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Kingly versus Political Rule in Aristotle's *Politics*

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Abstract: The absolute king as a god-like ruler is a notorious exception to Aristotle's political paradigm of ruling and being ruled in turn. Since the idea appears several times in the *Politics*, it must bear some philosophical importance. In elucidating the latter, I will make two claims: first, this importance can only be grasped by referring to Plato, and especially his *Statesman*. Second, the philosophical point of these passages within Aristotle's *Politics* is to indicate that such a kingly regime is not primarily better than, but different from a political one.

Keywords: Aristotle, *Politics*, kingly rule, best regime, Plato

I

One of the central themes in Aristotle's *Politics* is the question who should rule the city-state and in what manner. In short, the answer is that these people should be citizens and that their rule should be political. First, they should be citizens, because a citizen is thought to be someone who has the right to participate in the deliberative and decisive offices of the *polis* (1275a22-23 and 1275b17-21). According to Aristotle, only free and adult males (with citizen parents) qualify for citizenship, which means that all slaves, women and children are excluded from it. Second, because the citizens constitute the *polis* as a political community, the rule in this community should be “political rule” (πολιτική ἀρχή), which is defined as the authority over free and equal or similar persons (1255b20 and 1277b7-9). This rule thus can be considered as power of peers, distinct from the despotic rule of a master over his slaves, who are not free, and the household rule of a man over his wife and children, who are free but not equal to their husband and father.¹ As a consequence, the citizens of a political

¹ In *Politics* I.13 (1260a9-14), Aristotle indicates why slaves, women and children cannot partake in political power: slaves are lacking the deliberative capacity necessary in the political

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community should be able to rule their fellow citizens as well as to be ruled by them. This is indicated throughout the *Politics* as the ability in both “ruling and being ruled” (ἄρχειν καὶ ἄρχεσθαι). Who these citizens are and what is meant with their political rule depends on the nature of the constitution they live in. For in different constitutions, various criteria can be applied for citizenship and the idea of ruling and being ruled can even be explained in dissimilar ways.²

In spite of the differences between the various constitutions, Aristotle yet has a general idea of political rule, in accordance with fourth century Greek practice, that covers two main features, namely (1) that power must be shared among the citizens and (2) that laws should be sovereign over them. The first point can be inferred from the fact that the political community, whatever the criterion for citizenship, consists of equal and similar persons, wherefore the political offices are not to be held permanently by the same men, but by each “in turn” (κατὰ μέρος or ἐν μέρει, 1261b3-4, 1279a10-11, 1297a4, 1325b8 and 1332b26). The second point is the case because the rulers should not have the highest authority, since they could be subject to their passions (1281a34-36 and 1286a16-20). That is why general and incorruptible principles as laws must rule sovereignly. The citizens should act as guardians of these laws and only take independent decisions when the laws fall short (1282b1-6 and 1287a18-23). The general idea in Aristotle’s *Politics* concerning the rule in a political community is thus that the power of the citizens in the *polis* is limited, because it is not permanently in the same hands and subjected to the laws. There is one notorious exception, however, in which Aristotle argues that this should not be the case:

P1 εἰ δὲ τίς ἔστιν εἷς τοσοῦτον διαφέρων κατ’ ἀρετῆς ὑπερβολὴν ἢ πλείους μὲν ἑνός, μὴ μέντοι δυνατοὶ πληρώμα παρασχέσθαι πόλεως, ὥστε μὴ συμβλητὴν εἶναι τὴν τῶν ἄλλων ἀρετὴν πάντων μηδὲ τὴν δύναμιν αὐτῶν τὴν πολιτικὴν πρὸς τὴν ἐκείνων, εἰ πλείους, εἰ δ’ εἷς, τὴν ἐκείνου μόνον, οὐκέτι θετέον τούτους μέρος πόλεως· ἀδικήσονται γὰρ ἀξιούμενοι

decision-making process, whereas women and children do have it, but respectively in a non-authoritative and incomplete way. This is why, according to III.6 (1278b32-1279a2), slaves should be ruled despotically, i.e. primarily in the advantage of the master, and women and children in the way of household management, i.e. in their own or at least a common advantage. For these and further differences between rulers and ruled, see Miller (2013).

2 Without going into detail, the *Politics* instructs that in a democracy free birth as such can be enough for citizenship, whereas in an oligarchy or an aristocracy wealth and (full) virtue limit the citizen body. In a polity, only the military virtue seems needed. The idea of ruling and being ruled is sometimes described in the historical way, as was customary in ancient Athens, where the membership of various offices changes every year (1261a32-34 and 1317b24-25). At other instances, however, Aristotle is using it in a more aristocratic way in saying that the young citizens should be ruled by the older ones and only become rulers when they acquire a certain age (1277b11-13 and 1332b38-41). See also Schofield (1999, 103–109).

τῶν ἴσων ἄνισοι τοσοῦτον κατ' ἀρετὴν ὄντες καὶ τὴν πολιτικὴν δύναμιν· ὥσπερ γὰρ θεὸν ἐν ἀνθρώποις εἰκὸς εἶναι τὸν τοιοῦτον. ὅθεν δῆλον, ὅτι καὶ τὴν νομοθεσίαν ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι περὶ τοὺς ἴσους καὶ τῷ γένει καὶ τῇ δυνάμει, κατὰ δὲ τῶν τοιούτων οὐκ ἔστι νόμος· αὐτοὶ γὰρ εἰσι νόμος (1284a3-14).

If there is one person so outstanding by his excess of virtue – or a number of persons, though not enough to provide a full complement for the city – that the virtue of all the others and their political capacity is not commensurable with their own (if there are a number) or his alone (if there is one), such persons can no longer be regarded as a part of the city. For they will be done injustice if it is claimed they merit equal things in spite of being so unequal in virtue and political capacity; for such a person would likely be like a god among human beings. From this it is clear that legislation must necessarily have to do with those who are equal both in stock and capacity, and that for the other sort of person there is no law – they themselves are law.³

In this famous passage from III.13, Aristotle mentions one or a few individuals who are in excellence or virtue so outstandingly superior that any comparison with the other citizens is excluded. In such a situation you could speak of a “god among human beings” (θεὸς ἐν ἀνθρώποις) who should earn all the power in the community permanently and stand above all law. In a twofold respect, the rule of such a god-like individual would thus be contrary to the concept of political rule. Not remarkably, this can be presented as a problem in the *Politics*, because it counters one of its general doctrines.⁴ The issue is well-known in the literature and many scholars have given an explanation for the occurrence of this idea, by pointing either to Aristotle's relation with the Macedonian royal house (as biographical explanation) or Plato's political thought (as philosophical explanation). The question whether this idea can be understood as a reference or allusion to the Macedonian kings, and Alexander the Great in particular, cannot be dealt with here. In the past, however, it is already demonstrated that a biographical explanation is certainly not necessary.⁵ We will therefore only look for an explanation that elucidates the concept from within rather than outside Aristotle's philosophy, without losing sight of the strong connection with his master's ideas. But so far, no one seems to read Aristotle's idea of a god-like ruler entirely in reference to his distinction of the different types of rule. If one does so, as I will read it, it can be understood as the illustration of an important claim in the *Politics*, by which Aristotle dissociates himself from Plato.

³ Translations from the *Politics* are taken from Lord (1984).

