and Aristotle both assert that impartiality – the ability to understand another’s perspective, and weigh all perspectives equally – is necessary to navigate inequality in the allocation of social goods. Moreover, they both understand successful political
communities to be ones in which society’s members understand each other’s perspective, and accept the broader logic upon which society and its allocation of goods is based.

Aristotle characteristically approaches the problem of inequality pragmatically: he believes that a political community will not be effective if inequality creates discord, and that only a certain kind and a certain level of inequality will allow a community’s members to govern one another in turn through reason – his model for a just society of equals. Rawls, on the other hand, examines this problem at the ultimate level of abstraction; a society is only just, on his account, if it is one to which all of its members would consent in a position where they are forced to be completely impartial because they do not know what advantages they would have.

This paper is divided into four chapters. In this one, I will explain the kind of comparative study I wish to undertake. I will refer extensively to Nancy Sherman’s *Making a Necessity of Virtue*, a book that inspired this work and that attempts a similar analysis of a much bigger topic: Kant and Aristotle on ethics. In the second chapter, I will discuss Aristotle’s position on economic inequality, drawing primarily on his remarks in the *Politics* where he discusses it in relation to political constitutions. Then, in the third chapter, I will outline Rawls’s position, drawing primarily on his general framework and remarks on economic inequality in *A Theory of Justice*. In the fourth chapter, I discuss the framework which unites the two thinkers – and also the differences this analysis illuminates.

**An Unappreciated Similarity**

Aristotle and Kant epitomize totally different approaches to ethics. Aristotle believes that ethics arise from the need to cultivate human excellence: developing a more disciplined character, learning how to respect others, and acting rightly are all parts of a broader Aristotelian
conception of virtue. Kant, on the other hand, believes that ethics are an obligation that arises, *a priori*, from the concepts of human reason, autonomy, and freedom themselves. Writing in different contexts, responding to different thinkers, these two thinkers could not have reached more different conclusions. This, at any rate, is the conventional view of scholarship on this issue.

But in her provocative and compelling work, *Making a Necessity of Virtue*, Sherman complicates this conventional view. “It has not been adequately appreciated,” she writes, “that Kant develops a complex anthropology of morals - a tailoring of morality to the contingent features of the human case - which at times brings him into surprising alliance with Aristotle and his project of limning an account of human excellence.”¹ Despite numerous differences, the thinkers reach remarkably similar conclusions about the subject of moral virtue – the ability of human beings to adhere to the demands of morality. Both thinkers counsel an approach to moral virtue that emphasizes the emotional underpinnings of the motivation to follow moral obligations – even as they differ widely in their sources and justifications for those moral obligations.

Sherman believes that understanding this remarkable similarity, and contrasting it with this fundamental difference, can improve our understanding of both thinkers. Sherman’s “systematic claim,” she writes, “is that Kant’s teeter-totter with the emotions can be best understood with Aristotle’s view in the background.” Her “claim is that we can grasp in a sharper way the significant contours of Kant’s views through broad dialogue with Aristotle on this subject.”²

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² p. 124, Ibid.
The Advantage of a Comparative Discussion

Sherman even suggests that this conversation may bring us closer to a comprehensive view of the subject that does a better job of capturing human moral obligation and moral motivation than either thinker’s theory does on its own. “The very advantage of a comparative discussion is precisely to bring to bear the perspective of other theories that do not easily emerge in a more internal discussion.” In our search for a better theory, a comparative approach enables us to embrace some of the strengths of each thinker’s perspective. “If we were to combine some of the merits of the Kantian and Aristotelian points of view,” Sherman continues, “what we might aim for is a comprehensive theory that at once recognizes the far reach of our moral concern and also the role of affiliation in cultivating that concern.”

Sherman believes that it was Kant who best recognized “the far reach” of moral obligations. Kant’s “march is intended to move beyond the ‘capital’ of human nature to a foundation for morality safely outside human contingency.” But Kant pays special attention to how his principles of morality – derived from the ideas of rationality and freedom themselves, and applicable to all rational beings – can succeed in a human context in which the particular facts of human existence have an important role to play; this is “Kant’s central preoccupation.” On Sherman’s account, Kant’s “distinction between a metaphysics of morality and an anthropology is meant to capture this division between an a priori grounding and the specific circumstances of the human case.”

Within the human case, Kant pays close attention to moral virtue, which is the “attitude of will” or “fortitude” that “act[s] on reasons that preserve [the moral obligations of the rational

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3 p. 238, Ibid.
4 p. 123, Ibid.
Kingdom of Ends], embodied as they are in the various formulae of the categorical imperative.” Though those obligations are legislated by autonomous individuals taking the interests – and equal freedom – of the rest of the community into account, they require a subordinate, human virtue for humans to adhere to them. This virtue is a kind of character or moral discipline that can obey the sometimes difficult requirements of morality. In contrast, Sherman writes that “on the Aristotelian view, although practical reason is the backbone of virtue, it is never understood as an internal source of law or a source of autonomy, humanity, and community in the sense that Kant requires.”

Equal Dialogue and a Better Vantage Point

Sherman is careful to avoid the view that Aristotle’s philosophy is only a subset of a broader Kantian analysis. Rather, she emphasizes that Aristotle’s views of ethics stand on their own, and that what a Kantian interlocutor might call Aristotle’s failure to find a deeper basis for morality than contingent human facts actually represents a willful and legitimate decision to see human beings as such – not as rational beings confined in the trappings of a human body. Moreover, Aristotle is unique in his emphasis on the development of moral practices within an actual – and not hypothetical – community. Sherman writes that:

Within Aristotelian theory, there is no conception of a law that in principle ties all human beings to justice. The notion of a kingdom of ends simply does not make sense when the boundaries of moral interaction are set by the polis … I raise this point not to use Kant as the whipping boy of Aristotle. There is little value in that sort of dialogue. The project we are engaged in is one of exposing the vantage points that an ancient theory such as Aristotle’s offers us and, in turn, the different horizons a modern moral theory, such as Kant’s, opens up. Aristotle’s theory insists upon, in a way virtually neglected by modern moral theory, the importance of shared

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5 p. 138, Ibid.
activity and its place in moral development. The interactions of friend, family, and citizens become at once the home of moral development and the home of moral activity. But part of the problem is that the two spheres need not be one and the same. In particular the arena important for moral development need not be the exclusive arena for moral practice. The latter takes place on a wider stage, where our moral concerns range beyond limits set by shared contests and the personal ties that nurture. 6

To put it another way, the central interpretive problem is that for Kant, “moral development” and “moral practice” are distinct; for Aristotle they are one and the same. Indeed, for Aristotle, morality is the achievement of virtue – which is itself the basis of morality. For Kant, however, the way we get to morality, rational a priori inquiry, is not the way we get to moral virtue – which looks a lot more like Aristotle’s concept. Our self-improvement and moral enlightenment are not the same, on Kant’s account: self-improvement involves the cultivation of the qualities which allow us to recognize and practice the dictates of the categorical imperative’s a priori reasoning. But for Aristotle, these are the same thing: the cultivation of virtue is worthwhile in and of itself, because virtue – not morality – is the final purpose of human life.

Sherman’s argument, in essence, is that Aristotle’s account of ethics and virtue is the same as Kant’s account of moral anthropology – the personal qualities necessary to adhere to the obligations of morality. Aristotle’s version of morality rests on an empirical conception of human nature that insists on the fundamentally emotive and social characteristics of human existence. While Kant’s views on ethics have a different metaphysical foundation, Kant’s recommendations for human behavior do take the empirical and therefore contingent facts of human life into account and end up looking a lot like Aristotle’s writing on the subject.

6 p. 224, Ibid.
The difference, then, is that Kant seeks to build a foundation for morality that is broader than the contingent empirical facts of human existence, while Aristotle builds his system of morality on those facts themselves. Sherman describes this as

“the crucial distinction between Aristotle and Kant – that for Kant, moral anthropology rests always on a foundation of pure morality, on a conception of the autonomy of reason that can be stripped, for the most part, from the constraints of the human case. To establish a metaphysic of morals where reason alone is the source of moral authority remains a constant goal, even when the more focused interest is in developing an account that applies to humans. For Aristotle, there is nothing but the human case and its inescapable finitude.”

