
The book cover promises that Rosler’s study «sheds new light on Aristotle’s relation to modern political contractarianism, contemporary ethics, jurisprudence, and political theory … and gives special consideration to contemporary jurisprudential analysis (misspelled, E. S.) of legal authority, and obligation.» This announcement reveals an ambitious agenda, and this Classicist reviewer regrets that he might not do justice to all these aspects of Rosler’s study; he will limit his critical comments to Rosler’s reading of Aristotle. According to Rosler «Aristotelian scholarship … seems to agree on the whole that Aristotle does not have a notion of political obligation» (2) – ‘political obligation’ is more specifically «a moral requirement or necessity to act in accordance with the dictates of political authority» (116, cf. 6). Political authority becomes part of this study since political authority serves as «a prolegomena (sic) to the discussion of the notion of political obligation itself»; their relationship Rosler describes as «moral entailment between authority and obligation» (87). Rosler’s formula is to explain in detail the specific concept that is the chapter’s or section’s focus; he cites the authorities for the modern views he refers to and offers critical comments or modifications to provide the reader a fairly clear idea of the concept under review, including aspects of its history, e.g. in Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and others. The most valuable contribution of this book is the consideration of a variety of models of explanations that belong to political theory in order to describe Aristotelian arguments in clearer conceptual terms. Rosler calls his approach a «reconstructive method» that considers the possibility that «a concept or a claim may have a place in a philosopher’s thought even though it may not be articulated in terms corresponding to ours» (Rosler 7, after Miller). This ‘reconstructive method’ is introduced as an alternative to a method of «classical scholarship» that studies an ancient philosopher in isolation from contemporary interests. Clearly, if Aristotle’s Politics is of any importance for modern political thinking then it must be permitted to investigate whether this work addresses questions a modern reader poses. To reveal in advance my impression of this book: in Rosler’s study, I find a discrepancy between the erudition, diligence and sophistication demonstrated when dealing with modern concepts on the one hand and his use of Aristotle on the other. He usually adopts a collage technique by which a few quotes of a few lines in translation 1 mainly from Aristotle’s Pol., out of context 2 and from passages that focus on quite different topics, suffice as evidence to establish the Aristotelian position. Rosler rarely considers the wider

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1 Literal translations of Greek phrases are often odd, however, the choice of more common terms can be a source of misunderstandings, e.g. Rosler (166 n. 42) translates ζῆν πρὸς τὴν πολιτείαν (Pol. 5.9 1310a35) as ‘obedience to the constitution’, which is too strong, and misleading since Aristotle possesses words to express ‘obedience’. He has used πρὸς τὴν πολιτείαν in the same chapter twice before, at 319 to express the norm of education and at 1309a36 to express the political standard of virtues – in neither case ‘obedience’ would be appropriate.

2 «In what follows we shall go into some passages in the Politics in which Aristotle uses the notion of morality …» (137); «there is another passage» (153); «So let us now turn to some passages from the Nicomachean Ethics which provide us with instances of moral duty» (133).
context in which an idea is found. In particular for the subject matter of Rosler’s study, it would have been helpful to have examined in a systematic fashion in which way or ways ‘authority’ asserts itself in Aristotle’s *Pol.*, and in which way or ways those who are ruled respond to it. The reader does not learn how political obligation fits into the parameters of Aristotle’s political philosophy. Is (dis)obedience an important aspect of Aristotle’s political theory or just a subordinate idea compared with other concepts that are more important to Aristotle? Which are these other concepts, and what does their existence reveal about the character of Aristotle’s political philosophy – or the relevance of the subject matter Rosler investigates? These are not the questions Rosler asks, and the result is that no reader of this book will gain much insight into Aristotle’s political theory because no part of it has been presented in a systematic way.