⁴ See the general discussion of this issue (“The Kingship Problem”) in Mayhew (2009, 535–538). A more thorough treatment is given in Newell (1987, 159–178), Carlier (1993, 103–118) and Gastaldi (2009, 33–52).

⁵ See Ehrenberg (1938, 71–85) and Schütrumpf (1991, II. 517–534).

To start with, it is significant to highlight the fact that Aristotle does not seem to mention this idea of the god-like ruler only once, but in several passages, five in sum. I will then, first, demonstrate how these passages all refer to the same idea, which indicates that it must bear some importance in the *Politics* (Section II). I will argue next that Aristotle is dealing with an issue taken up by Plato on the best or ideal state, but also indicate that his answer must differ in a considerable way from his master's in order to remain important (Section III). In that respect, the analysis of P.A. Vander Waerdt serves as a methodological example here. It nevertheless falls short as a sufficient explanation, because it does not seem to fit the text entirely (Section IV). I will propose an alternative then, which states that Aristotle's point here is not that the rule of a god-like individual is *better than*, but *different from* political rule. Although such an explanation does not seem to be free from difficulties either, I believe it serves as the best solution to clarify the role of the respective passages in the *Politics* on the god-like ruler (Section V).

II

Aristotle does not only mention the idea of a permanent ruler in the passage from *Politics* III.13 (= **P1**) cited above, but once more in the same chapter (= **P2**), and further in III.17 (= **P3**), VII.3 (= **P4**) and VII.14 (= **P5**). It is important to look first to these different passages from the third and seventh book, not only to examine whether they all express the same idea or not, but also to understand the idea(s) more fully. I will argue that these five passages do express the same idea, by taking the first passage as a starting point, with which the other passages will be compared and assimilated one after another.

P2 ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τῆς ἀρίστης πολιτείας ἔχει πολλὴν ἀπορίαν, οὐ κατὰ τῶν ἄλλων ἀγαθῶν τὴν ὑπεροχὴν, οἷον ἰσχύος καὶ πλούτου καὶ πολυφιλίας, ἀλλὰ ἂν τις γένηται διαφέρων κατ' ἀρετὴν, τί χρὴ ποιεῖν; οὐ γὰρ δὴ φαῖεν ἂν δεῖν ἐκβάλλειν καὶ μεθιστάναι τὸν τοιοῦτον· ἀλλὰ μὴν οὐδ' ἄρχειν γε τοῦ τοιοῦτου· παραπλήσιον γὰρ κἂν εἰ τοῦ Διὸς ἄρχειν ἀξιοῖεν μερίζοντες τὰς ἀρχάς. λείπεται τοίνυν, ὅπερ ἔοικε πεφυκέναι, πείθεσθαι τῷ τοιοῦτῳ πάντας ἀσμένως, ὥστε βασιλεῖς εἶναι τοὺς τοιούτους αἰδίους ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν (1284b25-34).

In the case of the best regime, however, there is considerable question as to what ought to be done if there happens to be someone who is outstanding not on the basis of preeminence in the other goods such as strength, wealth, or abundance of friends, but on the basis of virtue. For surely no one would assert that such a person should be expelled and banished. But neither would they assert that there should be rule over such a person: this is almost as if they should claim to merit ruling over Zeus by splitting the offices. What remains – and it seems the natural course – is for everyone to obey such a person gladly, so that persons of this sort will be permanent kings in their cities.

P3 ὅταν οὖν ἡ γένος ὅλον ἢ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἓνα τινὰ συμβῇ διαφέροντα γενέσθαι κατ' ἀρετὴν τοσοῦτον, ὥσθ' ὑπερέχειν τὴν ἐκείνου τῆς τῶν ἄλλων πάντων, τότε δίκαιον τὸ γένος εἶναι τοῦτο βασιλικόν καὶ κύριον πάντων καὶ βασιλέα τὸν ἓνα τοῦτον. [...] οὐ γὰρ πέφυκε τὸ μέρος ὑπερέχειν τοῦ παντός, τῷ δὲ τὴν τηλικαύτην ὑπερβολὴν ἔχοντι τοῦτο συμβέβηκεν. ὥστε λείπεται μόνον τὸ πείθεσθαι τῷ τοιοῦτῳ καὶ κύριον εἶναι μὴ κατὰ μέρος τοῦτον ἀλλ' ἀπλῶς (1288a15-29).

Now when it happens that a whole family, or even some one person among the rest, is so outstanding in virtue that this virtue is more preeminent than that of all the rest, it is just in that case that the family be a kingly one and have authority over all matters, or that this one person be a king. [...] It does not accord with nature for the part to be preeminent over the whole, but this is the result in the case of someone having such superiority. So all that remains is for a person of this sort to be obeyed, and to have authority simply and not by turns.

P4 διὸ κἂν ἄλλος τις ἢ κρείττων κατ' ἀρετὴν καὶ κατὰ δύναμιν τὴν πρακτικὴν τῶν ἀρίστων, τοῦτῳ καλὸν ἀκολουθεῖν καὶ τοῦτῳ πείθεσθαι δίκαιον. δεῖ δ' οὐ μόνον ἀρετὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ δύναμιν ὑπάρχειν, καθ' ἣν ἔσται πρακτικός (1325b10-14).

Hence when another person is superior on the basis of virtue and of the power that acts [to achieve] the best things, it is noble to follow this person and just to obey him. Not only virtue should be present but also power, on the basis of which he will be active.

P5 εἰ μὲν τοίνυν εἴησαν τοσοῦτον διαφέροντες ἄτεροι τῶν ἄλλων, ὅσον τοὺς θεοὺς καὶ τοὺς ἥρωας ἡγούμεθα τῶν ἀνθρώπων διαφέρειν, εὐθὺς πρῶτον κατὰ τὸ σῶμα πολλὴν ἔχοντες ὑπερβολήν, εἴτα κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν, ὥστε ἀναμφισβήτητον εἶναι καὶ φανεράν τὴν ὑπεροχὴν τοῖς ἀρχομένοις τὴν τῶν ἀρχόντων, δῆλον ὅτι βέλτιον αἰετὸς τοὺς αὐτοὺς τοὺς μὲν ἄρχειν τοὺς δ' ἄρχεσθαι καθάπαξ (1332b16-23).

Now if the ones were as different from the others as we believe gods and heroes differ from human beings – much exceeding them in the first place in body, and then in soul, so that the preeminence of the rulers is indisputable and evident to the ruled – it is clear that it would always be better for the same persons to rule and the same to be ruled once and for all.

Let us start with the two passages from III.13, which will henceforward be referred to as **P1** and **P2**. In this chapter, Aristotle deals with the different claims to power in a *polis*. In short, the argument is that none of the claims to exclude a multitude from political power (such as wealth or virtue) is justified, because the multitude is considered better, not individually, but taken together as a group. This is not true, however, when a god-like ruler would appear, because his virtue and capacity are “not comparable” (μὴ συμβλητή) with the abilities of all the others, as **P1** indicates.⁶ This is why, Aristotle goes further, ostracism is used

⁶ There is controversy on what exactly “not comparable” means. Some scholars take it to be that it must be understood in a distributive way as incomparable to all the other citizens combined, whereas others think that it must be read collectively as incomparable to the other citizens in kind. See especially Mulgan (1974, 66–69), who endorses the second claim. It seems

as an advantageous and even just mean to make sure that no one claims the permanent authority over the others, except again when this person would be preeminent in virtue, which is the reason to bring up **P2** and conclude the chapter with it. Aristotle is thus making a twofold but connected point on one and the same idea. This can be inferred from the fact that in both cases he considers such rule as an instance of the “best constitution” (ἀρίστη πολιτεία, 1284a1-2 and 1284b25) and compares the ruler fitted for it with a divine figure (a θεὸς ἐν ἀνθρώποις in 1284a10-11 and Zeus in 1284b31).

