

# THE ARISTOTELIAN THEORY OF REGIMES AND THE PROBLEM OF KINGSHIP IN *POLITICS* III

Richard Romeiro Oliveira<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** The main purpose of this paper is to understand the complex and many-sided nature of the theory of regimes elaborated by Aristotle in *Politics* III. We identify the main philosophical and conceptual elements that make it possible for the philosopher to accomplish a vigorous defense of the thesis that kingship can be considered, under certain political circumstances, the best form of government.

**KEY-WORDS:** Aristotle. City. Kingship. Regime.

## 1. THE QUESTION OF THE BEST REGIME, THE THEORY OF DIFFERENT KINDS OF RULE, AND THE PARADOXICAL DEFENSE OF KINGSHIP IN ARISTOTLE'S *POLITICS*

Although the *Politics* of Aristotle is not a wholly homogeneous and unified treatise, since its text constitutes the result of a compilation of class notes and originally independent expositions (*pragmateiai, méthodoi*) about the political things (*tà politikà*) presented by the philosopher inside his school (feature that produces numerous gaps, breaks and digressions in its composition),<sup>2</sup> it can be said, however, that the work exhibits some discursive coherence, insofar as its development follows a general plan and aims to carry out certain theoretical purposes intimately connected to each

<sup>1</sup> Professor Adjunto do Departamento de Filosofia e Métodos, Universidade Federal de São João del-Rei (UFSJ), São João del-Rei, MG – Brasil.  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9776-1006> E-mail: richardromeiro@hotmail.com

Membro permanente do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Filosofia, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE). Doutor em Filosofia pela Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG) (2006).

<sup>2</sup> On this matter, see Tricot (1977, p. 7-8), Saunders (*in* SINCLAIR, 1992, p. 30-33), Laurenti (1992, p. 39-40), Aubonet (2002, p. XCVI-XCIX), Bodéüs (2003, p. 9-13) and Barker (2009, p. 255-261).

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other.<sup>3</sup> By taking the problem of the principles of human action in the city (*polis*)<sup>4</sup> as the basic material of its investigations, the *Politics* intends to attain,

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Barker (1958, p. xl-xli), Laurenti (1992, p. 43-44) and Aubonet (2002, p. CXVI-CXX). Although acknowledging the textual problems of this Aristotelian work, I cannot entirely agree with the severe and heavy judgments made on this subject by Robinson (2004, p. viii-ix). Talking about “the defects of the *Politics*”, Robinson comes even to state the following and harsh criticisms (*loc. cit.*): “Aristotle’s *Politics* is a book with great defects, which probably lose it many readers. The style is often awkward and often obscure, usually owing to excessive tentativeness or caution. The order of thought is annoyingly inconsequential [...] the *Politics* is a collection of long essays and brief jottings pretending to be a treatise. It is thoughts written at different times by a man whose thoughts were abundant and always developing, in intervals between much business and much study of other kinds. It makes a less unified impression than most of his works except the *Metaphysics*.” Despite these heavy criticisms, Robinson cannot help recognizing, however, the philosophical greatness of the *Politics*, claiming paradoxically that “the *Politics* is the greatest work there is in political