After introductory explanations of the method and fundamental concepts of Aristotle’s practical philosophy in chapters 1 and 2, Rosler structures the main part of his study after a pattern that alternates between a chapter on an aspect of authority (chapters 3 and 6) and chapters on obligation (4–5 and 7). In chapter 1, titled ‘Ethics in Aristotle’s Theory of Politics’, Rosler begins his investigation by claiming that «(t)here are at least three main and related lines of Aristotelian argument explaining the link between ethics and social science» (21), however, for the first two claims which he outlines he does not provide a reference to anything Aristotelian, and for the third he remarks that «the correct conception of well-being … enhances the stability of political systems and make (sic) their citizens better off to the extent that these political systems approximate the best regime (e.g. *Pol.* V.9 1309b18–22)» (Rosler 22, cf. 249–50). I would call this view the «idealistic political paradise paradigm» according to which the rulers’ virtue and correct understanding of *eudaimonia* will result in a stable regime under which the citizens flourish.1 However, it is – unfortunately – not true that the government of good men who have a correct understanding of the well-being of the citizens is stable as the oligarchy in Erythrai proved which was overthrown although those in power cared well (καίπερ καλῶς ἐπιμελομένων 5.6 1301b18) for the affairs of the city, and generally constitutions are unstable that are based on qualities which only few possess regardless of how good they are (5.1 1301b39–1302a15) – a government of «the best who are few» is actually rejected by Aristotle (3.11 1281a40, see below) because of the hostility it creates within the city.

Chapter 2 on ‘Nature and Normativity’ presents an insightful account of issues like naturalness of the *polis* and man as *zoon politikon* by nature. However, Rosler does not address the question whether these often discussed subjects affect anything Aristotle has to say after *Pol.* 1.2, that is, whether his inquiry in

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1 However, the passage quoted from *Pol.* 5.9 seems to point into the opposite direction: instead of setting up the best state as a model for the reform of existing states Aristotle considers deviation from the perfect form to a certain degree still tolerable; thus he concedes that democracy and oligarchy «can be in an acceptable state although falling behind the best order», ἐκείνη ἀκτενε ἐγείρει ἱκανόν, καὶ περὶ ἐξεστηκυίας τῆς βελτίστης τάξεως, 1309b32f. The imperfect constitution is acceptable, and states are remarkably resilient inspite of their imperfection. But one can not allow a constitution to become too radical since this will eventually destroy it.
books 2 to 8 ever draws on these arguments from the beginning of Pol. 1. Do his comments in Pol. 2–8 addressed at the legislators who shape the constitution or at the officials and citizens who have specific responsibilities in the city ever in any way refer to the assumption that the city is natural? In other words, what is the impact of these often quoted arguments found in Pol. 1.2 for Aristotle’s political theory? In my judgment there is none. In Rosler’s discussion of specific topics the whole of Pol. is rarely present.

In chapter 3 titled ‘The Concept of Political Authority’, Rosler begins by rejecting the thesis of Hannah Arendt that the Greeks had no knowledge of the concept of authority, and he does so before he has clarified what he understands under political authority. In section 3.3 «The nature of authority» he cites C.D.C. Reeve who had claimed that Aristotle had «a substantial problem of political legitimacy» and «we believe that autonomy is a central value» (Reeve, cited by Rosler 92). The ensuing discussion of this concept is interesting; however, is autonomy of individuals a problem for Aristotle’s political theory? The closest Aristotle comes to this position in Pol. is his account of the democratic «maximalist» (mis)understanding of freedom as «living the way one wishes» (6.2 1317b11–13) – a view Rosler discusses extensively later (151–167). Section 3.3 ends by explaining Hobbes’ and Locke’s concepts of authority. Rosler works his way back to Aristotle in section 3.4 he asks whether Aristotle embraced a solution to political authority comparable to that of Hobbes and Locke – since the concept of political authority is generally traced back to Roman auctoritas, e.g. by Hannah Arendt, why isn’t that link investigated?