On two points, though, there seems to be at least an apparent difference between the two passages, namely with regard to (1) the nature and (2) the quantity of these rulers. First, more abilities for god-like rule are required in **P1** (both ἀρετή and πολιτική δύναμις) than in **P2** (only ἀρετή). This is not really a difference, however, since the political capacity mentioned in **P1** must be understood as the intellectual ability to deliberate, called “prudence” (φρόνησις).⁷ Since, according to the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1144b30-32), moral virtue implies prudence, it does not appear necessary to mention it every time, as seems already the case in **P1** (1284a4). Moreover, prudence in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1103a3-7) is thought to be a specific intellectual *virtue*, and thus a virtue as well. Prudence must therefore be considered as a necessary part of the outstanding virtue of the god-like ruler.⁸ Second, Aristotle mentions in **P2** only the case of one god-like ruler, while in **P1** he leaves open the possibility of several such individuals. Nevertheless, already in **P1** is the tendency detectable to apply the idea only on one ruler, since Aristotle uses just the singular τὸν τοιοῦτον in 1284a11. It therefore makes sense that Aristotle understands these god-like rulers as “kings” (βασιλεῖς) in **P2** and elsewhere, and not as aristocrats.⁹ There is thus no doubt that the two passages from III.13 express the same idea.

safe to say, however, that both interpretations do not exclude each other, in the sense that incomparable things are not “measured by the same standard”, but at the same time “need not preclude all comparisons”, see Keyt (1991, 275).

⁷ In *Politics* III.4 (1277a15), Aristotle clearly indicates that the excellent ruler is “good and prudent” (ἀγαθὸς καὶ φρόνιμος), referring both to the moral and the intellectual excellence of his nature. That prudence is a “political capacity” is clear from the sixth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where both prudence and the political domain are equated (1141b23-24) and prudence is thought a capacity (1143a25-29). Cf. Newell (1987, 165).

⁸ For this and a more thorough discussion, see Bates (2003, 199–205).

⁹ According to Aristotle’s famous classification in III.7 (1279a25-38 and 1279b4-10), a kingship is a correct regime where there is only one ruler, whereas in an aristocracy the rule is divided among few. But in both cases, the rulers rule with a view to the common advantage. If this was not the case, they would be deviant regimes, called tyranny or oligarchy respectively.

The third passage appears a few chapters later in the third book, in III.17. At first sight, there seems to be a gap between **P3** and the first two passages. The passages from III.13 are nevertheless used as introduction to Aristotle's discussion on kingship in *Politics* III.14-17 and especially his evaluation herein of an absolute kingship or "all-kingship" (παμβασιλεία), which is a regime with a permanent ruler who is sovereign over all (1285b29-30) and acts according to his own will (1287a8-10). Aristotle discusses this regime at length and only seems to consider it justified in the case of a divine ruler with the abilities of the god-like king.¹⁰ And this is exactly what he is saying in **P3**. Not only is he making an explicit reference to the former two passages (to **P1** in 1288a19 and to **P2** in 1288a24), he is also using the same vocabulary both to describe the preeminent but different nature of the god-like king in reference to the others (ὑπερβολή or ὑπεροχή and διαφέρων κατ' ἀρετὴν in 1284a4, 1284b27-28 and 1288a16-17) and to indicate how the latter should act when such a person would appear (πειθεσθαι τῷ τοιούτῳ in 1284b32 and 1288a28-29).

What is new in **P3**, though, is that Aristotle speaks of an individual or a "whole family" (γένος ὅλον) and thus connects the outstanding superiority needed for god-like kingship also with kinship.¹¹ This could mean either that this family is a reference to the various individuals from **P1**, or that it just points to the heredity of the kingship. Although the first possibility seems to have the advantage that it does not need to create a difference between the various individuals from **P1** and the family from **P3**, the second possibility has the benefit that it fits Aristotle's general definition of kingship (1279a32-34) better as the good rule of (only) one man. Although both interpretations are not mutually exclusive, the last one seems to be the one used here, since it corresponds better with what Aristotle says elsewhere in the *Politics* on family and kingship.¹² This does not mean that the various individuals from **P1** cannot be

10 The relation between the god-like kingship and the παμβασιλεία is thus, strictly speaking, that the former implies the latter, but not *vice versa*. To earn the name "all-kingship" truly, however, a permanent ruler who isn't subjected to the laws must already be divine. For similar older terms (παμβασιλεύς or παμβασιλεία) also seem to have a divine connotation in Alcaeus (Diehl fr. 2) and Aristophanes (*Clouds*, 357), see Carlier (1993, 108).

11 This corresponds to what he says in III.13 (1383a36-37), where he mentions the argument that it would be likely that better men descend from better parents, since "noble birth" (εὐγένεια) is the "virtue of a family" (ἀρετὴ γένους). Something similar can be found in the fragment (Rose fr. 92) from Aristotle's lost treatise *On noble birth*. In *Politics* III.15 (1286b22-27) and *Rhetoric* II.15 (1390b21-31), he nevertheless criticizes such a view.

12 In III.14 (1285a16) and V.10 (1313a10), Aristotle uses the expression "based on family" (κατὰ γένος) to indicate hereditary kingship. Earlier in V.10 (1310b9-12 and 1310b31-34), he also mentions that kingship is based on the preeminence in virtue of an individual or his family, referring thus to the same two possibilities as in **P3**.

called kings, since Aristotle himself sometimes uses the word in the plural for multiple but permanent rulers within the same state.¹³ It is thus uncontroversial that all the three passages from the third book refer to the same idea.

This could become more difficult when one looks to the fourth passage, the one from VII.3, since now, there are not only a few chapters between this one and the former ones, but three whole books. The problem could disappear if one would insert books VII-VIII of the *Politics* between book III and IV, as various scholars thought necessary.¹⁴ But regardless of the correct or most adequate order of the books from the *Politics*, it seems clear that at least thematically speaking, there is no difference between the passages from the third and the seventh book, in so far as both are embedded in the question concerning the best constitution, and not, as the empirical books IV-VI, with practical questions concerning the decline or preservation of historically attested constitutions. Nevertheless, one could argue for a difference between the three passages from the third book and **P4**, because Aristotle mentions that the individual in the latter passage is only “superior” (κρείττων, in 1325b10), and thus not so *outstandingly* superior that his virtue and political capacity would be incomparable with the abilities of others.¹⁵ The problem with such an interpretation is that it would lose sight of two correspondences with the former three passages. First, the same two abilities, virtue and capacity, are expected again from the ruler in **P4** as from the god-like king in **P1** (1284a6-7 and 10).¹⁶ Second, it is mentioned here that it would be just to “obey him” (τούτῳ πείθεσθαι), as was also the case in **P2** (1284b32) and **P3** (1288a28-29). It seems then that **P4** is far more likely to be an expression of the same idea as in the former passages from the third book and that, although Aristotle does not mention it explicitly, the ὑπερβολή or ὑπεροχή of the ruler’s virtue is implied here as well.