Political theorists, Sherman argues, should take seriously the possibility of a philosophical dialogue between Aristotle and Kant. Such a dialogue is fruitful for those who seek to understand both the similar approach to human virtue and emotions and the widely differing understanding of morality’s fundamental origins in the writing of both thinkers. Understanding this similarity, she argues, tells us something new about where the thinkers agree, but also gives us a better understanding of how they differ. We not only learn more about Aristotle and Kant’s views about how emotions motivate moral behavior; the differences in ethical theory that remain are also thrown more sharply into contrast.

**A Dialogue on Inequality**

This paper attempts to accomplish for economic inequality what Sherman has accomplished for the study of moral virtue: to gain a deeper understanding of two very different – and very important – positions by putting them into dialogue with one another and to contribute to an ongoing theoretical conversation about the principles from which any conversation about economic inequality should begin.

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7 p. 2, Ibid.
This paper’s claim is that Sherman’s analysis of Kantian and Aristotelian ideas on moral virtue – namely, that this area of thinking constitutes a “surprising alliance” between the two otherwise very different thinkers – is also true of Rawlsian and Aristotelian ideas about economic inequality. The veil of ignorance and the middle class polis make much the same argument – that economic circumstances should reflect, to as great an extent as is possible, the judgment of society’s members when they are being completely impartial. The nature of these economic circumstances should never endanger the political community that allows for impartiality to exist in the first place.

Moreover, as with Kant and Aristotle on moral virtue, there is a crucial difference between the views of the two thinkers which is also instructive. The difference, once again, lies not in the thinkers’ conclusions but in how they arrive at those conclusions. Rawls’s philosophical system derives its legitimacy from an underlying social contract between all members of the community. Rawls is interested in the conditions through which such a social contract could fairly be negotiated. Aristotle, in turn, arrives at his framework through a kind of pragmatic constitutionalism. Aristotle does not bother with notions – dear to Rawls, as well as other modern thinkers like Locke – of hypothetical agreements that legitimize the existence and activities of the state. Rather, Aristotle’s project, as he declares in the final chapter of the Politics, is to study the different constitutional and legal settlements that have emerged and figure out which one of them is best. Rawls’s approach is theoretical and idealistic while Aristotle’s is empirical and pragmatic.

Yet they reach the same conclusion. This insight, I argue, has much to teach us about the views of both thinkers on this subject. Here, once again, there is a clear parallel to the Sherman analysis. Rawls’s approach to morality is theoretical and idealistic; Aristotle’s approach to moral
virtue, too, is characteristically empirical and pragmatic. In both cases, Rawls emphasizes the rational autonomy of individuals who, acting together, can make progress towards a more just society. Aristotle, in contrast, begins with society and asks how it can be perfected.

Sherman’s analysis of moral virtue, and, I submit, this paper’s analysis of economic inequality, are illuminating because they help us understand this vital way in which these thinkers differ. But even more importantly, these analyses show that two radically different approaches can reach the same conclusions.
Chapter II

Aristotle’s Middle Class Values

Aristotle was a remarkable thinker – one of the greatest biologists, philosophers, economists and political scientists of the ancient world. With his prolific commentary on virtually all available subjects of intellectual inquiry, the distribution of wealth and income did not escape his notice. In fact, it is a source of some of his most lucid commentary, a place where he speaks boldly and frankly about what he perceives to be the nature of human political relations.

In this chapter, I will begin by offering some broad commentary on Aristotle’s conception of the meaning of politics. These remarks are necessary to contextualize the analysis which is to follow. The focus of this chapter, however, is Aristotle’s commentary on the distribution of wealth in a society and the effects of that distribution on the political affairs of its people. After outlining his perspective, I will analyze what I take to be its essential analytical features.

Aristotle’s economic commentary is situated within a political context, which itself occurs within a broader analysis of the meaning and purpose of life. Aristotle describes the purpose of this analysis in the concluding section of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this work, Aristotle describes the meaning of human life. Humans, Aristotle believes, are meant to live together in societies and pursue excellence in order to attain a state of flourishing. While
Aristotle discusses many kinds of human excellence – excellence of friendship, of political statesmanship, of household management, of intellectual inquiry, of spiritual exploration, to name only a few – he is clear that these versions of excellence are all aspects of a more fundamental quality of virtue. Part of this virtue is also an excellence with respect to moral behavior. In order to fulfill their potential for excellence, individuals must act toward each other in a way that is just and honorable. While the kinds of behaviors that are appropriate or inappropriate for this kind of excellence – i.e. that are moral or immoral, in modern language – can be understood by reason, individuals act morally as a result of their character, their habituated emotional disposition toward one another and to the world.

The Meaning of Politics and the Purpose of Law

While virtue, moral improvement, and excellence can be obtained through deliberative reason, Aristotle suggests in the final book of the *Ethics* that most people cannot become more virtuous this way. Aristotle allows that

discourses appear to have the power to encourage and stimulate open-natured young people, and would make a well-born character that loves what is truly beautiful be inspired with virtue. But they are unable to encourage most people toward what is beautiful and good. For they are naturally obedient not to respect but to fear, and refrain from base actions not on account of shame but on account of penalties. For since they live by feelings, they pursue the pleasures that they are comfortable with and the things by means of which these will come about, and avoid the pains opposed to these pleasures, while they have no notion of what is beautiful and truly pleasant, having had no taste of it.\(^8\)

While people are capable of pursuing excellence, they choose to pursue pleasure. This is a troubling question for Aristotle. The answer he furnishes is critical to understanding his political thought: “What sort of discourse, then, could reform such people? For is it not possible, or not easy, to change by words things that have been bound up in people’s characters since long

ago; perhaps one should be content if, when everything is present by which we seem to become
decent, we might gain a share of virtue.” Here he returns to a concept he has been developing
through much of the work: the notion that much of human behavior is built on habit, and that
therefore behavior can be changed through habituation. By the way, it is in this position– using
habitual emotive states to guide moral choices – where Sherman finds him to be in allegiance
with Kant’s anthropological thinking. He writes that “argument and teaching are perhaps not
powerful in all people, but it is necessary for the soul of the listener to have been worked on
beforehand by means of habits, with a view to enjoying and hating in a beautiful way, like
ground that is going to nourish the seed.” ⁹

Aristotle believes that appropriate moral habits must be cultivated in order for people to
live well and form strong communities. He writes that, “in general feeling seems to yield not to
reasoned speech but to force. So it is necessary for a character to be present in advance that is in
some way appropriate for virtue, loving what is beautiful and scorning what is shameful. But it is
difficult to come upon a right training toward virtue from youth when one has not been brought
up under laws of that sort, for living temperately and with endurance is not pleasant to most
people, and especially not to the young.” This leads him to his conclusion: that because moral
improvement can only come about in communities where individuals have been habituated by
social circumstance to the correct disposition to pursue excellence through rational inquiry, a
society’s laws must take the moral improvement of its members into account: “Hence it is
necessary to arrange for rearing and exercises by laws, since they will not be painful when they
have become habitual. And no doubt it is not enough for people to hit upon the right rearing and
discipline when they are young, but also afterward, when they have reached adulthood, they

⁹ Ibid
must practice these things and habituate themselves, and we would need laws about these things as well, and so, generally, about the whole of life; for most people are more obedient to compulsion than to argument, and are persuaded more by penalties than by what is beautiful. This is why some people think the lawmakers ought to exhort people to virtue and encourage them to act for the sake of what is beautiful.”

On Aristotle’s account, the habituating power of the law is the solution to the problem of human immorality: once habituated correctly, the moral reasoning of the truly virtuous can take hold. If the purpose of life is to act virtuously, then the purpose of lawmaking is to help in this cause by inculcating the habits that are conducive to reason – so that reason can be used to attain virtuous, and therefore also moral, life. “For someone who wants to make people better by giving care,” Aristotle writes, “whether to many people or to few, what one ought to do is try to become knowledgeable about lawmaking, if we might become good by means of laws.” Aristotle ends the Ethics by concluding that, now that he has discovered the purpose of politics – advancing human virtue, which is fundamental to a flourishing human life – it is time to devote further study to just how politics can achieve that purpose. Most scholars believe these remarks are intended as a transition from the Ethics to the Politics, a work which is devoted entirely to answering just this question. Aristotle ends with a famous line: “so having made a beginning, let us discuss it.”