In chapter 4, an essay on ‘Morality and Political Obligation’, Rosler takes it for granted that the notion of moral obligation and duty found in EN, and the terms like καλῶς or δεῖ used to express it, have in Pol. the same moral meaning Rosler had shown them to possess in EN. He paraphrases the introductory remarks in Pol. 2.1 where Aristotle justifies his own treatise on the best state with the poor quality of existing states (διὰ τὸ μὴ καλῶς ἔχειν ταύτας τὰς νῦν ὑπαρχόντας, 1265b34f.): «an account of the moral inadequacy of ‘really’ existing political systems» (137). Given the wide range of critical points Aristotle raises in Pol. 2 it seems wrong to narrow them down to ‘moral inadequacy’. His criticism of privileges for Spartans who had at least three sons (2.9 1270b1–6) or of the ‘childish’ form of election of the gerontes (b27–28) lacks a moral dimension and does not expose moral inadequacy.

In this chapter Rosler, referring to Pol. 6.5 1320a14–16, finds «something very like the modern notion of political or civic obligation» (139). However, in the phrase δεῖ δὲ τῇ πολιτείᾳ πάντως μᾶλλον μὲν εἶναι τοὺς πολῖτας the idea «that citizens have a duty to support just constitutions» (Rosler 141) is not expressed. There is never any doubt


2 I am not even convinced that Aristotle had only this in mind at EN 10.10 where he describes as one aspect of his program of the political enquiry that is to follow «why some cities are well governed and others not», EN 10.10 1181b19 διὰ τίνες αἰτίας αἱ μὲν καλῶς αἱ δὲ τοιοῦτον ἀρκεόντων. Rosler translates this and similar expressions as «to be governed in a noble or morally admirable way» and makes assumptions about Aristotle’s «employment of moral terms in his political analysis» (137).
mentioned that the demos would support democracy because that is all they want, and under the constitutional situation assumed here the wealthy are in the minority and have no political influence, that is, they are not even in a position in which they could take meaningful steps to support the constitution – and why should they? Aristotle’s concern is not the political obligation of either of the two social groups that are normally hostile towards one another (4.4 1291b7–13; 5.8 1308b27), but, as the context shows, he addresses the lawgivers and demagogues under a democracy, demanding that they avoid any actions that alienate the wealthy from the constitution. He is concerned with political leadership which is generally the focus in Pol., showing his (maybe unrealistic or even naive) optimism: if those in power rule in the common interest all citizens including those who do not have political influence under a certain constitution could develop a favorable attitude to it, as it is indispensable (δεῖ) if the constitution is to last. The attitude Aristotle expects from the citizens is not obligation but ‘good will’ (εὐνοία) which Aristotle considers an emotional state. Often he uses for the same concept the expression that ‘all parts need to wish that the constitution lasts’ – ‘wish’ expresses a desire and not a duty one has to follow. Failure to consider the context or to establish the exact meaning of Greek terms is often the source of misunderstandings in Rosler’s study.

In chapter 5, titled ‘The Question of Political Obligation’, Rosler suggests: «Aristotle seems to proceed on the assumption of (what may be called) the moral correlativity thesis of political authority and obligation. From a moral point of view talk of political authority is strongly correlative with talk of political obligation: if somebody or some body has a right to rule, this right entails a duty to obey» (169). In support of this view Rosler refers to EN 3.5 1135b32ff. where Aristotle argues that legislators punish rightly those who commit wicked acts. However, what is missing here, is the first part of the ‘correlation’, the justification of the authority of those in power. The failure to mention this concept is surprising since the notion of a «a right to rule» is very Aristotelian, it is «the right applied in distribution» that establishes aretē as the standard in the allocation of political power – a concept Rosler never refers to specifically, if I haven’t overlooked anything. This is an omission hard to understand since this principle dominates the discussion of constitutions in Pol. 3 chapters 9 to the end of book 3, is mentioned at a prominent place in 5.1, and referred to for the hierarchy of the political order in 7.14 1332b28–29, cf. 4 1326b15.