A similar difference between the passages from the third book and the last passage, the one from VII.14, can be sought, but now with a result that would be the reverse. For instance, Richard Kraut argues that **P5** differs from the passages from the third book, since the former is “beyond utopia” in so far that the subjects of the rulers herein are all thought to be well-educated and virtuous

¹³ This is the case in II.9 (1271a18-26) and 11 (1272b37-41), where he mentions the kings of Sparta and Carthage. Cf. Keyt (1991, 274).

¹⁴ See the still widely used commentary of Newman (1887–1902). For a more recent plea for such an adjustment to the manuscript tradition, see Simpson (1998, xvi–xx).

¹⁵ See Schütrumpf (2005, IV. 279).

¹⁶ In **P4** (1325b11), Aristotle does not speak of a “political capacity”, but of a “practical capacity” (δύναμις πρακτική) to achieve the best things. That the latter is also a reference to φρόνησις is made clear in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1140b20-21 or 1141b21), where the practical character of prudence is always emphasized.

men, whereas the ones in the third book are not necessarily so.¹⁷ This would imply that the virtue of the kings in **P5** even must be higher than the already preeminent virtue mentioned in **P1**. In a way, this is plausible, since **P5** also mentions a bodily superiority (1332b18-19) that is lacking in the other passages. Nevertheless, the preeminence of the soul, with which virtue is meant, seems more important and thus more constitutive for god-like kingship.¹⁸ It may be true, as R.G. Mulgan argued, that the needed virtue for a permanent ruler as such is only relative to the virtue of his subjects.¹⁹ It is unlikely, however, that Aristotle used the idea on permanent rule in **P5** in a different way than in the former passages, since the reference to the divine (or even mere heroic) character of these rulers and the vocabulary used to describe it (διαφέροντες or διαφέρειν and ὑπερβολή or ὑπεροχή) do not suggest any difference with the already outstanding men from the other passages. We may therefore conclude that all the five passages wherein Aristotle describes a ruler who is superior to his subjects, are expressions of the same idea: a god-like king so outstanding in virtue, both morally and intellectually, that he should rule permanently without any laws.

III

As the idea of a god-like king seems to be an important point in Aristotle's *Politics*, at least important enough to mention it in five different passages, this requires an explanation.²⁰ Such an explanation has to do two things: (1) it should elucidate the importance of the idea of a god-like king by clarifying *why* Aristotle uses it, (2) without losing sight of the fact that it remains an exception to the more general doctrine of ruling and being ruled in turn. The problem is that it should contain a justification for the passages on god-like kingship that seems at first sight lacking in the *Politics*. Of course, one could argue with David Keyt, and

¹⁷ See Kraut (2002, 421).

¹⁸ Compare it with I.5 (1254b34-1255a1), where Aristotle mentions something similar, but emphasizes more clearly the psychological superiority. In III.12 (1282b23-30) he even criticizes the division of power on the basis of just physical features as complexion or height.

¹⁹ See Mulgan (1974, 25).

²⁰ In looking for an explanation, we cannot accept the solution that all these passages only contain an argument to the absurd, because that would annihilates the importance of the idea expressed in it. (Cf. Carlier (1993, 116), who indicates the same, without even taking the two extra passages from the seventh book into consideration.) Such an interpretation is given, for instance, by M.P. Nichols, who considers the outstanding virtue of the god-like king a “contradiction in terms”, because, as Aristotle argues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, “virtue lies in the mean”, see Nichols (1992, 170).

it seems indeed right, that this must be understood as a part of Aristotle's theory of distributive justice.²¹ For in III.9, Aristotle starts dealing with the thought that power must be distributed rightly among the citizens. In normal circumstances, this means that citizens deserve a fair share in power according to their merit and abilities, which supposes that they can be compared with each other within a certain scale. When, however, the situation would occur, as in the case of the "god among human beings" from **P1**, that someone's excellence is that great that he is no longer comparable to the others, then the principle of distributive justice instructs that all power must be concentrated in the hands of this divine individual. The passages on the god-like king must be taken then as an exceptional or merely theoretical application of the theory of distributive justice.²² The problem with such an argument is that it only justifies the idea of god-like kingship in the *Politics*, but fails to explain its importance.

A solution could consist in the fact that we should not consider the *Politics* as a monologue that stands on its own, but as a dialogue that in many respects pays its debts to Plato, whose thought is indeed often taken up or refuted. This could explain the importance of the passages on the god-like king, since the interaction with the thought of his former master can serve as a reason why Aristotle puts so much attention to the matter. It is interesting, as many scholars already have pointed out, that there is indeed a correspondence between the idea of permanent rule in Aristotle's *Politics* and certain passages from Plato's political works, wherein the latter describes his ideal statesman. Plato's two main political treatises, the *Republic* and the *Laws*, come to mind first, but in fact, it is particularly an important part of the *Statesman* (293a-303b) that contains a strongly similar point of reasoning. In comparing Plato and Aristotle, scholars have pointed to the fact that Aristotle in *Politics* III.15-16, just like Plato, embeds this topic into a larger discussion concerning the question whether it is advantageous to be ruled by the best laws or the best man.²³ I want to focus only on the result of this discussion here, in so far that both philosophers agree that a situation is at least conceivable where some individuals should be permanent rulers.

²¹ See Keyt (1991, 239–240 and 270–276).

²² That Aristotle does not seem to believe that such a ruler could occur in reality can be inferred from **P3** ("It does not accord with nature for the part to be preeminent over the whole") or the sentences following **P5** in VII.14 (1332b23-27), claiming that it is not easy to assume such superiority in an individual. This corresponds with the repeated thesis in the *Politics* (1252b19-20, 1286b8-10 and 1313a3-5) that kingship in general, at least for Greeks, is a regime from the past.

²³ See especially Cohen (1996, 145–161) and Attack (2015, 309–313).

There are three significant correspondences between Aristotle's god-like king and Plato's ideal ruler, namely with regard to their (1) quantity, (2) quality and (3) relation to the laws. First, just as Aristotle in **P1**, Plato mentions in the *Statesman* (293a and 297c) one or a few persons who could take up this role in the state (cf. *Republic* 540d). But just as Aristotle, he continues to speak of these individuals in the singular (e. g. 294a, 296e, 300c or 301a) and therefore calls them kings. It is thus in regard to kingship that both philosophers discuss the idea of permanent rule. Second, Plato is describing such an outstanding person in divine terms as well (303b; cf. *Laws* 713 c-d), even, as Aristotle in **P5**, both with regard to their body and soul (301e). Thus this permanent ruler is also for Plato a god-like king who differs extensively from his regular human subjects and therefore deserves all authority. Third, like Aristotle in **P1**, Plato indicates that such a person should stand above the (written) laws (294a-b or 300c-d), but also that in regular constitutions, where such an ideal ruler is missing (301e; *Laws* 875c-d), it is always better that the regime is lawful (302c-303b). This indicates, finally, that Plato too considers laws necessary in regular circumstances, but not in his ideal state.²⁴

In a way, thus, you have a similar type of reasoning in Plato's *Statesman* and Aristotle's *Politics*: if there would be divine individuals who are fitted for permanent rule, then you should give him (or they) all the power in the state. But because in practice, these god-like individuals are not likely to occur, people should adopt a government where laws rule and citizens share their power with each other. It becomes tempting then to think, as scholars often did, that the god-like king from the *Politics* is to be equated with Plato's famous conception of the ideal ruler in the *Republic* (473c-e): the philosopher-king.²⁵ As such, this is not altogether unlikely, because in his (juvenile) *Protrepticus* (47–49), Aristotle indeed seems to endorse the claim that statesmen and legislators should be philosophers. However, in the work that definitely reflects his mature political philosophy, the *Politics*, no trace is to be found of such a claim.²⁶ In III.4 (1277b25-26), Aristotle even states that the only (intellectual) virtue peculiar to a ruler is prudence. Since the “political” or “practical capacity” from **P1** and **P4** are taken to be this prudence, as was argued before, this general requirement

²⁴ One might still see a difference on this level between Plato and Aristotle, in so far that Plato argues primarily for the ideal ruler and only in the lack of it for a lawful regime, whereas Aristotle does the inverse and considers the lawful regime as the standard, with the god-like king as its only exception, see Kahn (1990, 380).