Political Associations and Economic Conditions

In the beginning of the Politics, Aristotle starts to do just that. In the second chapter, he writes that “it is peculiar to human beings, in comparison to the other animals, that they alone

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10 Ibid.
11 1180b p. 199, Ibid.
12 1181b p. 200, Ibid.
have perception of what is good or bad, just or unjust, and the rest. And it is community in these that makes a household and a city-state.” Political associations, Aristotle believes, are founded on the human capacity for collective moral reasoning through deliberation. We can already begin to see the economic foundations of his reasoning: he defines “a complete community” as one that “reaches the limit of total self-sufficiency.” The communities that have reached this level may have “come to be for the sake of living,” but they “remain in existence for the sake of living well.” Economic activity is a means of providing for human life and bringing humans together into political association, but ultimately, like politics, it is subservient to life’s larger purpose of fostering human flourishing.

Aristotle then proceeds to discuss various political states of affairs and their consequences for the development of virtue. He proceeds to offer an exhaustive analysis of many topics in political theory and social science: different structures of government and their consequences, law and its importance for a well-ordered and moral society, the qualities and values of citizens, and the factors that politicians should take into account as they make decisions. Most relevant to our purpose here is his discussion of the distribution of wealth and income. In typically Aristotelian fashion, he begins by describing and categorizing the subject under study: “for in the first place we see that all city-states are composed of households; and, next, that within this multitude there have to be some who are rich, some who are poor, and some who are in the middle; and that of the rich and of the poor, the one possessing weapons and the other without weapons. We also see that the people comprise a farming part, a trading part, and a

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vulgar craftsman part. And among the notables there are differences in wealth and in extent of their property.”

From this framework, he considers the various possible forms which a socioeconomic order can take. He places them on a spectrum between the most equal societies and the least equal: “there are held to be mainly two constitutions … democracy and oligarchy.” Aristotle goes on to say that “it is a democracy when the free and the poor who are a majority have the authority to rule, and an oligarchy when the rich and well born, who are few, do.”

**Why does economic inequality matter?**

Aristotle believes that a position between these two extremes, one that capitalizes on the advantages and minimizes the disadvantages of each, is the best possible society for equal citizens. This society would have a large middle class that made most political decisions. It is his reason for this position that is so important to this paper’s analysis: “since it is agreed that what is moderate and in a mean is best, it is evident that possessing a middle amount of the goods of luck is also best. For it most readily obeys reason, whereas whatever is exceedingly beautiful, strong, well born, or wealthy, or conversely whatever is exceedingly poor, weak, or lacking in honor, has a hard time obeying reason.” Aristotle believes that this quality, the ability to obey reason, is crucial for a society to foster human flourishing.

Why do the upper and lower classes have such a hard time obeying reason? Aristotle explains: “For the former sort tend more toward arrogance and major vice, whereas the latter tend too much toward malice and petty vice; and wrongdoing is caused in the one case by

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14 1289a p. 105, Ibid.
15 1290a p. 105-106. Ibid.
16 1295b p. 119-120, Ibid.
arrogance and in the other by malice.” On Aristotle’s account, the wealthy are too arrogant to use reason; the poor are too malicious. For Aristotle, arrogance and malice are habituated emotional states which prevent these groups from understanding each other and make political and moral deliberation more difficult.

How exactly does this work? Aristotle believes that “those who are superior in the goods of luck (strength, wealth, friends, and other such things) neither wish to be ruled nor know how to be ruled (and this is a characteristic they acquire right from the start at home while they are children; for because of their luxurious lifestyle they are not accustomed to being ruled, even in school).” On the other hand, “those who are exceedingly deprived of such goods are too humble. Hence the latter do not know how to rule, but only how to be ruled in the way slaves are ruled.”\(^{17}\) The habituation that produces these emotional dispositions is a result of inequality: the privileged social position of the wealthy makes them arrogant and incapable of being ruled by others, while the social position of the poor fosters malice and prevents them from acquiring the skills to rule over others.

This is especially concerning because of Aristotle’s argument “that one cannot rule well without having been ruled” and that “a good citizen must have the knowledge and ability both to be ruled and to rule, and this is the virtue of a citizen, to know the rule of free people from both sides.”\(^{18}\) This is an important part of Aristotle’s political philosophy: understanding what it is to rule and to be ruled makes citizens better rulers and subjects, and allows them to view political questions without bias towards the rulers or towards the ruled. This bias is present in an unequal society, and it is what prevents the wealthy and poor from being able to rule. Ultimately, when

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) 1277b p. 72-73. Ibid.
individuals are forced to rule without bias towards their particular circumstances, they are capable of collectively attaining a higher form of political reasoning in which reason and historical experience, not the clash of competing interests and disagreeing factions, inform political judgments. The wealthy and poor can never attain this kind of reason because they can only see one perspective – they cannot understand different perspectives.

What happens when this kind of bias is prevalent because a society has too many of rich and poor? “The result is a city state consisting not of free people but of slaves and masters, the one group full of envy and the other full of arrogance. Nothing is further removed from a friendship and a community that is political.”19 Aristotle’s problem with inequality is that it can make the collective decision-making of political equals ruling one another – a vital part of just and effective political governance – more difficult, because it makes it more difficult for society’s members to understand one another’s perspectives. Inequality also gets in the way of friendship, because in order to be friends society’s members need to understand each other. More than a simple pleasure, friendship for Aristotle is a fundamental aspect of human flourishing, and an important way for humans to attain excellence.

Unequal societies are so dysfunctional, Aristotle writes, that their politics are overwhelmed with strife and it is impossible to obtain the kind of mutual consent needed to obtain a stable political order: “because of the conflicts and fights that occur between the people and the rich, whenever one side or the other happens to gain more power than its opponents, they establish neither a common constitution nor an equal one, but take their superiority in the constitution as a reward of their victory and make in the one case a democracy and in the other

19 1295b p. 119-120, Ibid.
an oligarchy.”\textsuperscript{20} This is a result of the inherent bias that the poor and the rich have with respect to political judgments. Their lack of perspective prevents the rich or poor from establishing a political community that includes everyone and causes them to use political power to further their own interests, not those of society taken as a whole. This kind of society, on Aristotle’s account, is inevitably ridden with strife. Indeed, for Aristotle, a political constitution in which one class rules over another is not properly a constitution. A constitution is more than a set of rules for government, like the compacts for protecting property he describes in other societies;\textsuperscript{21} it is a political community between individuals who rule over each other for each other’s sake. Aristotle clearly believes that a constitution that applies to all, and in which all interact as equals, is better. But the strife associated with economic inequality makes this impossible in unequal societies.

**Impartiality and the Middle Class**

But Aristotle raises another, more promising, possibility: a middle class society. Aristotle writes that “the middle classes are least inclined neither to avoid ruling nor to pursue it, both of which are harmful to city states.” Furthermore, “neither do they desire other people’s property as the poor do, nor do other people desire theirs, as the poor desire that of the rich. And because they are neither plotted against nor engage in plotting, they live out their lives free from danger.” This is the advantage of an equal political settlement where individuals understand and trust one another. Aristotle writes, “that the middle constitution is best is evident, since it alone is free from faction.”\textsuperscript{22} Rather than constantly scheming for power, the middle class society displays what modern political scientists might call a sense of political order: while individuals

\textsuperscript{20} 1296a p.121, Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} 1280a-b p. 80, Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} 1295b p. 119-120, Ibid.
outside of political community have an individual incentive to acquire power and resources, a community has a collective incentive to agree upon rules that forbid selfish behavior and that encourage positive-sum gains. A community which follows this collective incentive and establishes these rules displays order. While this language is unfamiliar to Aristotle’s account, this logic is present in it. Indeed, Aristotle goes a step further by describing a need for more than mere order, but for a community that can foster excellence and human flourishing. For this to succeed, however, it is crucial for a community to have a true political constitution – not a mere contract for mutual advantage, but a commitment founded on mutual understanding.

The middle class society does not habituate its members toward arrogance or malice; therefore, it is the society which “most readily obeys reason.” This obedience to reason explains why the middle class is able to rule and to be ruled: rather than giving in to biases like the arrogance of the wealthy or the malice of the poor, the middle class can make political decisions impartially. Members of a middle class society will enforce these decisions as rulers but they will also be forced to obey them as the ruled. We should take seriously Aristotle’s notion of ruling and being ruled in turn; selection of citizens to rule by lot or by election, who would then return to the ranks of the ruled when their term was completed, was common in his day. However, this notion also refers to the way that citizens in a democratic political community simultaneously rule one another through the law and are ruled by the law. Members of the middle class are capable of self-government because they come from a common middle class background. Unlike the rich, whose existence implies the existence of the poor, the middle class can have a society that contains no classes other than it: in other words, it can have a society without damaging, politically divisive class distinctions. The members of the middle class have a common
perspective, they understand each other, and they have experienced political power from both sides.