The concept of «right applied in distribution» legitimizes a claim to fill a position of power for those who possess aretē. Is this principle balanced by an obligation to obey so that there exists a «moral entailment between authority and obligation» (Rosler 87)? Clearly where there are winners under ‘the right applied in distribution of power’, there will be losers, or groups that would have to obey the government that is legitimate by the standard developed here. However, it is remarkable that Aristotle addresses their situation not from the angle of legal philosophy that reflects on the nature of the obligation to accept the orders of a

1 *Rhet.* 2.1 1378a18 περὶ δ’ εὐνοίας καὶ φιλίας ἐν τοῖς περὶ τὰ πάθη λεκτέων.
3 EN 5.5 1133b30–32, cf. 6 1131b27–28.
4 Pol. 3.9 1280b39–1281a8.
legitimate government but from the angle of constitutional theory that questions the standard, and the results, of the principle that would put some men into power while keeping others out.

After having introduced the ‘right of distribution’ in Pol. 3.9 Aristotle raises objections among others against a government of good men or that of the one best man pointing out that under their rule everybody else would be disenfranchised (10 1281a28–34). In 3.11 he foresees outright hostility on the part of the great number of free men if they are excluded from political participation (1281b29) as they would be under the government of «the best who are few» which he considers here (140) as the alternative option and which would clearly be a just government. However, Aristotle does not censure the great number of free men because they refuse to honor their «duty to support just constitutions»,¹ nor does he demand that they change that irreverent attitude towards such a government, nor does he try to instill in them a sense of duty and obedience. In Pol. 3.11, his advice is to give in to the aspirations of the great number of free men and grant them access to the political process.² Obviously the ‘right of distribution’ is for Aristotle not the final answer to the question of appointing positions of political authority.

The question of who should have the power, that is authority, in the state is not that easily settled for Aristotle so that he can move on and now turn his attention to the ‘correlative’ concept of obligation. Aristotle responds to these problems not with a directive of political obligation but by suggesting that lawmakers and statesmen need to respond to the expectations specific groups have – as in 3.11 or at 5.1 (1301b29–1302a8) where he stipulates that both geometric equality that is based on virtue, areté, and arithmetic equality that is based on numbers should be employed in the constitutional setup. Aristotle justifies this by referring here as well to the experience of instability of all constitutions that are based on one form of equality (14). Again one would have to ask whether a state that is ordered exclusively along the principle of geometric equality would not be ‘just’ and, therefore, entitled to impose on its citizens the «duty to support just constitutions» (Rosler 141). Aristotle does not take this position. Rosler’s assumption about the response of citizens in ‘just’ constitutions cannot be reconciled with the way Aristotle sees the issue. In his approach to political authority he discusses the reaction of citizens not in terms of the duty they have to accept authority, but as a constitutional reformer who would like to see inequality and possible conflict between those inside and outside the political class removed.

In chapter 6, titled ’The justification of political authority’ Rosler attempts to determine which of the theoretical accounts of the need of government Aristotle would endorse. Rosler reveals features of the best state peu a peu as they fit the progress of his argument. He starts with «what is at stake is whether Aristotle’s virtuous agents, the citizens of his ideal regime, would also be in need of political authority …» (195) and characterizes the same citizens as «fully rational and moral agents» (196). However, the hoplites who are citizens (7.9 1329a10–31) still lack the fully developed rationality because of their youth (134–15), a fact which changes considerably the role of authority in this state and its potential need to intervene. Rosler seems to have an overly idealistic view of the ‘ideal’

¹ Rosler 141.
² For the sake of stability of a constitution, the demos needs be included in the political process: 2.9 1270b18; 10 1272a31–33.
state which affects the explanation of the need of government Aristotle would propose.

In the last chapter, titled ‘The limits of political obligation’, Rosler argues convincingly against views that Aristotle subscribes to totalitarianism, or a holistic form of communitarianism, according to which parts may be sacrificed to promote the general good (226–233). He goes beyond this by claiming that for Aristotle the political duties of citizens are not unconditional, and he seems to distinguish two responses of citizens, one being disobedience under «wrong forms of constitution» (236, section 7.3) and the second «right of resistance» under tyrannies (section 7.4).