²⁵ See e. g. Lindsay (1991, 506) or Bartlett (1994, 148).

²⁶ To be honest, neither does the *Politics* contain a straightforward criticism to the philosopher-king, although Aristotle does criticize many other aspects from Plato's *Republic*. His objections to this idea, however, “can be gathered from what he says elsewhere”, see Miller (2009, 545).

still seems to apply in the case of the god-like king. But then, these kings are not philosophers in the Platonic sense as individuals with real “scientific knowledge” (ἐπιστήμη) of an everlasting truth, but only men with an extraordinary practical capacity, useful in politics for deliberation and decision-making.²⁷

Such a difference between Plato and Aristotle is not necessary, because Aristotle’s *Politics* is often in agreement with Plato, and sometimes even contains phrases and concepts from the latter without referring to his works. But on this point, a difference between both philosophers is not unlikely, and can even be suspected, for it would make clear why Aristotle puts so much emphasis on the idea. The fact that he mentions a certain point and then repeats it several times could suggest that Aristotle does not entirely agree with Plato. Thus, in looking for an explanation for Aristotle’s god-like king, one has to take into account that Plato described his ideal rulers in a similar way, without going so far as to identify them completely with each other. In other words, we should look for a philosophical explanation that not only reveals the similarities between Plato and Aristotle, but also, and maybe even primarily, one that deals with the existing differences between both.

IV

In a paper appeared some thirty years ago, P.A. Vander Waerdt came up with a straightforward philosophical motivation of Aristotle’s god-like kingship by explaining how it deals with a question already present in Plato, without falling victim to one of the weaknesses of his master’s answer.²⁸ In short, his explanation is that Aristotle thinks that this god-like kingship is better than a regular political regime where every citizen participates in power, because it endorses in a better way the good life that the citizens aim for. The thesis is that, ultimately, the citizens of a political community need “leisure” (σχολή) to lead a good life, and the participation in politics prevents them from achieving this aim.²⁹ With this leisure, citizens will not only engage in philosophy in the strict sense, but

²⁷ The distinction between ἐπιστήμη and φρόνησις is made in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.5 (1140a31-1140b4), where he relates scientific knowledge to necessary things that cannot be otherwise, whereas prudence as deliberative capacity does not apply to these things. Later on, in VI.8 (1141b23-33), prudence is therefore thought to be the “leading capacity” (ἀρχιτεκτονική) in the domain of politics. In both Plato’s *Republic* (428b-429a) and his *Statesman* (292b-e), it is nevertheless ἐπιστήμη that is required from the ideal rulers.

²⁸ See Vander Waerdt (1985, 249–273).

²⁹ See especially *Politics* VII.14 (1333a30-1333b5 or 1334a2-10), where Aristotle ranks leisure above “occupation” (ἀσχολία), and indicates that the latter is for the sake of the former.

will participate in a broader intellectual culture, which includes music and other arts as well.³⁰ Since a god-like king would take away the required participation in power of the citizens within a normal political regime, this kingship is thus best suited to promote the best life in the *polis*. Although Aristotle understands the best life then in a more broadened sense than Plato, he still agrees with Plato that the unoccupied life of “philosophy” (φιλοσοφία) is the best way of life and that kings are the best rulers to implement it.

A problem, however, is that a philosopher-king is normally not willing to rule, because it is not in his interest to take up power in the state, since it deprives him of the life he wants to lead. In the *Republic* (499b-c, 519c or 521b), it is even argued by Socrates that such men must be compelled to rule. Aristotle solves this issue here, according to Vander Waerdt, since the god-like kings of whom he speaks in the *Politics* are not philosophers with, or at least aiming for, scientific knowledge, but divine individuals, who have no need for contemplative activities, wherefore they can grant their subjects in a beneficent way the time and leisure to do deal with these. This is because they differ in kind from their subjects in the sense that their virtue is not intellectual or moral, but a “heroic virtue”, incomparable to any (regular) human virtue.³¹ It is only because such individuals are highly unlikely in practice, that Aristotle doesn’t pay more attention to them. Vander Waerdt then concludes: “Aristotle thus agrees with Plato that the way of life of the best regime consists in the cultivation of φιλοσοφία and that kingship is the εἶδος ἀρχῆς best suited to bring about the necessary conditions for it, but he disagrees with Plato both in the meaning he assigns to φιλοσοφία as the way of life of the best regime and in the kind of virtue which constitutes the king’s incomparable virtue.”³²

Vander Waerdt’s analysis already received some critique, because one of its premises, namely that the best life in Aristotle’s *Politics* is to be assimilated (exclusively) with a life of leisure, is too rigid and does not pay its debts to Aristotle’s overall validation of political participation.³³ It remains generally accepted though that contemplative activities are, if not sufficient, then at

³⁰ See Lord (1982, 196–202).

³¹ This can be inferred from **P1**, **P3** and **P5**, where Aristotle indeed emphasizes the god-like character of these rulers. Vander Waerdt additionally also points to *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.1 (1145a18–24), where Aristotle speaks of such a superhuman excellence that is “something heroic and divine” (ἥρωικὴ τινα καὶ θεῖα), which can only be achieved “by excess of virtue” (δι’ ἀρετῆς ὑπερβολήν).

³² See Vander Waerdt (1985, 271).

³³ For criticism of this thesis, see Miller (1995, 235–237) or Taylor (1995, 248–252). Very recently, Carol Attack also criticized Vander Waerdt (and other scholars), arguing that he falls into the trap of creating a model that is not present in Aristotle’s texts. According to her, Aristotle is only

least necessary conditions for the best life in Aristotle's philosophy. But if one accepts this starting point, then there are good reasons to agree with Vander Waerdt's analysis, because it can serve as the philosophical explanation of the many passages in the *Politics* on the god-like kingship. For it illustrates on what point Aristotle still agrees with his former master and where he differs in opinion. The latter is then the reason *why* it is important to bring it up in the *Politics* and come back to it several times. However, when we look more closely to these passages and the context in which they are brought up, Vander Waerdt's thesis can be confronted with two problems, of which the second will be fatal: (1) Aristotle does not endorse the rule of philosophers in the *Politics*, but neither does he explicitly reject it and (2) he considers the rule of the god-like king as primarily just, and only secondary in the interest of his subjects.