In a society of equals, “it is just for [the members] to rule no more than they are ruled, and, therefore, to do so in turn.” In order to do so, they will have to abide by laws: “But this is already law,” Aristotle writes, “for the organization is law. Thus it is more choiceworthy to have law rule than any one of the citizens.” When equal members rule one another, they must do so through laws that are created by their reason and experience. Therefore, Aristotle writes, “anyone who instructs law to rule would seem to be asking God and the understanding alone to rule.”

When the members of a society rule over one another impartially, that society is governed by a kind of reason that is analogous to the divine. But this can only be achieved with a society that has a strong middle class: only the members of the middle class know how to rule and be ruled, only they are habituated towards impartiality rather than arrogance or malice, and only they are able to “obey reason” – the divine reason of a society where people follow the law. Aristotle writes that law is “understanding without desire.” This is the kind of perspective he wishes for a society’s members to adopt as they rule over one another. The rich and poor probably lack understanding, but, more importantly, they desire to advance only the social standing of their class.

The nature of inequality

Aristotle’s argument seems simple but powerful: significant economic inequality habituates the rich and poor in a way that prevents them from understanding each other’s perspective – or even wanting to understand – which is anathema to friendship and political

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23 1287a p. 96-97. Ibid.
24 Ibid.
deliberation. A more economically equal society will also be a more politically successful one because citizens will be habituated towards impartiality, friendship, and respectful political deliberation by their similar socioeconomic perspectives. But a deeper analysis, I argue, suggests that Aristotle is more concerned with the nature of economic inequality than its degree – although degree is clearly important to him as well.

The most important piece of evidence for this is that Aristotle criticizes absolute equality – the kind of tyranny that the poor might impose when they seize power and attempt to establish “extreme democracy.” This is explicitly not the society that Aristotle wants: he writes that “if the poor … divide up the property of the rich … they are evidently destroying the city-state.” “It is clear” that this is unjust – but no less so than if the “rich minority” was to rule and attempt to “plunder and confiscate the property of the multitude.” While the perspectives of all of society’s members might be closest in extreme democracy, this distribution of resources would be unjust. Aristotle does write that “justice seems to be equality,” but specifies that this only means “for equals. Justice also seems to be inequality” but only “for unequals.” Indeed, the fault of extreme oligarchy and democracy is that “they disregard the ‘for whom.’” For Aristotle, the “for whom” is the concept of justice or merit – the principle that determines who actually deserves to have more or less of society’s goods. Since the rich and poor “are speaking up to a point about justice of a sort, they think they are speaking about what is unqualifiedly just.” But they are only “speak[ing] about a part of justice” – but not about actual justice.

25 1295b p. 119-120, Ibid.
26 1281a p. 82. Ibid.
27 1280a p. 79, Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 1281a p. 82. Ibid.
What, then, is justice? What principles should determine the distribution of goods?

Aristotle devotes considerable attention to this question:

Someone might say, perhaps, that offices should be unequally distributed on the basis of superiority in any good whatsoever, provided the people did not differ in their remaining qualities but were exactly similar, since where people differ, so does what is just and what accords with merit. But if this is true, then those who are superior in complexion, or height, or any other good whatsoever will get more of the things with which political justice is concerned. And isn’t that plainly false? The matter is evident in the various sciences and capacities. For among flute players equally proficient in the craft, those who are of better birth do not get more or better flutes, since they will not play the flute better if they do. It is the superior performers who should also get the superior instruments. If what has been said is somehow not clear, it will become so if we take it still further. Suppose someone is superior in flute playing, but is very inferior in birth or beauty; then, even if each of these (I mean birth and beauty) is a greater good than flute playing, and is proportionately more superior to flute playing than he is superior in flute playing, he should still get the outstanding flutes. For the superiority in wealth and birth would have to contribute to the performance, but in fact they contribute nothing to it.30

Aristotle’s message is clear: offices and other social goods should be distributed like the flutes – not on the basis of irrelevant characteristics, but instead on the basis of merit and social good (i.e. who can put the flutes to the best possible use). Applying this parable about the nature of distributive justice to economic wealth, it follows that inequalities would be permissible on the basis of economic ability. In other words, the dispute between the rich and the poor can be solved by permitting inequality, but primarily on the basis of merit and social good, not arbitrary characteristics. It is clear that Aristotle’s middle class society would accept some level of inequality – if only because Aristotle strongly condemns rulers who seek to dramatically equalize economic conditions along with those who would greatly exacerbate inequalities. It also

30 1282b-1283a p. 86, Ibid.
appears likely that, for Aristotle, a just distribution of economic resources would require
distribution on the basis of relevant characteristics.

This conclusion, furthermore, is consistent with Aristotle’s remarks on the ability of the
middle class to be impartial because they are able to rule and be ruled, and with the notion that a
community of impartial actors ruling one another can attain reason that is almost divine. This
type of impartial reason, it would seem, would tolerate even fairly significant inequalities so long
as they were in the interests of society as a whole – and so long as they were not deleterious to
political community.

Of course, Aristotle cares less about achieving a just distribution of economic resources
and more about finding the distribution of economic resources that will result in social harmony
and political justice. But some conception of economic justice appears to be necessary for this to
be possible: if a middle class society contains inequalities but nevertheless “obeys reason,” then
these inequalities must comport with the demands of reason and thus must be predicated on
morally relevant characteristics. Moreover, it seems reasonable to conclude that justifiable
inequalities are far less likely than arbitrary inequalities to provoke malice on the part of the least
advantaged and foster arrogance on the part of the privileged. Thus the nature as well as the
degree of inequality is important for Aristotle. What matters is whether the economic conditions
produce impartiality, friendship, and stable political community.

Political Community’s Higher Purpose

The meaning of this community, moreover, is more than the political or economic
usefulness it affords to its members. “A city-state is not,” Aristotle clarifies, “a sharing of a
common location, and does not exist for the purpose of preventing mutual wrongdoing and
exchanging goods. Rather, while these must be present if indeed there is to be a city-state, when all of them are present there is still not yet a city-state, but only when households and families live well as a community whose end is a complete and self-sufficient life.\textsuperscript{31} While a society and its laws clearly provide benefits to its members, Aristotle wants us to understand that is not what societies are for. “The end of the city-state is living well, then, but these other things are for the sake of the end.” Aristotle believes that humans attain meaning through community and the actions – like friendship, conversation, marriage, politics, and religious practice – that it enables. Unlike many modern writers (and like many ancient ones), Aristotle locates the source of meaning at the level of the community, not at the level of individual values.

But Aristotle does consider what, two thousand years later, was to become a competing interpretation of the source of governmental legitimacy: the social contract. “Suppose people constituted a community,” he writes, “and came together for the sake of property” – not for any greater purpose than mutual benefit. If this happened, “their participation in a city-state would be proportional to their property, and the oligarchic argument would seem to be a powerful one. (For it is not just that someone who has contributed only one mina to a sum of one hundred minas should have equal shares in that sum, whether of the principal of the interest, with the one who has contributed all the rest.)”\textsuperscript{32} Aristotle seems to suggest here that, in a society built on nothing more than immediate self-interest – and in a world where justice is simply the enforcement of this pact – even very large inequalities would be permissible. What use is an ability to understand another’s perspective when self-interest is the only thing that matters? While these societies are less stable that more equal ones, Aristotle has a bigger problem with them. Societies, on his account, should not exist “only for the sake of life, but rather for the sake

\textsuperscript{31} 1280b p. 81, Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} 1280b p. 80, Ibid.
of living well, since otherwise there could be a city-state of slaves or animals, whereas in fact there is not, because these share neither in happiness nor in a life guided by deliberative choice.\textsuperscript{33} These societies might succeed in achieving their unambitious goals, but they will fail to do the things that, for a society, are actually worth doing:

And suppose they do not do so for the sake of an alliance to safeguard themselves from being wronged by anyone, nor to facilitate exchange and mutual assistance … To be sure, they have agreements about refraining from injustice, and formal documents of alliance, but no offices common to all of them have been established to deal with these matters; instead each city-state has different ones. Nor are those in one city-state concerned with what sort of people the others should be, or that none of those covered by the agreements should be unjust or vicious in any way, but only that neither city-state acts unjustly towards the other. But those who are concerned with good government give careful attention to political virtue and vice. Hence it is quite evident that the city-state (at any rate, one truly so-called and not just for the sake of argument) must be concerned with virtue. For otherwise the community becomes an alliance that differs only in location from another alliance in which the allies live far apart, and law becomes an agreement, “a guarantor of just behavior toward one another,” as the sophist Lycophron said, but not such as to make the citizens good and just.”\textsuperscript{34}

We have seen that, in a true city-state, inequality must be limited and based on a general sense of economic fairness. This is necessary because limiting inequality leads to social harmony and appears to produce more rational, impartial governance. When read in this context, Aristotle’s critique of societies built only a social contract for protection of property and mutual advantage is informative. Aristotle believes that, while a social agreement that preserves peace might be viable in a deeply unequal society, a just society will be one that is more equal. This equality is what allows citizens to govern one another equally in accordance with the law through reason. Inequality not only creates disunion and bad government, it also prevents a

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
community from realizing its most fundamental purpose. Furthermore, Aristotle is clear that between preserving the property of individuals and obtaining justice through a true political community, which requires some level of equality, the latter is more important.