philosophy” (p. xii). NB: All the quotations from the Greek text of the *Politics* in this paper will be made according to the edition established by Aubonet for the “Collection Budé” (1971, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> The term *polis* is often translated by state or city-state in modern or vernacular languages. However, I consider that this is an incorrect version of the Greek word, since there is a substantial difference between the ancient experience of the Greek *polis* and the modern state institution. In fact, we can say that the state as a specifically modern institution arises from the overcoming of medieval political fragmentation and the polyarchy that was inherent to it, thanks to two main mechanisms: on the one hand, a growing process of centralization of power, which transfers to the hands of a sovereign the monopoly of everything that concerns the production and execution of the laws, the military and security functions, the collection of taxes, etc.; on the other hand, the development of an increasingly complex and sophisticated bureaucratic apparatus, constituted by a professional and hierarchical administrative framework, responsible for the management of the public machine and for the provision of the services under its control. Cf. Pierson (2004, p. 4-26). It is the combination of these two elements - centralization of power and the constitution of a bureaucratic apparatus - that makes possible the advent of the typically modern conception of the state as, to use Skinner’s formulation (1978, p. 353), “the form of public power separate from both the ruler and the ruled, and constituting the supreme political authority within a certain defined territory”. Obviously, it is thanks to the establishment of the state thus understood that a fundamental phenomenon arises in the configuration of modern politics, namely: the separation of government and society, with the consequent institution of a power structure erected above the community or the civic body. None of these features can be found in the Greek *polis*. Indeed, Greek *póleis* have never overcome their radical political fragmentation, and each has thus always remained an autonomous and independent political unit with its own laws, its own customs, its own ways of administering justice, and its own religious practices. Each *polis* was thus a small republic, and the ancient Greek world never abolished its polyarchism, or its extreme political compartmentalization. Moreover, in the absence of political centralization or concentration of power in a single sovereign instance, there was no separation of government and community in ancient Greece, with its correlative constitution of a bureaucratic apparatus designed to control society from top to bottom. Sartori (1987, p. 278), taking into account the elements explained above, elucidates this fundamental difference between the modern State and the Greek *polis* in the following terms: “Ancient democracy was conceived in intrinsic, symbiotic relation with the *polis*. And the Greek *polis* was by no means the city-state that we are accustomed to call it – for it was not, in any sense, a ‘state’. The *polis* was a city-community, a *koinonía*. Thucydides said it in three words: *ándres gar polis* – it is the men that are the polis. It is very revealing that *politeía* meant, in one, citizenship and the structure (form) of the *polis*. Thus, when we speak of the Greek system as democratic state we are grossly inaccurate, both terminologically and conceptually.” See also, on this