The first problem can come through as something odd, because it was already argued that the god-like king is not a philosopher in the Platonic sense. Nevertheless, we shouldn't draw too much attention to the fact that Aristotle considers his permanent ruler as someone completely different from a philosopher-king, because strangely enough he never explicitly criticizes this Platonic idea in the *Politics*. Vander Waerdt's claim that it is yet on this point that Aristotle's god-like king really differs from Plato's ideal ruler, is only demonstrated indirectly by referring to a fragment from Themistius' *Oration VIII* (107d).³⁴ Problematic, moreover, is that this fragment still reserves some role for a philosopher in politics: not as the king himself, but as the adviser of the king. Although his god-like kings are indeed not philosophers, it seems then too farfetched to make it Aristotle's point, because the *Politics* pays too little attention to it.

More important is the fact that Vander Waerdt believes that the god-like kingship is better than a political regime, because it would benefit the subjects,

exploring rather than supporting the virtue model of monarchy developed by intellectuals as Xenophon and Isocrates, see Atack (2015, 300 and 317).

34 The fragment (Rose fr. 647), although strictly speaking it is rather a testimony, could derive from (or: refer to) Aristotle's *On kingship* or his *Politicus*, and reads: Πλάτων μὲν οὖν, εἰ καὶ τὰ ἄλλα πάντα θεῖος καὶ αἰδοῖος, ἀλλὰ τοῦτόν γε ἀτεχνῶς ἀποκεκινδυνευμένως προήκατο λόγον, ὅτι μὴ πρότερον τὰ κακὰ λήξει τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πρὶν ἂν ἡ φιλόσοφοι βασιλεύσωσιν ἢ βασιλεῖς φιλοσοφήσωσιν. ἐλήλεγκται δὲ ὁ λόγος καὶ δέδωκεν εὐθύνας τῷ χρόνῳ. ἄγασθαι δὲ ἄξιον Ἀριστοτέλην, ὅτι μικρόν τὰ Πλάτωνος ῥήματα μεταθεῖς τὸν λόγον πεποίηκεν ἀληθέστερον, φιλοσοφεῖν μὲν τῷ βασιλεῖ οὐχ ὅπως ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι φάσκων ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐμποδών, τὸ δὲ φιλοσοφοῦσιν ἀληθινῶς ἐντυγχάνειν εὐπειθῇ καὶ εὐήκοον· ἔργων γὰρ ἀγαθῶν τὴν βασιλείαν ἐνέπλησεν, οὐχὶ ῥημάτων.

because it is in their interest. In the five passages, Aristotle nevertheless mentions only in **P5** that such a regime would be “better” (βέλτιον, 1332b22) than one where everyone rules in turn, and even here it does not necessarily imply a hierarchy of ways of ruling. Compare it with a remark in *II.2* (1261a38–39), where he also says that “it is clear that it is better if the same always rule” (δῆλον ὡς τοὺς αὐτοὺς ἀεὶ βέλτιον ἄρχειν), since it would be better for shoemakers and carpenters to stick with their profession rather than change places every once and a while. But then Aristotle continues: “[B]ut in cases where it is not possible because all are equal in their nature, and where it is at the same time just for all to have a share in ruling (regardless of whether ruling is something good or something mean), there is at least an imitation of this” (ἐν οἷς δὲ μὴ δυνατόν διὰ τὸ τὴν φύσιν ἴσους εἶναι πάντας, ἅμα δὲ καὶ δίκαιον, εἴτ’ ἀγαθὸν εἴτε φαῦλον τὸ ἄρχειν, πάντας αὐτοῦ μετέχειν, ἐν τούτοις γε τοῦτο μιμεῖται, 1261a39–1261b3, cf. 1332b23–29). It is thus only with regard to the nature of the rulers that Aristotle presents permanent rule as better than ruling and being ruled in turn, because people are simply entitled to that which corresponds to their nature. When, however, this is not possible nor just, as in a political community, then such a situation should be imitated as good as possible, by giving everyone who deserves so at least a partial or temporary share in government. But this does not imply that the regime of a god-like king *an sich* is better than political rule, nor that it is supposed to be due to the enviable position of the subjects. Indeed, Aristotle never says that the permanent rule of a god-like king would be essentially in the interest of his subjects.³⁵ Even at the contrary, in **P3** and **P4** he puts the emphasis, as in the cited passage from *II.2*, on the fact that it would be only “just” (δίκαιος, 1288a18 and 1325b12) for these highly excellent individuals to rule permanently, thus for *their* sake. If there would occur a situation where one or a few individuals are in virtue and ability in a non-comparative way better fitted as rulers, then it would be simply unjust to deny them all the power, as he mentions already in **P1** (ἀδικήσονται, 1284a9). It seems then that we should look for an alternative explanation that fits the text better than Vander Waerdt’s analysis.

³⁵ Of course, the regime of the god-like king also must be in the interest of his subjects, otherwise it wouldn’t be a rightful kingship (1279a17–20 and 32–34) and the subjects wouldn’t gladly obey these kings (1284b32–34). One can even argue further that kingship, according to Aristotle, always implies beneficence or “well-doing” (εὐεργεσία), see *Politics* V.10 (1310b31–34) or *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.10–11 (1160b2–6 and 1161a11–15). I do not argue against this, but rather that this is not primarily Aristotle’s point, because he never says so in discussing the god-like kingship.

V

In the meantime, other scholars have dealt with the issue of the god-like king as well. Whether they all agree (completely) with Vander Waerdt's thesis is less important, but what seems to be a common assumption in understanding these passages is that Aristotle argues that this absolute kingship of a god-like individual would be an ideal that is ranked higher than a lawful regime where power is shared among the citizens. One does not, however, need to assume that a regime with permanent rule as such is *better* than one with ruling and being ruled. It is both true that the god-like kingship is (1) not a regime with political rule and (2) presented as an instantiation of the best constitution, but these two premises do not lead to the conclusion that *every* instantiation of the best constitution is not a regime with political rule.³⁶ The only valid conclusion would be that *some* instantiations of the best constitution are not regimes with political rule. But this leaves open the possibility that others are instantiations of the best constitution and I think that an aristocracy can fulfil this role.

In Aristotle's classical sixfold model of constitutions, as presented in *Politics* III.7, kingship, aristocracy and polity are thought to be correct constitutions, because they look towards "the common advantage" (τὸ κοινὸν συμφέρον), rather than merely the advantage of the one, few or many rulers, as in a tyranny, oligarchy or democracy. But a further difference between kingship (as right rule by one) and aristocracy (as right rule by few) on the one hand and polity (as right rule by many) on the other, is that the degree of virtue of the rulers in the former two regimes can be thought to reach a complete level of excellence, whereas in the latter they cannot: "It is possible for one or a few to be outstanding in virtue, but where more are concerned it is difficult for them to be proficient with a view to virtue as a whole" (ἓνα μὲν γὰρ διαφέρειν κατ' ἀρετὴν ἢ ὀλίγους ἐνδέχεται, πλείους δ' ἥδη χαλεπὸν ἡκριβῶσθαι πρὸς πᾶσαν ἀρετὴν, 1279a39-1279b1). As the expression διαφέρειν κατ' ἀρετὴν reminds us of the main reason in **P1** and **P2** why a god-like king earns all the power in a state, it seems thus that the same applies to an aristocracy.³⁷ Aristotle here simply follows Plato's *Republic* (445d) and *Statesman* (293a), in saying that the ideal regime can be both a kingship (rule by one) or an aristocracy (rule by few).