**Conclusion**

In sum, Aristotle believes that severe economic inequality can make it harder to achieve social harmony and political justice. Some economic inequality, however, is justified: implicitly, he suggests that the nature as well as the degree of inequality may be more important. The members of society, when acting impartially, may view even fairly large inequalities as justified if they benefit society. What matters is a sense of economic fairness that prevents the malice and arrogance that small but arbitrary inequalities can create. Aristotle values the impartial perspective of the middle class; it allows them to obey reason and govern one another as members of a just society. Economic equality is important because it allows the creation of a political community that achieves justice and is worth living in for its own sake.

Aristotle’s view is pragmatic: he desires economic justice not for its own sake, but because it enables social harmony, political justice, and the cultivation of virtue. It is also practical: while Aristotle seems to believe that impartiality is key to economic justice, the most he aspires for is a society where people can mostly understand each other and generally believe conditions to be fair.
The philosopher John Rawls looms large in the history of modern philosophy. His magnum opus, *A Theory of Justice*, changed the field of moral and political philosophy forever. In addition to his contributions as a philosopher in his own right, Rawls was a renowned scholar of Immanuel Kant. In *A Theory of Justice*, he applies Kantian ethics to political questions and develops a comprehensive theory for assessing justice within economic systems and societies. Like Aristotle, his focus is on the “basic principles” of a state, or its constitution. But Rawls focuses on whether these principles are just in and of themselves, not on whether they are conducive to a successful society that can achieve political justice.

A society’s basic principles are the foundation of its system of ethics and shape its political, economic, and social institutions. Thus, getting these principles right is key to having a just society.

**A Contract in a Different Context**

Rawls’s account of justice, like that of many political philosophers including Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, rests on a social contract. Social contract theory holds that humans are fundamentally free and that rules of social cooperation must be undertaken with their consent; in
this way, society and its organizing principles may be thought of as an agreement between all of society’s members. Like an ordinary contract, which allows free individuals to consensually undertake obligations to one another for mutual benefit, the social contract frames our obligations to society as founded upon and legitimated by our own consent. Of course, we do not ever formally consent to the existence of the government nor is our consent revocable. Nevertheless, whether a reasonable, free, and rational person would consent is a powerful moral criterion.

Rawls’s project “generalizes and carries to a higher level of abstraction” the social contract theories of other thinkers. Rawls accepts the logic of the social contract: that “those who engage in social cooperation choose together, in one joint act, the principles which are to assign basic rights and duties and to determine the division of social benefits … Just as each person must decide by rational reflection what constitutes his good, that is, the system of ends, which it is rational for him to pursue, so a group of persons must decide once and for all what is to count among them as just and unjust.”

However, Rawls insists that the bargaining which results in this decision must take place under fair conditions. He believes that no one should be “advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances” – these factors are morally arbitrary, in that they are beyond the control of an individual. No one can reasonably take credit for these advantages, or be blamed for the corresponding disadvantages. Rawls’s baseline assumption is that individuals are free and equal as moral persons – as “rational beings with their own ends” – and thus that the conditions in

which the social contract is negotiated should reflect their fundamental, underlying moral
equality as moral, rational, autonomous beings.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{Inequality: are advantages arbitrary?}

Rawls’s second principle of justice requires a commitment to increasing social mobility
and equality of opportunity while also reducing economic inequality by paying particular interest
to the needs of the least advantaged. This is what the social contract which legitimates our
society’s very existence would demand, assuming it is negotiated under fair conditions that
acknowledge our inherent equality as moral persons.

Rawls’s second principle of justice “holds that social and economic inequalities, for
example inequalities of wealth and authority, are just only if they result in compensating benefits
for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society.” Some inequalities
are not just, even if they appear to be “expedient:” for instance, this principle “rule[s] out
justifying social institutions on the grounds that the hardships of some are offset by a greater
good in the aggregate.” But inequalities can be just: “there is no injustice in the greater benefits
earned by a few provided that the situation of persons not so fortunate is thereby improved.”\textsuperscript{37}

On Rawls’s account, inequalities are not inherently just or unjust; rather, they are just insofar as
they advance the interests of all – not some, not most, but all – and unjust insofar as they do not.
In order to achieve this principle, inequalities must not only improve the circumstances of
everyone – they must also be attainable by everyone.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid
\textsuperscript{37} § 11, p. 52-56.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
The power of Rawls’s argument is that it deftly weighs freedom and equality. His call for a more egalitarian society rests on the notion that as free individuals, the least advantaged are entitled to a society which they would rationally choose for themselves. Rawls also challenges the “meritocratic” logic of modern American society by suggesting that an honest conception of merit does not include things which are beyond our control – such as our innate natural talents, the quality of our education and parental upbringing, and even pure luck.

The second principle applies, in the first approximation, to the distribution of income and wealth and to the design of organizations that make use of differences in authority and responsibility. While the distribution of wealth and income need not be equal, it must be to everyone’s advantage and, at the same time, positions of authority and responsibility must be accessible to all. One applies the second principle by holding positions open, and then, subject to this constraint, arranges social and economic inequalities so that everyone benefits.

Though he laboriously articulates it in order to achieve a high level of precision, Rawls’s second principle is fairly simple: inequalities are only just if they benefit and are attainable by everyone.

**Interpreting the second principle: classical liberalism, or something more?**

Rawls allows that this theory contains two central ambiguities: namely, the criteria of “everyone’s advantage” and “equally open to all.” In §12 he describes these ambiguities in detail. Each term has two prevailing interpretations: “everyone’s advantage” can refer to adhering to the principle of Pareto efficiency, or to the difference principle; “equally open to all”
can refer to being formally or legally open to the most talented people, or fully open based on fairness or merit. The latter principles, Rawls explains, are the right criteria for a just society.\textsuperscript{39}

Rawls devotes considerable discussion to the two conceptions of “everyone’s advantage” – Pareto efficiency and the difference principle, starting with the former. A distribution of social and economic goods is Pareto efficient if there is no alteration that can be made which improves the circumstances of some agents without requiring that the circumstances of other members of society be harmed. Rawls sees Pareto efficiency as a good, but stresses that as a guide for justice it is limited. Rawls notes that many systems are characterized by Pareto efficiency – in fact, all four societies which can arise from different interpretations of the second principle can be characterized by Pareto efficiency. The systems have their own maxima – that is, the class whose benefits have been maximized, and from whom it would be necessary to take goods in order to improve the situation of others. The group whose interests are maximized serves as a constraint on the maximization of other groups’ allocation of goods. This group can be any group: the best-off in society, the worst-off, and any group in between. “The problem,” Rawls writes, “is to choose between them, to find a conception of justice that singles out one of these efficient distributions as just.”\textsuperscript{40}

Rawls believes that the interests of the least advantaged members of society should be maximized, in accordance with the difference principle. By maximizing the interests of the least advantaged and constraining the improvement of other groups’ allocation to the extent that doing so can improve the situation of the least advantaged, the difference principle ensures that the resulting social arrangements are those to which every member of society would consent through

\textsuperscript{39} §12, p. 57-65, Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} §12, p. 57-65, Ibid.
self-interested bargaining under fair conditions. They would only consent to a system of inequalities, Rawls believed, that benefited everyone. This is why the interests of the least advantaged must be maximized: if their interests are not maximized, then the system does not fully benefit them. It is important to remember that if the interests of a particular disadvantaged group are maximized so much that they come to enjoy a better set of benefits than another group, then that group becomes the least advantaged. Rawls is not advocating on behalf of a “least advantaged” group which he believes is most important from a moral perspective. Rather, he is ensuring that no group is written out of the benefits of the system of inequality by ensuring that even those who benefit the least from the system are still benefiting from the system – not being harmed by it for the sake of everyone else. Behind the veil of ignorance, Rawls insists, no rational individuals would consent to being harmed by the system of inequality.