indeed, two primary and intrinsically articulated philosophical goals: first, it is question of understanding what the nature of political society is and what its constituent elements are; secondly, it is question of grasping what kinds of regime (*politeia*)<sup>5</sup> this political society may take in its organization, how these regimes work and which one can be conceived as the best with regard to the axiological demands concerning the good life (*eu dzên*) and the excellence (*areté*) of man. The text is structured therefore according to a double intellectual demarche, combining the procedures of an analytical approach (which aims to describe and to clarify the nature of the city, its forms of government and the principles that base its concrete functioning) with those of a normative or prescriptive one (which unfolds itself from the question about the best regime) (SINCLAIR, 1992, p. 19; BERTI, 2012, p. 19-20). Now, concerning this latter topic, as many scholars have already remarked, one can notice a truly essential and decisive element in the shaping of the type of philosophical reflection that Aristotle intends to conduct in

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important issue, Strauss (1992, p. 30). Therefore, in order to maintain strict fidelity to the meaning of the Greek *polis*, I will always translate this word in this paper by “city”, and not by city-state.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this paper, the word *politeia* will preferably be translated by “regime” and not by “constitution” (as is often done by many contemporary translators), since the term “constitution” does not adequately renders the original meaning of that Greek vocable. In fact, in modern languages the term “constitution” designates primary a legal phenomenon, referring to that set of basic laws and juridical rules of a country or State. The Greek concept of *politeia*, however, at least as it is used by authors like Xenophon, Plato and Aristotle, represents a much more complex and wide-ranging political phenomenon, to the extent that it includes in itself all that relates to the *modus vivendi* of a city as a whole, i.e., all that relates to the values, the practices, the customs and – last but not least – the particular form of government of a political community. In other words, the Hellenic term *politeia* designates not so much what concerns the *nomos* (the universe of legal rules), but rather what concerns the social *ethos* (the universe of collective morality) and to the *arkhé* (the element of political power) produced by this *éthos*. Now, in the Greek view the collective morality and the form of government associated to it have an evident primacy over the legal rules, the *ethos* precedes and conditions the *nomos*, which means therefore that the *politeia*, which has to do precisely with the social *éthos* of the city, is really something more primal and comprehensive than the positive laws, being thus the fundamental principle that inspires the elaboration of legislative provisions. Cf. Strauss (1971, p. 136-137). In *Politics*, Aristotle endorses and carries forward this view, conceiving the *politeia* as the way of life of a city (*bíos tis tés póleos*), which is responsible for the order of its inhabitants (*tôn oikotinton táxis ti*) and whose existence, being based on a *ethos*, assures the unity and the identity of a political community (see *Politics* III, 1274b32-39; IV, 1295a40; VIII, 1337a15-19). As such, the *politeia* functions then, according to the Aristotelian teaching, as the principle from which the laws are laid down and the offices and magistratures are distributed, including the sovereign office responsible for the government of the *polis* (see *Politics* III, 1278b9-15; IV, 1289a14-20). On this important subject, cf. Barker (1958, p. lxvi), Romilly (1992, p. 148-149), Aubonet (2002, p. 134, n. 6), and Robinson (2004, p. xv-xvi). Due to the reasons mentioned above, I will accordingly render here *politeia* by “regime” and not by “constitution”, judging that the first term, because it contains in itself the meaning of “way of life”, reproduces more adequately the semantic complexity of the Greek word.

the *Politics*, because the questioning of the most excellent political order (*aríste politeía*) with regard to virtue is ultimately the essential questioning that stimulates the main developments of this work.<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, we have here something that represents not a philosophical peculiarity of the Aristotelian teaching in particular, but rather a feature of the Greek political thought as a whole (see, e.g., what Plato provides in his *Republic* and in his *Laws*), which, by assuming from the beginning the conception of the *pólis* as a moral association, could not help analyzing the city based on ethical criteria as the good (*tò agathón*) and the virtue (*areté*), and establishing, as a result, the problem of the best regime as its decisive problem.<sup>7</sup>

In any case, once someone understands what was explained above, it becomes easy to grasp the reason why the *Politics* is presented within the Aristotelian *corpus* as a direct extension of the studies developed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, forming thus with this latter work a coherent and theoretically articulated philosophical set (NEWMAN, 1887, p. 1-2). It is possible to explain this philosophical set constituted by the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* in the following way: while in the *Nicomachean Ethics* the philosopher conducted a rigorous and patient investigation about the nature of human good, comprehending this human good, from an eudemonist point of view, as happiness (*eudaimonía*) and this latter one as the achievement of “man’s function” (*érgon toû anthrópou*) (*NE* I, 6, 1097b26), i.e., according to the Aristotelian conception, as an activity of the soul in accordance with its specific excellence or virtue (*enérgeia tês psukhês kat’aretén*) (*NE* I, 13, 1102a5), in *Politics* he intends to lengthen and carry out this investigative task, expanding, however, his philosophical scope in order to determine the social, legislative and institutional conditions responsible for the fulfillment of happiness and human virtue in the collective sphere of the city (MACINTYRE, 1991, p. 64). In other words, while in *Nicomachean Ethics* the fundamental aim consists in analyzing what human excellence is, disclosing the principles that explain its complex character and the main forms that it can take, in *Politics* the basic intent is to understand how this excellence may be achieved on a political level by means of an explanation of the nature and functioning of the civic structures that make it possible

<sup>6</sup> Strauss (2012, p. 48-49) makes clear this point as follows: “The variety of specific public moralities or of regimes necessarily gives rise to the question of the best regime, for every kind of regime claims to be the best. Therefore the guiding question of Aristotle’s *Politics* is the question of the best regime.” See also Sinclair (1992, p. 19) and Pellegrin (1993, p. 10-12).