Rosler finds support for his view in Aristotle’s remarks about Sparta and the absurd fact that they lost their happy life while they continued to observe Lycurgus’ laws and no one prevented them from using them (7.14 1333b23–26). Rosler reads this passage: «Aristotle himself suggests at 1333b24 that the Spartans might have fared better, had something or somebody prevented them from obeying their laws» (238). This ignores the context where Aristotle takes issue with those who praised the Spartan lawgiver for his focus on war and states bluntly in light of the failure of this objective: «it is obvious that ... their lawgiver was not good» (1333b21–23). The serious problems Sparta faced could have been prevented by a better lawgiver. It is difficult to see how the refusal of some Spartans to obey the laws could have helped, however, this is not the issue. Aristotle’s focus is again on the quality of legislation, and this part of the Pol. is intended to assist the new colony that is to be founded, and Aristotle gives here advice and guidance to legislators who frame the constitution and the laws so that they avoid the mistakes Spartan legislators made and the problems Sparta experienced. Clearly it is completely outside of the purview of the sketch of a best state in Pol. 7 that Aristotle would suggest to citizens to refuse to obey the authority of a rotten constitution they happen to live under. Such a view ignores the addressee of this work Politics, and ignores the character of the best state of books 7 and 8 which are not addressed to citizens in order to give them the hint that disobedience to authority would be the proper course of action to take.

Since some radical laws and a corresponding education can contribute to the destruction of constitutions (5.9 1310a2) Rosler concludes that «citizens may justly disregard laws which destroy the constitution» (233). As pointed out before, Aristotle’s Pol. is mainly addressed at the statesman and lawgiver who shape the constitution. This is not different in 5.9. Here Aristotle’s remarks about an education that makes a constitution last is one aspect of the larger task of lawgiver and statesman which requires from them knowledge of the factors that preserve or destroy a democracy or oligarchy (1309b35). Clearly when Aristotle brings up the idea of education that allows constitutions to last he has the statesman and lawgiver in their educational role in mind. An independent response by «a truly loyal subject» in the form of justified disobedience, is not envisioned. This view insinuates an approach to politics which I cannot discover

1 See Schütrumpf above p. 579 n. 1.
2 Cf. Rosler 234: «the possibility that sometimes obedience is not due at all».
4 Rosler 236. Ibid. n. 38 he considers whether Aristotle did not have «the truly loyal subject» in mind when at 6.5 1320a33 he speaks of «the true democrat». Again, this chapter is addressed at the lawgiver who wants his constitution to last: 1319b33–37.
in Aristotle. Aristotle in *Pol.* does not offer spiritual support to citizens who are disillusioned with government by encouraging them to disobey, what he does is offer insight and advice to statesmen so that they can help the constitution (4.1 1289a6–7).

In the section «Tyranny and the Right of Resistance» of his last chapter Rosler, following others,\(^1\) argues for the view that Aristotle's «political theory accommodates the notion of a right of resistance» (239).\(^2\) The problem is again that Rosler combs through Aristotle's *Pol.* in order to find answers for his questions. But did Rosler ask the right question? If one considers it a duty, a moral duty (*EN* 3.8 1116b2–5), that citizens defend the freedom of their country against being enslaved by a foreign country why is the same behavior within a city suddenly called a ‘right’ and not a duty or obligation? The difference is considerable: one can decide not to exercise a right but one cannot shirk a duty. Furthermore, Aristotle informs in *Pol.* 5.10 1311b23–36 that tyrants were killed. Would resistance against tyranny include assassination of a tyrant and did Aristotle establish a right of tyrannicide? The choice of the label ‘right of resistance’ in order to describe the response of citizens to tyrants is arbitrary in the first place, and Rosler did not determine what actions this concept encompasses. I can’t give here the reasons why the concept of a ‘right of resistance’ is questionable.