Rawls believes that justice is prior to all other social goods, and thus on his account it is more important that the basic organizing principles of society could reasonably obtain the consent of all society’s members than that all possibilities for positive-sum gain have been exhausted. However, he also notes that completely optimizing the interests of the least advantaged will result in a society that adheres to both the difference principle and the concept of Pareto efficiency. However, he stresses that the former is more important, and urges policymakers to err on the side of violating Pareto efficiency rather than risk perpetuating an unjust distribution.\textsuperscript{41}

Rawls also considers whether “open to all” refers to legal, formal openness or to a more expansive equality or opportunity. The two kinds of society which endorse only the former, narrower conception are the system of natural liberty and the natural aristocracy. These systems

\textsuperscript{41}§ 13, p.69-73, Ibid.
“require a formal equality of opportunity in that all have at least the same legal rights of access to all advantaged social positions.” But this formal equality of opportunity is just that: formal.

“Since there is no effort to preserve an equality, or similarity, of social conditions,” Rawls writes, “the initial distribution of assets for any period of time is strongly influenced by natural and social contingencies” – contingences for which participants in the system are not responsible, and over which they do not have control. “The most obvious injustice of the system of natural liberty,” Rawls concludes, “is that it permits distributive shares to be improperly influenced by these factors so arbitrary from a moral point of view.” These systems award social goods, at least in part, based on “the outcome of the natural lottery; and this outcome is arbitrary from a moral perspective.” “There is no more reason,” Rawls insists, “to permit the distribution of income and wealth to be settled by the distribution of natural assets than by historical and social fortune.”

Instead, Rawls advocates that the second principle of justice be interpreted with democratic equality, not formal equality, by making use of the difference principle. Social goods should be allocated on the basis of conditions which, as much as possible, emphasize equality of opportunity. There may be times when it is necessary for some social groups to have systematically better outcomes than others; it might be necessary for this born with mathematical aptitude to be systematically better off than those without it in order to encourage them to produce innovations that benefit everyone. This is permissible, but only if the difference principle is rigidly adhered to and the discrepancy in expected outcomes clearly benefits the group with the worst expected outcome. Mathematicians might receive more wealth if incentivizing the creation of mathematical knowledge is an especially important social goal, but

42 §12, p. 57-65, Ibid.
this is only just if advantaging the mathematically talented in this way makes everyone –
including the mathematically challenged, and the least advantaged in society – better off.

**Rawls and Economic Justice**

Rawls reaches a powerful conclusion: inequalities are justified only if they benefit
everyone in society. This conclusion is based on his view that moral judgments should not be
distorted by morally arbitrary factors, and thus that society’s most basic values should be
legislated in a situation where these factors are not at play: the veil of ignorance. The veil of
ignorance, by definition, creates a situation in which individuals are as impartial to social
circumstance as they possibly can be. Behind the veil of ignorance, bias simply cannot exist
because individuals do not even know which conditions – including those of advantage and
disadvantage – they possess. Since individuals are fundamentally free, they can only be bound by
constraints which they would rationally accept; and because they are morally equal, the
conditions in which they would negotiate the constraints must be equal as well. Thus,
inequalities which result from these constraints are only those which benefit everyone; and even
those who benefit least from the social arrangements must be in a position where they could not
rationally object to the resulting social order. If they could, it would destroy the logic of
universal hypothetical consent that enables a society to be just.

Through the application of a Kantian notion of moral disinterestedness and rationality to
economic questions, Rawls embarks on an ambitious philosophical project: to understand what
reason and morality demand of an economic distribution. His goal is idealistic – to understand
and obtain economic justice – and his method, the veil of ignorance, is profoundly theoretical.
Chapter IV

The Impartial Community

This paper’s claim is that, despite the clear differences in motivation, argument, and context in which Aristotle and Rawls present their arguments about economic inequality, their views on it are basically – and surprisingly – the same. They both believe that impartiality is crucial to determining the justifiability of economic inequalities and that the degree of inequality is limited by the potential for unfairness to destroy the logic of society itself. For Aristotle, impartiality is an ability to understand others and assess political questions with reason rather than desire. It helps societies achieve social harmony, political community, and friendship. Aristotle sees these things as the purpose of society. For Rawls, impartiality is a criterion that is necessary for a society’s social contract – and the political and economic institutions that result from it – to be just. For them both, impartiality, an ability to understand the perspectives of others including those who are better or worse off, is necessary to determine what inequalities are or are not permissible. This impartiality requires a community that requires a certain level of economic equality in order to be viable. Both thinkers imagine an impartial community: a group of people who understand each other’s perspective and collectively make moral and political decisions on that basis.

Rawls and Aristotle are dramatically different thinkers. They asked different questions about different topics in very different contexts, and they differ on fundamental questions of
epistemology and the nature and purpose of philosophy itself. Aristotle was an ancient Greek thinker who pioneered novel approaches to science, religion, economics, politics, and logic; Rawls was a modern university professor who primarily addressed questions of political morality in a modern liberal society – especially ones that relate to economics.

My aim in this paper is not to diminish these substantial differences. Rather, I wish to show how these two thinkers arrive at a surprisingly similar position about economic inequality. Having outlined the positions of the two thinkers in the two preceding chapters, I will begin this chapter by discussing this similarity in greater detail. Then, I will discuss this similarity in relation to the broader set of ancient and modern perspectives on economic inequality and show that this similarity is not a trivial matter – it puts Aristotle and Rawls at odds with many other thinkers. Finally, I will discuss the differences which my comparative analysis illuminates.

**The Impartial Community**

In the preceding chapters, I have described the framework Rawls and Aristotle put forward to assess inequalities in social goods. In essence, Aristotle believes that a political community in which the members of society govern one another in turn, as equals, is the best possible society and is capable of an almost divine form of political reason – the ability to make judgments with reason and without desire. He believes that the only class truly capable of this kind of governance is the middle class, which is capable of ruling and being ruled and thus “obeying reason.” The rich and the poor are habituated by their circumstances towards arrogance and malice respectively, which makes it difficult for them to govern. Indeed, a state that is governed only by the poor or only by the rich cannot even have a proper constitution, in Aristotle’s view.
It is important to recognize that Aristotle, unlike Rawls, does not address economic inequality systematically. Rather, he attempts to systematically address how best to establish social harmony and political justice, and we learn about his views on economic inequality along the way. Specifically, we learn that ruling one another in turn as equals “would seem to be asking God and the understanding alone to rule.” By ruling and being ruled, the middle class come to understand both perspectives; it gains a sense of impartiality that allows us to abstract from our particular circumstances and take society’s best interests into account. Reason also rejects morally arbitrary allocations, like providing the best flutes to the richest or most beautiful people, instead of the best flutists. In order to have this sense of impartiality, there cannot be too much inequality because it would habituate society’s members towards arrogance or malice like the rich and poor, who inevitably seek to dominate the other group and cannot take everyone’s interest into account. Impartiality is what we use to assess social inequalities, but the logic of impartiality can only work in a community whose members are habituated towards being impartial with one another. Too much inequality, or morally arbitrary inequality, causes the logic of this system to break down.

Rawls, on the other hand, does address inequality in a clearly systematic fashion. This makes him much easier to interpret on this subject, and perhaps explains why the chapter I devote to his thinking is shorter.

Rawls believes that free, rational individuals can only be justly governed by a social contract which provides them benefits in exchange for obligations. The only fair contract is one which they would choose under fair bargaining conditions – bargaining conditions in which no party has a strategic advantage over any other party. The only way to achieve these conditions is

to completely strip individuals of considerations which, from a social point of view, are morally arbitrary. Rawls does this through a thought experiment by placing individuals behind a “veil of ignorance” that prevents them from knowing the particular circumstances – including advantages and disadvantages – which they will have in life. In other words, Rawls believes that impartiality – absolute, abstract impartiality – needs to be exercised in assessing the basic principles which will determine economic inequality. The purpose of the thought experiment is to establish a social contract to which every person, at least hypothetically, would assent. Any deviation from Rawls’s difference principle – which requires that a system of inequality benefit every single member of society – would destroy the logic of hypothetical unanimous consent upon which his social contract, and thus his system of justice, rests. In short, the system of social inequality must benefit everyone so that it can obtain everyone’s consent; otherwise it is unjust.