³⁶ Otherwise, in syllogistic terms, the *Latius Hos*-rule would be violated, for the quantity of one of the terms ('being an instantiation of the best regime') cannot be higher in the conclusion than in one of the premises.

³⁷ In a god-like kingship, however, the outstanding virtue must contain also a certain "excess" (ὑπερβολή) or "preeminence" (ὑπεροχή), which makes the king incomparable to all others.

If this is true, then it is not remarkable that kingship and aristocracy are mentioned together by Aristotle as the two regimes where this (high) degree of virtue is imaginable (1289a30-35 and 1310b30-34). The difference, however, is that in an aristocracy, you could still speak of a citizen community, although certainly smaller than the one from a polity, whereas in a kingship, this is no longer the case. For in an aristocracy, the (select) group of citizens can still share its power among its participants, but in a kingship, the only and thus permanent ruler remains the king. In that respect, it makes sense that Aristotle states in III.13 that with regard to the best constitution, a citizen is “one who is capable of and intentionally chooses being ruled and ruling with a view to the life in accordance with virtue” (ὁ δυνάμενος καὶ προαιρούμενος ἄρχεσθαι καὶ ἄρχειν πρὸς τὸν βίον τὸν κατ’ ἀρετὴν, 1284a2-3), which seems to describe the life in an aristocracy. And only hereafter, he adds the exception of permanent rule, which is **P1**. Similarly, but now more pronounced, the conclusion of the third book of the *Politics* reads:

φανερὸν ὅτι τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον καὶ διὰ τῶν αὐτῶν ἀνὴρ τε γίνεται σπουδαῖος καὶ πόλιν συστήσειεν ἂν τις ἀριστοκρατουμένην ἢ βασιλευομένην, ὥστ’ ἔσται καὶ παιδεία καὶ ἔθνη ταῦτά σχεδὸν τὰ ποιοῦντα σπουδαῖον ἄνδρα καὶ τὰ ποιοῦντα πολιτικὸν καὶ βασιλικόν (1288a39-1288b2).

[I]t is evident that it is in the same manner and through the same things that a man becomes excellent and that one might constitute a city under an aristocracy or a kingship. So the education and the habits that make a man excellent are essentially the same as those that make him a political or kingly [ruler].

Aristocracy and kingship are here both thought to be instantiations of the best regime, but only the rule of the former is called “political” (πολιτικός). It seems fair to understand aristocracy and kingship then as the two types of constitutions that qualify for the best regime in Aristotle’s political thought, but that the rule of the former is to be called political, whereas the latter is not.

If, therefore, one is looking for a philosophical explanation that illuminates why Aristotle puts so much emphasis in the *Politics* on the idea of a god-like king, one does not need to explain why it is better than an aristocracy, but rather why it is different. The answer then seems simple: the rule of a god-like king is no longer *political* rule. As such, this does not seem to be an important point, but it is in fact one of the main aims from the outset of the *Politics* (1252a7-16, and again in 1253b18-20 and 1254b2-6) to differentiate between despotic, household, kingly, and political rule, by which Aristotle dissociates himself from Plato.³⁸ For Plato states in his *Statesman* (258e and 259c) that the rule of a master, a household manager, a king,

³⁸ This can be considered even as the main aim of book one, see Schofield (1999, 128–132) and Cherry (2012, 29–36).

and a statesman (or politician) are all instantiations of the same art or science, but Aristotle disagrees and indicates that these are different forms of authority.³⁹ In the first book of the *Politics* he deals with despotic rule over slaves (chapters 4–7) and the spousal and paternal rule over wife and children (chapters 12–13), but for his treatment of kingly rule, one has to wait until the third book.⁴⁰ If that is true, why not read the passages on the god-like kingship then as illustrations whose aim it is exactly to point to the difference between kingly and political rule?

That the rule of a god-like king is non-political, was already presented in the introduction of this paper as something evident, but that this is *exactly* Aristotle's point is less obvious. Nevertheless, a double indication can be found in **P1**, the first (and thus guiding) of the five passages on permanent rule. First, Aristotle says that if you would suppose some one or more god-like rulers, you shouldn't suppose a group that large that it can "provide a full complement for the city" (πλήρωμα παρασχέσθαι πόλεως, 1284a4-5), because then it *would* become a (new) political community that contains a group of citizens considered equal to each other. Second, a few lines later, he adds that such god-like individuals would no longer be considered as "part of the city" (μέρος πόλεως, 1284a8), which is the political community.⁴¹ Within this first

39 This claim does not seem to be used in its strongest version, in the sense that all four types of rule differ from each other, but rather in a weaker sense, that they are not all the same. The main point seems to be that political rule differs from the other three, because only in the former there is an alternation of power, but this does not prevent Aristotle from assimilating sometimes the other types with each other. In *Politics* I.7 (1255b20) or III.14 (1285b29-33), for instance, monarchic or kingly rule and household rule are thought to be similar, see Schütrumpf (1991, I. 179–180).

40 At the end of the first book of the *Politics* (1260b20-24), Aristotle refers to the remaining questions that he will deal with elsewhere, which probably (also) refers to his treatment of kingship in the third book, see Cherry (2012, 35). An explanation for the scattered exposition on the different kinds of rule in the first and third book could be the following: in the first book, Aristotle deals with power in the *oikos*, in the third book (and further) with power in the *polis*. This is then why the rule of a master and a household manager is discussed in the former, the rule of a king and politicians in the latter. Aristotle nevertheless also makes analogies between these forms of rule, e. g. in *Politics* I.12 (1259a37-1259b4) and *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.10 (1160b22-1161a9). Interesting to mention here is that Aristotle compares the paternal rule of a father over his children in both chapters with kingly rule, whereas the spousal rule of a man over his wife respectively with political and aristocratic rule. That the latter two types of rule are not contrary to each other (which supports my claim of calling an aristocracy a regime with political rule), is discussed in an excellent recent paper, see Deslauriers (2015, 46–63).

41 A similar remark is given by Aristotle in *Politics* I.2, where he says that "who is in need of nothing through being self-sufficient" (δεόμενος δι' αὐτάρκειαν οὐθέν, 1253a28) is not a part of the city either. Such a person is called a god here and a king in *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.10 (1160b3-4).

passage, Aristotle thus makes clear that, although justified, the rule of a god-like king occurs outside a political context. It must be said, I am certainly not the first one who notices that Aristotle is indicating here that the permanent rule of such a king would be non-political.⁴² But I think that the problematic nature of all these passages in the *Politics* disappears if one does not only read it this way, but even understand it as Aristotle's argumentative point. I take it thus to be that Aristotle intends to say with these five passages that the rule of genuinely god-like individuals would be indeed justified, but at the same time that it differs from the rule to be expected in a political community, where power is shared among the citizens.

In looking for an explanation, it was said earlier that Aristotle's point must be related to Plato's thought, since the similarities with the latter cannot be coincidental. But to understand Aristotle's emphasis, it seems likely that his version of this best constitution differs from the Platonic account. If you would argue that it is indeed Aristotle's point that such kingly rule would be different from the political version of the best constitution, i.e. aristocracy, then an important difference with Plato's *Statesman* can and must be noted: Plato considers (especially) kingly and political rule throughout the whole dialogue as interchangeable.⁴³ Since Aristotle, from the outset of the *Politics*, disagrees with such an assimilation, it seems that he sincerely felt the urge to react against it and that the passages on god-like kingship are the ones in which he does so. The reason why Aristotle disagrees with Plato is simply that kingship would not (any longer) be a regime that fits Aristotle's idea of a *polis* as community of peers.⁴⁴ One has to suppose an almost divine individual to make his rule justified, but even then it does not happen without consequences, for such a ruler would put the *polis* as a political community to an end, by being, strictly speaking, the only citizen that partakes in power. The idea of the god-like king

⁴² See especially Newell (1987, 170–174). More recently, the distinction between kingly and political rule is also recognized in *P1* by Laurand (2011, 81–85) and Cherry (2012, 102 and 114).