<sup>7</sup> On this subject, see Barker (2009, p. 4-6).

what the philosopher in the work calls the “good life” for man. That shift, which causes the passage from ethics to politics, is perfectly justified in Aristotle’s political theory as a coherent and even necessary intellectual procedure because the philosopher, taking a communitarian starting point and refusing the possibility of an atomistic or individualistic anthropology (as will be the case later in the theoretical model delineated by the modern political thought),<sup>8</sup> defines man as “a political animal by nature” (*phýsei dzôon politikón*), (*Pol.* I, 1, 1252a6) and defining man as “a political animal by nature” thinks that human beings can fulfill their most elevated capacities and reach thereby their genuine happiness (and the full actualization of their excellence) only inside a properly organized city.<sup>9</sup> It follows from what was said that the good of an individual is at first linked to the good of the *polis* and, since the *polis* has originally a primacy over the individual, that the good of the *polis* must be put over the good of the individual.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In regard to the communitarian starting point of Aristotle’s political theory, see Saunders (2000, p. 56)

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Lord (1987, p. 136-137), Strauss (1992, p. 41), Saunders (1992, p. 36-37), Laurenti (1992, p. 62-63), and Berti (2012, p. 30-32). What was said above makes sufficiently clear that in Aristotle’s view the city is indeed a moral association that aims at an ethical end – the achievement of the good life as the life lived in accordance with virtue or excellence – as its supreme goal. Robinson (2004, p. xx) explains this theoretical feature of the Aristotelian political philosophy as follows: “What then is this aim of the city, this one identical aim that every city has by nature? Since the city is the supreme community, the good at which it aims is the supreme good (1252a1-6). The supreme good is the good life. While the city arises for the sake of life, it exists for the sake of good life (1252b30). ‘The end of a city is the good life’ (1280b39). And what is good life? It is good actions, not companionship (1281a2-4). It involves the goods of both circumstance and body and soul, but those of circumstance and body to a moderate amount, and those of the soul, including courage and temperance and justice and wisdom to an extreme (1323b21-22) [...] Fundamentally the good life is the life of virtuous action.”

<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that for Aristotle the politics runs out all that concerns human excellence and that there is accordingly no kind of virtue and happiness intended for man, in Aristotelian thought, beyond the city limits. Indeed, as shown in *Nicomachean Ethics* X, 6-9, Aristotle states that there is a higher kind of excellence for man – and thus a higher kind of human *eudaimonia* – that is certainly non-political, namely the intellectual excellence related to the exercise of theoretical activity (*theoretiké enérgeia*), which is by its own nature a private or solitary experience that brings man closer to what is divine (*theion*). On this subject, see MacIntyre (1991, p. 87-88). Well, if we take this into account, we see thus that there is room in Aristotle for the admission of a certain individuality and of a domain of human life that transcends the *polis*, despite the communitarian starting point taken by the philosopher in the development of his political and ethical reflection. However, we must understand that this individuality advocated by the Stagirite, in contradistinction to what is observed in modern thought, has not a pre-political character, i.e., it is not something that precedes the genesis of the civic order, but it is rather a supra-political phenomenon, which presupposes as such the formation of the city as a necessary precondition for its realization. And this is so because for Aristotle man is not a god, or a pure and self-sufficient spirit, but instead a mortal being, whose nature is by definition bounded, limited, and lacking in many things, which makes human life dependent on the structure of political

For Aristotle, the main consequence resulting from this conception is the apprehension of the deep interweaving of ethics and politics and the radically architectonic nature of the political science (*politiké epistémē*), which as the comprehensive knowledge of everything regarding the human action incorporates the general understanding of the sovereign human good, either for the individual or for a political association (LORD, 1987, p. 122; CRUBELLIER; PELLEGRIN, 2002, p. 187-188).<sup>11</sup>

The essential articulation between ethics and politics proposed by Aristotle, leading to the concept of the political *epistémē* as architectonic knowledge about the sovereign good of man, makes evident, then, the strictly normative or prescriptive nature of the thought presented by the philosopher in his *Politics*.<sup>12</sup> This theoretical feature, as one can easily see, drives away the *Politics* from the philosophical and methodological approach followed by a major part of the modern and contemporary political science, which from Machiavelli to Weber have tried to establish a radically autonomous political knowledge, which is independent of ethical requirements. In the case of Weber, specifically, it can be said that his ideal of a value-free (*wertfrei*) social science, based on the recourse to a neutral axiologically research method (*Wertfreiheit*), is the very antithesis of the Aristotelian teaching (BERTI, 2012, p. 12).<sup>13</sup>