Both thinkers believe that impartiality is the most important quality for assessing social inequalities. Impartiality is what allows society’s members to rule one another in turn, as though divine reason and accumulated social experience were ruling; impartiality, through the veil of ignorance, is what legitimates a society’s social contract and the inequalities which the resulting social order produces. But, for both thinkers, something deeper is going on. It is not enough that a person who happens to be in authority rules without partiality. Rather, it is necessary that each community member understand the perspective of all other members. For Aristotle, this is necessary for social harmony and political stability. For Rawls, it is necessary for justice that everyone would rationally consent to society’s underlying social contract, and that requires assessing social circumstances from a position of impartiality. Too much inequality can destroy this kind of community – by habituating society’s members away from reason on Aristotle’s pragmatic account, or by destroying society’s underlying logic on Rawls’s abstract account.
The impartial community approach it is at once individualist and communitarian. It is individualist because it seeks to accommodate the views of every member of society. It is communitarian because, by attempting to instill an impartial perspective, it ensures that those views will advance society’s interests. It is not an egalitarian view or an elitist view, because it does not view inequality as inherently favorable or unfavorable. Inequality, on both accounts, is a tool that can be deployed on behalf of the greater good, so long as it does not destroy the conditions which enable the greater good to be considered in the first place.

**Contracts, Compacts, and Cities of God**

This is not, of course, the only view that Aristotle and Rawls have in common. Both of them believe that philosophy should be taken seriously; both of them have faith in the power of reason to improve the human condition; both believe that morality is a genuine concept that imposes meaningful obligations on human beings; both believe that arbitrary decisions are bad, and so forth. Many other thinkers accept some or all of these premises as well. For my claim about the impartial community to be meaningful, it is not enough for it to be true: it must be more than trivially true.

My hope is that the reader can recognize that this particular approach to inequality is largely unique to these two thinkers. However, I will now offer some very general and limited comments on great thinkers who also addressed inequality. While my account will not do these thinkers justice, I believe it will give the unconvinced reader a sense of just how surprising and interesting this similarity between Rawls and Aristotle is.

Ancient thought contains a variety of perspectives on inequality. One of the most famous is that of Aristotle’s teacher, Plato, who described a system of social inequality in the “myth of
the metals” in *The Republic*. Plato suggests that a culture must have inequality and that inequalities need to be endorsed by cultural practice and religious belief. He spends other parts of the work describing the inherent fallibility of politics and his attempt to construct a utopian state that solves the problems of politics – a project that he may take seriously, or may intend as a critique of political utopianism, depending on how he is interpreted. In any case, he certainly does not accept anything close to a view that all of society’s participants could, in any sense, understand and assent to the prevailing logic of a just distribution of goods. Other ancient thinkers – in the classical ancient world as well as in the Middle East during the Arab Golden Age – fail to address distribution of goods at all, or generally accept the preexisting distribution as unchangeable and inherently legitimate.

Medieval thinkers like Aquinas and Augustine emphasize the divine source and spiritual temptations of wealth. Both thinkers emphasize the importance of managing wealth equitably, and do speak of the special obligation that the wealthy have to use or share their resources with others. But these obligations proceed from God’s word – as interpreted by the Church and, provisionally, the nobility – not from the collective, impartial decision of society.

Modern thought, while almost by definition more liberal and contractarian than ancient thought, also features a variety of frameworks for navigating inequality that differ from the impartial community. One of the most prominent is the social contract. A variety of thinkers, including Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, proposed that society’s collective actions could be justified by an underlying bargain between all members of society with each other, that is, by a social contract. This bargain would feature advantages and disadvantages, and would be decided on hypothetically (Kant) or from a state of nature (Rousseau, Locke). The social contract is
similar to the impartial community in that it is founded on the hypothetical or implicit consent of each person in a society.

Aristotle believes that a social contract for “the sake of property,” “the purpose of living,” “to facilitate exchange” or “for mutual assistance” would not result in a true city-state. They do not “give careful attention to political virtue and vice” and do not “share in happiness or a life guided by deliberative choice”. 44 Aristotle envisions a higher purpose for society than a mutual agreement for mutual benefit. He does believe that a society of equals should involve the mutual political participation of all its members. But this mutual participation is about something greater than mutual benefit: he believes that the people who are equals should seek to rule over one another and achieve political friendship for a collective higher purpose – not for the advantage of their aggregate individual self-interest.

While Rawls certainly accepts the logic of a social contract, his conception is fundamentally different. Social contract theorists like Locke and Rousseau envisioned a social contract negotiated in a state of nature – a document granting the benefits of social cooperation and government negotiated by those living without those advantages. The individuals in the state of nature have more reason to desire cooperation than ordinary people, but they do not have a better perspective from which to make moral judgments. Rawls, on the other hand, clearly stipulates that the social contract is negotiated behind a veil of ignorance where the actors negotiating it are forced to be impartial. This is crucial, because it means that the social contract is undertaken for the purpose of justice, not merely for the purpose of mutual self-interest.

How they treat the notion of a contract is a fundamental difference between Rawls and Aristotle. Rawls accepts the social contract in his special, impartial form; Aristotle does not. This is connected to an even deeper difference: Rawls differs with Aristotle in that he is avowedly liberal. Rawls believes that individuals should be able to form their own conception of the good to pursue in life, while Aristotle advances a particular conception of the good based on his understanding of excellence and virtue. But both of them believe that the particular political problem of social and economic inequalities is best addressed through a community of people seeking to understand one another’s perspective where there is not so much inequality that this sense of shared impartiality is undermined. Their shared impartial community framework makes them unique. The only notable social contract thinker who might also be said to use this framework is Kant, who required that a potential social contract be consistent with the categorical imperative – one that abides by principles which a rational person could consistently will to be moral laws for everyone. Kant’s writings on politics and economics are not well enough developed for us to conclude if he would have subscribed to this framework, but the similarities between its solution to economic inequality and his system of ethics are clear: both emphasize impartiality and respect the full autonomy and dignity of all members of a community.

Another popular modern approach to inequality is utilitarianism, as popularized most prominently by Mill. Utilitarianism, which allocates resources on the basis of maximizing utility, clearly differs from the impartial community. It does not rely on the assessment of all a community’s members, and does not put any constraint on inequality for the sake of preserving a political community. Libertarianism and classical liberalism similarly differ from the impartial
community view. Both hold that inequality should be determined by the market system, not the moral or political needs of a society.

Finally, there is a completely different category of thinkers such as Nietzsche and Marx, who simply reject the premise of this inquiry: in the case of the latter because he rejects the notion of inequality and exchange, and sees politics and morality as artificial tools of economic subjugation; in the case of the former because of skepticism about the existence or usefulness of justice as something separate than the will of the most powerful.

The concept of an impartial community is a remarkable similarity not only because it unites two very different thinkers. It is also remarkable because it is a unique approach to navigating social inequality.

**Pragmatism, Idealism, and Complications**

The intention of this paper is to establish that Aristotle and Rawls employ a remarkably similar framework for navigating inequality. This similarity tells us a great deal about both thinkers. But a further purpose of this paper was to examine, following Sherman, the differences which this similarity illuminates.

Rawls and Aristotle both believe that an impartial community – one whose members can understand one another’s perspectives, and in which a sense of mutual benefits legitimate inequalities in the allocation of social goods – should be used to assess inequality. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, Aristotle’s motivation for employing this framework is pragmatic and his application of it is practical. Rawls’s motivations, on the other hand, are idealistic and his application is abstract.
Aristotle does not propose that an impartial community can obtain economic justice; indeed, the concept of economic justice is largely absent from Aristotle’s analysis of politics. Aristotle is concerned about economic justice in exchange – he forbids usury, insists on equal exchanges, proposes justice as a mean, and so forth – but does not develop a notion of economic justice in allocation. Rather, his remarks about allocation are totally devoted to achieving political stability and social harmony. This reflects a characteristically Aristotelian pragmatism: rather than advancing the abstract, lofty goal of true economic justice, Aristotle instead describes a sense of basic economic fairness that allows society to function and achieve its other goals – which have to do with friendship, intellectual contemplation, and the shared pursuit of personal excellence. Aristotle’s community is impartial so that it can get along.

