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Book Review by Paul W. Ludwig

Public Spiritedness

Aristotle: Democracy and Political Science, by Delba Winthrop.
University of Chicago Press, 288 pages, $65

Book III of Aristotle's *Politics* looks on its surface like the work's most narrowly "political" book. It channels partisan voices of democrats and oligarchs, who occasionally even swear at each other. It also begins the eminently practical exercise of political compromise, combining features of democracy and oligarchy into a new constitution, a "mixed regime."

Despite this apparent practicality, it is the thesis of Delba Winthrop's posthumously published *Aristotle: Democracy and Political Science* that Book III also contains a metaphysical inquiry which underlies its political one. Her line-by-line, occasionally syllable-by-syllable commentary on the text contains more than a dozen references to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and seven to Jacob Klein's *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra* (1968). Winthrop's question is: Do aggregates of distinct parts ever form a unified whole? Whether it be in politics, in the soul, or in the cosmos, can *unum* ever really come into being *e pluribus*?

Today, the "whole" that Aristotle and Delba Winthrop sought is sometimes accused of being a "hierarchy"—a term gaining strength from early modern suspicion of priestcraft. Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes banished metaphysics from political philosophy, initiating the criticism that metaphysicians ignore "the way things are" and willfully impose their morality, "the way things ought to be," onto reality.

But in fact, to deny the existence of natural wholes is not to escape the accusation of willfulness. To give an example from modern politics, on which Winthrop wrote elsewhere: the sexual revolution and subsequent splinter movements have denied that the sexes form a natural whole. If they did, the couple's wholeness might set a standard by which other sexual unions could be judged arbitrary and merely willful. But the appeal of this argument is precisely that, in the absence of natural wholes, *we* decide: we exercise our freedom by creating the wholes we want. Either nature imposes a hierarchy which we must will ourselves to follow, or the absence of natural hierarchy sets us free to exert pure, unfettered will.

This ubiquity of willfulness suggests that the will has a role to play. Winthrop first completed *Aristotle* in 1974, as a Harvard dissertation. Back then, metaphysics was just beginning to make a comeback—but in a perverse new way. Postmodernists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and their followers increasingly wore willful self-asser-

tion as a badge of honor. They openly admitted to prior moral and political commitments which dictated their conviction that nature forms no ordered whole. The fascinating thing about Winthrop's reading is that she found, in Aristotle, a similar procedure, in which politics is "first philosophy," shaping the conclusions of Aristotle's metaphysics.

Winthrop's unique observation is that wholes must be *asserted*. Materialism, denying the existence of wholes, is a democratic prejudice. This is because democrats are committed to equality, which in practice becomes sameness. Homogeneity of "parts," sameness of citizens, means they do not fit together organically to form a whole. Only parts that are heterogeneous in form (as in heterosexual) can take on the division of labor that forms a random heap into a whole. Therefore, distinctions must be made. The oligarchs quoted in Book III of the *Politics* insisted on distinctions—on complementary forms or classes of people such as the propertied and the have-nots, the better people and the riffraff. Aristotle himself asserted a distinction between the virtuous and the unvirtuous. Such distinctions are rarely "by nature" in the sense of springing up on their own, the way bees' natures fit them to be a worker, a drone, or a queen.

Aristotle did say that some such distinctions may "accord with nature." But, Winthrop points out, we may also choose to act unnaturally. Moreover, politics elevates the citizen over the foreigner. Should real Americans have a status above the undocumented, or are we all just people? Such distinctions as those between citizen and foreigner do not spring up naturally: they must be asserted. Winthrop's thesis applies to the soul as well as to other wholes. A part of us, our reason or spiritedness, must assert that it is master over our other parts, such as our desires, if we are to have any hope of mastering them and so becoming virtuous. Each of us must assert that his parts form a whole, that he is a *person*, if he is ever to have any hope of actually being or becoming one. The radical implication of this thesis is that, in the absence of such an assertion, there may be no wholes in nature, either: as it turns out, even the beehive needs man's assertion that it is whole.

This represents quite a departure from what we think we know. For surely it works the other way around? Surely, natural wholes provide models for political wholes. The "body politic" metaphor takes its cue from a natural whole, the human body, the unity of which is obvious and gets transferred only metaphorically to politics: no polity is nearly so integrated as the human body. But Winthrop's assertion becomes more plausible once we take into account the atomism of ancient natural science. Due in part to the success of Plato and Aristotle in combatting it, this worldview is extant mainly in fragments and in later renditions. In one such rendition, Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, the wholes we think we see in nature (such as our own bodies) are likened to a herd of sheep seen at a distance. What appears to be at rest, one, and whole is actually an assortment of individuals in motion. Even the free will we think we enjoy is merely a product of smaller motions called atomic "swerves," in which the atoms of our bodies move at random and so stimulate our own "choices" and those of other animals.