Rosler’s ‘reconstructive method’\(^3\) is based on the assumption that concepts might have escaped the notice of modern scholars because they were expressed by philosophers of the past in terms not used today. If one starts with the assumption that Aristotle might not have articulated a concept in terms corresponding to ours it does not seem to matter in which way he formulated his political theory. The consequence of this view is that Rosler does not show interest in the system and logic of Aristotle’s political theory in a comprehensive manner and is indifferent towards the possibility that the language Aristotle chose might have been the best fit for the concepts he was investigating, the solutions he came up with, and the categories he was thinking in. In particular Rosler does not reflect on the issue of whether Aristotle considered the questions modern political theory asks but Rosler jumps upon the inquiry of whether Aristotle has an answer to these questions. Rosler did not succeed in identifying political authority and obligation as concepts of concern or particular interest for Aristotle in his political philosophy that were ignored for so long because they were hidden under a different terminology. In my assessment they have not been ‘reconstructed’ by Rosler but at least ‘obligation’ has been created, and ‘authority’ described in a manner that is at odds with Aristotle’s theory. The approach Rosler chose, that is of isolating the topics under investigation without any concern for the perspectives and objectives of Aristotle’s political theory as a whole and for the goals of his constitutional theory in particular was doomed to failure. Drawing on a variety of passages that are isolated from their thematic context is more than questionable. One could have imagined an approach that outlines what Aristotle’s *Pol.* is mainly about, in particular from which angle he looks at the constitution and citizens, and at which juncture the issues Rosler investigates could come up in Aristotle’s theory. Such an analysis of Aristotle’s practical

\(^{1}\) Miller and Kraut, see Rosler’s references 244 n. 55; 246 n. 59.

\(^{2}\) 239, cf. 243.
philosophy could have been conducted with the awareness of the concepts of modern political theory. Rosler did not examine what Aristotle actually did and why he proceeded the way he did, whereas for the history of political thought it is more instructive to learn about the way a philosopher expressed his views, to learn the terms and concepts he used – or did not (yet) use, and the larger systematic context which gives meaning to the specific ideas he discusses.

This book is the revised version of a doctoral thesis at Oxford University


The personality and career of Alcibiades exert an endless fascination. The handsome, brilliant aristocrat and ward of Pericles captivated the Athenians, but his ambition and outrageous behavior caused his motives in war and politics to be mistrusted. His role in the defeat of Athens, from the Sicilian expedition to Aegospotami, was a major concern of Thucydides and Xenophon, as well as of Ephorus, Theopompos, and other historians preserved only in fragments. Plato admitted that Socrates charmed but could not tame his ambitious and adulation-craving spirit. Finally, hundreds of years after Alcibiades’ death, Plutarch attempted an overview of this complex and contradictory statesman/general in his Parallel Lives, eccentrically comparing him with the Roman Coriolanus. Writing in the age of Trajan, he aimed at an audience of his contemporaries, Greek and Roman. The distinctive portrait he created was based on his own combination of source material from historians, Socratic dialogues, and anecdotes. The multiple levels of Plutarch’s biography, historical, artistic, and moral, render this one of the biographer’s most complex lives.

Simon Verdegem’s Plutarch’s Life of Alcibiades offers a detailed and sophisticated reading of the life, combining monograph and commentary. He analyzes the text paragraph by paragraph, but also divides the text into ten chapters according to the life’s internal structure. The partial conclusions of the individual chapters are summed up in the final chapter.

The book addresses three major questions: where Plutarch got his information, how he reshaped it for his account, and how he evaluated Alcibiades’ character. The book’s subtitle, ‘Story, Text and Moralism’, signals V.’s overall approach and supplies the template for his introductory and concluding chapters. In the Introduction, under ‘Moralism’, V. treats the overall purpose of the Lives and the role of comparison, and offers a long section (pp. 35–58) on pre-Plutarchan depictions of Alcibiades. The principles of the analysis which will be developed in the course of the book follow. Under ‘Story’, V. sets out the narratological distinction between story, that is, the underlying events, and text, the words that we read, and reviews Plutarch’s adaptation of his source material to construct the basic story, or referential level, of the Life. V. then discusses under ‘Text’ Plutarch’s narrative technique, using the categories of time, narrator, focalization, and speech representation. Finally, he considers the pairing of Alcibiades with