Furthermore, it remains clear that Aristotle’s notion of impartiality – at least as far as individuals are concerned – can only go so far. Aristotle’s remarks on the ability of the middle class, rich, and poor to rule emphasize emotional habituation and social experiences. His concept of impartiality does not rely upon abstract moral reasoning; rather, he is interested in the lived experiences of society’s members and the type of character those experiences produce. Will they be too arrogant or malicious to obey reason? Or will they be prepared to rule and be ruled?

Rawls, on the other hand, intends for his impartial community to realize a set of principles that are economically just. He takes the principle of allocative economic justice very seriously; indeed, this topic more than any other captures his attention in *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls’s philosophical project is to come up with principles that result in a just allocation of social goods. Therefore, while Rawls emphasizes fairness and impartiality in the bargaining process that results in a social contract, the point of this exercise is to arrive at principles of justice. He calls justice the “first virtue of social institutions” and writes that “a theory, however
elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions
no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust.”

Rawls’s notion of economic justice is not a means to an end; it is an end in itself.

Moreover, Rawls’s application of the impartial community is far more abstract than
Aristotle’s. Rawls’s veil of ignorance represents complete impartiality: it is impossible to be
partial without knowing one’s own position in society. The veil of ignorance is intentionally
hypothetical and aspirational. Rawls is less interested in coming up with functional guidelines for
an imperfect human society and more interested in figuring out what truly fair, rational principles
of justice would look like. Therefore, he envisions members of a community as totally impartial
deliberators – not as complicated, imperfect human beings.

Aristotle is worried about what will work for cultivating excellence; Rawls is worried
about what is just. Aristotle attempts to use empirical inquiry to figure out the messy realities of
the world, while Rawls engages in a thought experiment to see what kind of society is just for
rational beings. Broadly speaking, Aristotle is much more pragmatic and practical than Rawls,
who is idealistic and abstract. This comes as no surprise to anyone reasonably well acquainted
with both thinkers. However, the reality is somewhat more complicated.

For one thing, despite his generally pragmatic disposition, Aristotle’s language about a
community of equals governing one another is anything but pragmatic. Aristotle describes a
community where society’s members rule each other in turn as being ruled by “God and the
understanding alone.” In other words, there is a place in Aristotle for a kind of reasoning that
goes beyond what humans are normally capable of, and for a community ruled by an agent –

specifically “God or the understanding alone” – that is more impartial than a fair minded but human middle class citizen. This goes beyond pragmatism and practicality; it almost sounds idealistic and abstract.

This is not to say, however, that Aristotle and Rawls have a similar approach. Crucially, Aristotle’s higher form of reasoning only occurs through the law or through longstanding social customs which he sees as having the force of law; he writes that “anyone who instructs law to rule would seem to be asking God and the understanding alone to rule” immediately after saying of the members of a society of equals that “it is just for them to rule no more than they are ruled, and therefore, to do so in turn. But this is already law; for the organization is law.”

Why is it necessary for law or “the organization” to exist as an intermediary? Because ultimately it is the community that attains a higher form of impartial, almost divine moral understanding – not the individuals themselves, shaped as they are by their human experiences. For Rawls, we must ourselves abstract away from our own circumstances to obtain impartiality; for Aristotle, this is impossible as individuals. According, only by living in a community and ruling over each other in turn can a community attain a higher form of political reason.

Rawls, too, is more complicated than a first impression would suggest. He does not fail to address the notion that economic circumstances can habituate members of a political community. He writes that “the social system shapes the wants and aspirations that its citizens come to have. It determines in part the sort of persons they want to be as well as the sort of persons they are. Thus an economic system is not only an institutional device for satisfying existing wants and needs but a way of creating and fashioning wants in the future. How men work together now to satisfy their present desires affects the desires they will have later on, the kind of persons they

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will be.” For Aristotle, it is this characteristic – how a system shapes its members – that is all-important. Rawls, however, does not think it constitutes a serious objection to his form of thinking. He explicitly believes that the veil of ignorance can abstract members of society away from their socioeconomic habituations. He writes that although “it may seem at first sight that the influence of the social system upon human wants and men’s view of themselves poses a decisive objection to the contract view” because bargaining for a more just social contract will be distorted by the way society’s members have already been habituated. However, this objection ignores “the very special nature of [the veil of ignorance] and the scope of the principals adopted there. Only the most general assumptions are made about the aims of parties.” Therefore, “the theory of justice does not presuppose a theory of the good.”

However, Rawls does take the notion that habituation can affect principles of justice very seriously. Rawls believes that a principle of justice should, at least in the long run, be neutral to potentially arbitrary existing circumstances. One of his major criticisms of utilitarianism is that because it “depends upon existing desires and present social circumstances and their natural continuations into the future … we cannot be sure what will happen. Since there is no ideal embedded in its first principle, the place we start from may always influence the path we are to follow.” He believes that under his system, due to the abstract nature of deliberation that admits of habituation toward many different conceptions of the good, “the effect of the initial circumstances will eventually disappear.”

Most strikingly, Rawls believes that deliberation about society’s basic principles beneath the veil of ignorance should take into account the effect of habituation. He writes that “a just system

\[\text{\textsuperscript{48}}\text{ Ibid.}
\[\text{\textsuperscript{49}}\text{ Ibid.}]}
must generate its own support. This means that it must be arranged so as to bring about in its members the corresponding sense of justice, an effective desire to act in accordance with its rules for reasons of justice. Thus the requirement of stability and the criterion of discouraging desires that conflict with the principles of justice put further constraints on institutions.”

Aristotle is generally pragmatic; Rawls is generally abstract and idealistic. There is a place in Aristotle for impartiality that abstracts away from individuals’ emotional biases and imperfections, but this occurs on a societal and not an individual level. Rawls acknowledges the power of economic institutions to habituate society’s members and the need for them to be shaped to inculcate respect for justice and promote political stability, but he has faith that individuals, through the veil of ignorance, can abstract past their habituation using the veil of ignorance when they negotiate society’s most basic principles.

The Direction of Justice

A further difference is how two philosophers believe the framework should be deployed. For Aristotle, a society’s most fundamental principles are its customs. Aristotle writes that “laws based on custom are more authoritative and deal with matters that have more authority than do written laws.” There is an interesting parallel between the importance of these customs and Rawls’s basic principles of society – both are fundamental values, not matters of law or policy. Rawls believes it is these basic principles that are negotiated behind the veil of ignorance, in accordance with the difference principle. Because Aristotle describes only middle class societies as being capable of a true political constitution of equals, it is reasonable to infer that his notions

50 Ibid.
of impartiality as well as reasonable, non-arbitrary inequalities are part of this higher form of law, based on custom.

But while both of them emphasize fundamental values, there is a difference in the nature of these values. For Rawls, these are principles that result from the application of his ethical system. This is why Rawls is sometimes called a process ethicist. Rawls envisions the creation of a set of basic principles of justice through a hypothetical negotiation. This process is linear: individuals, at least hypothetically, abstract away from their particular advantages and disadvantages and negotiate a set of basic principles by which they can all live, so long as the resulting system of inequality benefits everyone.

For Aristotle, the process is circular. A middle class society results in more impartiality, which results in a political community, social harmony, and friendship. But these things result in more impartiality. Rather than a clear logical criterion, as in Rawls, for Aristotle political impartiality is a sort of habit that can be developed among individuals and in a society.

Conclusion

Allocating social and economic goods is a central problem of politics and moral philosophy. It is a problem of justice for some thinkers, like Rawls, and one of political stability and governance for others, like Aristotle. A compelling solution to this problem is offered by Aristotle and Rawls: the members of a society should attempt to understand each other’s perspective so that they can view their allocation and the allocations of others with impartiality, taking society’s interests rather than personal advantage into account. This impartiality – as an abstract Rawlsian construct or a real Aristotelian habit – is undermined by too much inequality, or by morally arbitrary inequality. A society that wishes to navigate inequality should attempt to
create an “impartial community:” a community in which all members seek to understand each other’s perspective and thereby make collective decisions regarding the allocation of social and economic goods impartially while limiting inequality to maintain the community.

This framework is an interesting and compelling answer to the questions presented by inequality. Even more remarkable is that Rawls and Aristotle – two very different thinkers, with different approaches to politics and morality, with different contexts and audiences, with even different ideas about what philosophy actually is – have this approach in common. Understanding this commonality has much to show us about the nature of their thought, even as it highlights the significant differences in their philosophical foundations.
Works Cited