Plato combatted such materialism with his theory of Forms, which exist in a separate realm and lend earthly, material beings some wholeness. Aristotle professed dissatisfaction with both materialism and Plato's alternative. Disembodied forms make as little sense as formless matter. Aristotle's response (in his *Physics*) retained elements of both theories. His embodied forms and "signed" matter mixed the materialist and formalist positions in a synthesis analogous to the *Politics*' mixing of regimes.

Both metaphysical positions, the materialist and the formalist, were political and politicized from the get-go. As we saw, materialism is democratic. But the order of rank necessary to make parts into a whole—a ranking that requires us to discriminate and make distinctions among persons—is inherently oligarchic. The distinctive forms that go together to make a whole may not exist outside the mind of the oligarch. Winthrop writes, "the city in speech is the only whole man knows." And so the radically uncertain political whole becomes the first and only model for natural wholes as well. There is no neutral ground from which to discover what is natural first and then apply it to politics. Even if you wish to discover, you must first commit.

Politics thus becomes interesting to the natural philosopher, though he may previously have thought it silly. His natural science now becomes dependent on the success or failure of this political enterprise: mixing the regimes. Without wholes and forms, matter cannot be known. Indeed, even atomists must posit the existence of whole (indivisible) atoms, which fall into natural kinds sharing an invisible shape (form). Science requires wholes. If wholes do not exist, then parts are not really parts. They are undifferentiated bits that we arbitrarily select, perhaps for some purpose of our own (for example, in modern science, to master them). Thus, to deny the existence of forms and wholes is to sink into murky epistemological waters, in which philosophy ceases to be a search for knowledge and starts to look like an attempt to impose order onto chaotic nature. Winthrop's Aristotle walks a line between a traditional position in which forms are discoverable in nature, without any need of prior assertion, and a postmodern position in which the forms asserted are manifestly willful in their mere imposition. For Winthop's Aristotle, wholes which are asserted must still be investigated.

Why, then, should we opt for democracy? Why not a moderate oligarchy? After all, democracy is the regime least likely to accept the imposition of forms and the assertion of distinctions needed to make it whole. On the other hand, democracy is the only regime in which the majority of people participate. Wholes that exclude most of the people, as monarchical and aristocratic regimes do, are wholes only paradoxically or at great cost. Hence democracy—if tempered by the assertion of distinctions—has the best hope of becoming truly whole. Somehow, we need a democracy that leaves room for aristocratic distinctions.

Aristotle divided the labor: oligarchs must legislate, while democrats must become jurymen. Oligarchs must legislate, Winthrop explains, because it will temper the oligarchic habit of mind by forcing them to formulate general laws that include all. Juries, in turn, will temper the democratic habit of mind, because jurymen are forced to make distinctions and so to observe forms. If jurors learn how to discriminate and legislators learn how to govern inclusively, we will come "as close as possible to justifying democracy." But "as close as possible" implies that a gap remains: Winthrop implies that a decent respect for precedent disguises the sheer amount of willful making and imposition that juries and lawmakers actually do. She illustrates this by reference to Alexis de Tocqueville. A lawyer or a Supreme Court Justice is "not conscious of his making by reasoning." Rather, in Tocqueville's words, he "has recourse to the most incredible subtleties in order to persuade himself that in adding to the work of his fathers he has only developed their thought and completed their work." Here perhaps we have an example of healthy willfulness, and it looks like a form of self-ignorance. This reverence for the ancestral runs counter to modern political science, in which "Law is altogether made and known as made." Modern political science mixes in a lot of tyranny, "obscuring the extent to which consent is the product of…manipulations."

In Winthrop's view, modern political science came in its infancy to see itself as a science of the passions, which are ultimately bodily. This development went together with the advent of modern natural science, which revolted from Aristotle and returned to counting and measuring bodies without reference to their metaphysical properties or purposes. Hence modern political science left out the end or aim of the passions and concentrated on the great fact that everyone *has* passions, regardless of their aims. In turning its attention to managing passions, modern political science implicitly turned away from the intellect, refusing to offer reasons why one passion is better than another and throwing up its hands at the flawed reasons alleged by partisans. As a result, modernity now offers *mere* rhetoric as opposed to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, substituting techniques of manipulation in place of his theory of civic discourse. Political science today cannot quite take seriously the demands of the noble claimant who wants his reasons addressed, not just a pill to calm him down. Spiritedness has a connection to reason that is not strictly rational. How, asks Winthrop, did ancient political philosophy deal with this will-to-assert?