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community as a previous and necessary basis of its fulfillment. As a consequence, according to the Aristotelian teaching, it is only after the constitution of the political community and the achievement of the self-sufficiency (*autárkeia*) propitiated by it that man can reach a form of life and of rationality – the life and rationality concerning the *theoretiké enérgeia* – that somehow surpasses the city. Cf. Frede (2013, p. 33). This means that in Aristotle's view human existence requires the mainstay of political community to attain its perfection, and it is precisely this fact that the philosopher has in mind when he asserts that man is “a political animal by nature”. Undoubtedly, we notice here a form of individuality that distinguishes itself from that advocated later by modern political philosophy, which, deriving from an atomizing anthropology, takes a radically pre-political character, conceiving man therefore as an autonomous and non-political individual, who has natural rights regardless of the political society and who founds the political society only as a means to ensure the effectiveness of such rights. See on this matter Kelsen (1937, p. 11-16), Berti (1979, p. 311-318; 2012 p. 19), Guthrie (1981, p. 331-333), Strauss (1992, p. 49), Kullmann (2010, p. 209-210), and Oliveira (2011, p. 157-181).

<sup>11</sup> Further remarks on this subject can be found in Bodéüs (2003, p. 13-15).

<sup>12</sup> On the ethical aim of the politics, see what Aristotle states in *NE I*, 1099b30.

<sup>13</sup> With regard to the Weberian concept of social science as a “value-free knowledge”, based on the recourse to a neutral axiologically research method, concept which is derived ultimately from Weber's belief that human reason is incapable of solving the radical conflicts concerning the fundamental moral alternatives, see the excellent explanation of Strauss (1971, p. 35-80).

Now, producing a structural correspondence between ethics and politics and conceiving the city as a political community (*koinonía politiké*)<sup>14</sup> intended to achieve the economic, legislative and institutional conditions of the good human living, that is, of the happiness and virtue of man, Aristotle had to investigate the various forms of regime or organization of the *polis* (*politeiaí*) in order to determine, as noted above, which one of these forms of organization can be considered the best. Yet, as the *Politics*' text shows, that intellectual procedure presupposes, first of all, the formulation of a political taxonomy that, defining and listing the fundamental species of *politeiaí*, provides a typological and schematic picture from which the political systems can be analyzed, judged, and compared to each other, in order to establish which one is the most excellent. That is the philosophical task that Aristotle carries out in *Politics* III. Well, when the contents of this book are analyzed more attentively, especially that ones the philosopher develops in chapters 9-13, one perceives, however, a sinuous, oscillating, and apparently incoherent discussion (at least in a first approach), since Aristotle advocates as the best form of government, at this point of *Politics*, first democracy, then aristocracy, and finally monarchy or kingship.<sup>15</sup> With regard to the defense of monarchy or kingship as the best *politeta*, particularly, as was observed by some scholars, it is *prima facie* a remarkable and paradoxical procedure, because it seems to conflict with the difference between political government (i.e., the government proper of the *pólis* or city) and royal or monarchic government established before by the Stagirite in other sections of the work (WOLFF, 2008, p. 109). In fact, in some passages of book I and in a specific excerpt of book III of the *Politics* (*Pol.* I, 1255b16-21; 1259a37-b17; III, 1278b30-1279a7), Aristotle, after determining the relationships between master and slave, husband and wife, and father and children as the fundamental relationships belonging to the

<sup>14</sup> The word *koinonía* used by Aristotle in the expression *politiké koinonía* means basically, in the political vocabulary elaborated by the philosopher, "every human association established in order to pursue a common interest (*tò koinón*) and giving birth to relations based on justice (*dikaion*) and friendship (*philia*)". Cf. Tricot (1977, p. 21, n. 1) and Saunders (2000, p. 55). As Aristotle arguments in the beginning of the *Politics*, there are different kinds of *koinoníaí*, i.e., different kinds of human associations or partnerships, pursuing different kinds of goods or common interests, but the supreme one is the *politiké kononía*, because the good pursued by the *pólis* is the sovereign one (*kyriotáton*). See *Politics* I, 1252a1-7.