⁴³ As Schütrumpf indicates quite neatly, the art of a king and a statesman are within Plato's *Statesman* thought to be the same (259d and 280a), they are placed often side by side (276c, 289d, 291c and 311c) and when the one is mentioned, then the other is often used as a synonym a few lines later (277a, 287a–d, 290a, 303e–304a and 305 c–d), see Schütrumpf (1991, I. 177).

⁴⁴ In the *Politics*, Aristotle argues at several occasions (1252b19–20, 1286b8–10 and 1313a3–5) that kingship is a regime from the past (see also note 22). In that sense it can be understood as prior to the political. According to Valéry Laurand, however, the rule of a god-like king differs from this pre-political rule: “Ce roi est comme un dieu, il s'agit d'une royauté d'exception, qui n'est plus infra-politique, ou pré-politique, mais *super-politique*, parce qu'il dépasse ce qu'on trouve dans une cité, la nature des citoyens”, see Laurand (2011, 85). This may be true indeed, but does not inhibit that god-like kingship remains non-political.

in Aristotle's *Politics* can be thought to function as the illustration of this consequence.

I want to conclude this paper with two apparent difficulties with this proposed explanation of the five passages on permanent rule: (1) Aristotle somehow still considers such a kingship “political” and (2) he argues two times that kingship is indeed better than aristocracy. The first problem with the above explanation that kingly rule essentially differs from political rule, is that Aristotle is then certainly not consistent in saying that god-like kingship is in every respect non-political. For already in **P1** he calls the required capacity twice “political” (πολιτική). Similarly, he says in III.17, that the people fitted for it must be “preeminent in virtue relative to political leadership” (ὑπερέχον κατ’ ἀρετὴν πρὸς ἡγεμονίαν πολιτικὴν, 1288a9). This is not a real problem, though, since the word πολιτική in Aristotle's *Politics* can be understood in a general sense, as the study of the human well-being, and in a narrow sense, as study of (power in) political constitutions.⁴⁵ In the argument that god-like kingship is really different from a regime with political rule, πολιτική is thus only used in the narrow sense as πολιτικὴ ἀρχή. This becomes clear if one reads the above sentence from III.17 in opposition with the next one, where it is said of aristocracy that such a regime acquires people “whose virtue makes them expert leaders relative to political rule” (κατ’ ἀρετὴν ἡγεμονικῶν πρὸς πολιτικὴν ἀρχήν, 1288a11-12). A kingship is then still “political” in the general sense of political leadership, needed for the well-being of the king's subjects, but not anymore in the narrow sense, like an aristocracy, as (best) regime with political rule.

The second problem seems to bear a greater challenge, because Aristotle indicates twice that a kingship is indeed the best regime within a hierarchy of all the six constitutions: once in *Politics* IV.2 (1289a38-1289b5) and once in *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.10 (1160a31-1160b9). Within this scale, kingship is thus presented as a regime that is ranked higher than an aristocracy, which reminds us of both the indication in **P5** that such rule was “better” than ruling and being ruled, and the explanation that Vander Waerdt came up with to demonstrate why. I do not think, however, that one has to go that far in reading these two passages as key points in Aristotle's validation of the god-like kingship, because the (explicit) reason *why* kingship is best, seems to be missing in it.⁴⁶ It is clear from a corresponding passage from Plato's *Statesman*

⁴⁵ See Kraut (2002, 16).

⁴⁶ The only reason I can read in ranking these constitutions is that the greater the difference between a correct form and its deviation, the worse this deviation is, cf. Newman (1902, IV. 146). This explains why Aristotle considers a tyranny as the worst and a democracy as the least bad

(302c-303b) that Aristotle took this hierarchy from his former master, and I would suggest that he simply adopted it without thinking through its consequences. For in the *Statesman* (293c-e), all these constitutions are thought to be distinct from the ideal one, which is Plato's variant of the god-like kingship, and are ranked in a hierarchy, depending on how well they approximate the ideal. Since a regular, law-abiding kingship is the most similar to its divine variant, it makes sense that Plato understands it as the best of all six (302e). But in Aristotle's hierarchy from *Politics* IV.2 and *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.10, this seventh constitution is missing, wherefore the Platonic reason why kingship is thought best, is absent here. The reason why Aristotle nevertheless took this scheme from his master is that he primarily may have wanted to criticize another Platonic point.⁴⁷ This also explains why kingship is presented within these two passages as the best regime, while elsewhere, as in *Politics* III.15 (1286b3-7), Aristotle equally expresses his preference for aristocracy over kingship.

This interpretation therefore fits the argument that Aristotle follows Plato in many respects, but ultimately disagrees with him on an important point in the *Politics*: kingly rule is different from political rule. A regime where an outstandingly virtuous person has eternal and unlimited power as absolute king, is therefore thought to be an instantiation of the best regime, just as an aristocracy, but not anymore as instantiation of the rule (to be expected) in a political community, where the citizens rule in turn. This shows plainly how Aristotle's

regime. An argument, however, why kingship, as a correct constitution, is ranked higher than the other correct forms, and especially aristocracy, does not appear in these passages. Aristotle calls kingship in *Politics* IV.2 "the first and most divine regime" (ἡ πρώτη καὶ θειοτάτη), but arguing that it is best *because* of this character, seems circular. Also in *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.10, this reason seems missing, but suggestions are made to explain it. Richard Kraut, for instance, thinks that kingship is better, because "when a few share power, ruling is more difficult, because they must coordinate their plans and make joint decisions", see Kraut (2002, 424). Aristotle himself, however, argues in *Politics* III.15 (1286b2-7) that one can suppose equally virtuous people in an aristocracy, which makes the latter more rather than less preferable, since multiple rulers are less likely to be corrupted than a single ruler. Another explanation, from Thornton Lockwood, is that elsewhere in the *Ethics* the reasons can be found why kingship is presented here as the best regime, in so far that it is sometimes used herein as a model for the inculcation of virtue, see Lockwood (2006, 360–363). Although this seems right, it does not, in my eyes, sufficiently explain why kingship itself is ranked higher than aristocracy. His argument seems to build upon Vander Waerdt's thesis that it is for the sake of the subjects, but earlier in this paper, such an assumption was refuted.

⁴⁷ Aristotle indicates in *Politics* IV.2 (1289b5-11) that "someone" (τις) already proposed such a scheme, but that it was wrong in the supposition that there is a good and bad variant for every constitution. Aristotle disagrees with him in saying that a constitution as the deviant oligarchy is simply bad and can only be regarded as less worse than another. That this someone against whom Aristotle argues is Plato becomes obvious in reading the latter's *Statesman* (302d-303b).

political thought is not only influenced by Plato's philosophical theories, but by common Greek practice as well.⁴⁸

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⁴⁸ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for his thoughtful comments and suggestions on this paper, which have improved both my general thesis and some specific arguments.

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