Both pre-Socratic philosophy and modern science failed to understand the nature of man, who by natural necessity has "an intention to make [his] nobility apparent." This assertive intention presupposes freedom or free will. Free will is the exact opposite of the necessity (a modern might say "inevitability") that ancient philosophers found in nature. But, Winthrop writes, "political philosophy accepts the hypothesis of the political man, that man is free, without proving it deductively." Why accept an unproven thesis? Because our natures demand it. In Stephen Sondheim's lyrics to *West Side Story*, a gang of street hoodlums try at first to blame their crimes on bad upbringing, in the song "Gee, Officer Krupke." But after their social worker, imagined in the song, gets angry at them, they eventually end up asserting their responsibility. The boys would rather assert that they are bad than not assert at all. Emotionally, if not rationally, we insist on responsibility.

Nature determines us this far: we have no choice but to assert choice. Humans are going to assert that their will is free; the question is whether willfulness can be moderated by orienting it toward something higher. This is the job of the philosopher with the statesman, for Winthrop, just as it is the job of a wife with her husband. Wives learn to influence their husbands without emasculating them so as not to lose the benefits of male virtues like courage and assertiveness. In the same way, the political philosopher learns how to let more manly men than he rule the city, and to let them think they rule wisely. In reality they only rule through right opinion. The philosopher influences their opinions in the direction of wisdom.

Thus did Aristotle discover a cosmos in which man fits: he offers a "demonstration," says Winthrop, that "man's noble assertiveness, his politics and his arts, must have been intended by nature." The god of this nature was carefully calibrated by Aristotle to leave man free. The unmoved mover was active only in banishing the Fates (who also took away free will). He neither created nor legislated. He had no *thumos* (spiritedness) and ruled natural bodies only in the sense of "being responsible for the intelligibility of their order." Aristotle's god was not willful and thus left us our wills. The moderns would later lament the stinginess of "Stepmother Nature" because she did not provide, ready-made, everything needful for human flourishing. But in Aristotle's hands, even this parsimony became a sign of good will toward men: nature has left space for us to make our own proper, human, contribution to the whole.

A vision such as Aristotle's is attractive to many sensibilities, including the religious sensibility that views the world as incomplete without our cooperation. From a Christian perspective, man's failings (sins) affect nature because the world does not look quite right, does not come together as a whole, without our contribution. When man fell, nature fell with him. Before the Fall, even natural beings had to be known by man in order to flourish fully. Other creatures acquired something new from us that was somehow still essential to them, as the animals did when Adam named them. Winthrop's book gestures down such possible paths. But the creator God of revealed religion took back too much control to fit neatly with Aristotle's god: He was omnipotent, so freedom had to be His gift.

Insofar as philosophy is properly a knowledge of ignorance, a search for wisdom, and "more a way of life than a corpus of dogma," Winthrop's philosopher must assert something he does not *know* is there but also cannot know is *not* there: he must assert that things in nature form a coherent whole. He thus offers "as true a teaching about metaphysics as he knows," demonstrating that his is "one explanation of nature as satisfactory as any other." She writes: "Aristotle's *Metaphysics* may well be poetry, but his *Politics*…is political science." Winthrop's bold claim is that we will never know whether the cosmos or anything else forms a whole unless we take a stand, bringing the parts together by asserting that they are a whole to be investigated. The reader will begin to see anticipations of distinctively modern and postmodern possibilities: Aristotle, according to Winthrop, posited a nature "as if" it were true. This sounds something like the "purposiveness without purpose" necessary to investigate biological organisms in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Science does not prove determinism but (Kant would say) requires it. Morality does not prove free will but requires it. The philosopher steps into a gap in the universe, bringing order to what, without him, could appear a chaos. He comes to be "outside the whole" by becoming "its first cause," an allusion to Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*. Unlike the directions in which postmodernists took such assertions, however, this "possible whole" becomes a matter for investigation.

Delba Winthrop's book leaves two final impressions on the reader. First, one recovers the sheer joy of reading Aristotle. Second, one marvels at a beautiful mind that is not in the least interested in its own ingenuity but only in bringing Aristotle's ingenuity to light. The same can be said of the defamiliarizing translation of Book III of the *Politics* which accompanies the commentary. The Aristotelian democracy that emerges from Winthrop's treatment is more moderate and balanced than today's democratic thinkers would like. Nevertheless, as the comparisons with the great Tocqueville show, Aristotle's lessons about democracy are ancient but not superseded.

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