<sup>15</sup> Crubellier and Pellegrin (2002, p. 197) draw our attention to this fact as follows: "La doctrine d'Aristote sur 'la constitution la meilleure' – il vaut mieux traduire ainsi l'expression *aristè politeia* – est difficile, notamment parce que ses déclarations semblent contradictoires. Parfois il declare que la royauté, ou une certaine forme d'aristocratie, est la constitution la meilleure, tantôt il semble penser que c'est le gouvernement constitutionnel, et c'est cette dernière position qui a le plus fait pour donner de lui une image de partisan d'un régime 'centriste'."

household (*oikía*) – primitive domestic core that constitutes the social and economic basis of the city –, seeks to analyze and discriminate the different kinds of rule (*arkhai*) corresponding to these rapports.<sup>16</sup> As Aristotle himself makes clear in the beginning of the *Politics*, through the development of this analysis what is intended is to question the doctrine advocated by some writers (Plato and Xenophon) concerning the essential unity of the types of *arkhé*, doctrine that teaches that the rules of a statesman (*politikón*), of a king (*basilikón*), of a household-manager (*oikonomikón*), and of a master (*despotikón*) are fundamentally identical [*oíontai (...) êinai tôn autón*], differing from each other only with respect to their numerical extension (*pléthei kai gàr oligóteiti nomídzousi diaphérein*), but not with respect to their species (*all' ouk eidei tóuton hékaston*) (*Pol. I, 1252a7-23*).<sup>17</sup>

Rejecting this teaching as intrinsically erroneous and opposing to it his own view of the heterogeneous modes of rule (*trópoi tês arkhês*), (*Pol. III, 1278b31*), the Stagirite comes to the following conceptions: first and foremost, it is important to recognize that the typical rule of a master (*despoteía*) is a rule exercised over men who are naturally slaves (*doúloi*), i.e., over beings who are not free (*eleútheroi*) (*Pol. I, 1255b16-18*). For that reason, says Aristotle, the master can perform his rule mainly according to his own interest (*tò toú despótou symphéron*) and only accidentally according to the interest of the slave (*tò toú doúlou katà symbebekós*) (*Pol. III, 1278b32-36*). On the other hand, in opposition to what happens in the relationships between master and slave, the government exercised by a father over his children (*patriké*) and that exercised by a husband over his wife (*gamiké*) are forms of rules in which the subjects are free and not slaves (*Pol. I, 1259a37-40*). Hence the non-despotic character of this kind of *arkhé* and the demand that its exercise be carried out to favor the

<sup>16</sup> According to Deslauriers (2006, p. 48-69), to demonstrate that there are different kinds of rule to which different kinds of relationships and subjects correspond is the main scope of the development of the argument of *Politics I*, and not, as many commentators think, to prove the naturalness of the political community. It is worth noting here that the Greek term *arkhé* employed by Aristotle in the context of this argument and elsewhere in *Politics* derives from the verb *árkho*, “to be the first” “to begin”, “to initiate”, and means originally “beginning”, in a double sense: a chronological one (and then *arkhé* designates more specifically “origin”, “principle”) and a political one (and then *arkhé* designates more specifically the “rule”, the “government”, i.e., the hegemonic element that in a society has a political primacy over the others and that has therefore the prerogative and the authority to initiate a course of political action). In Aristotle’s *Politics*, the word *arkhé* is employed in most cases, evidently, in this second sense. See Barker (1958, p. lxvii).

<sup>17</sup> The Platonic and Xenophontic teaching criticised by Aristotle in this section of *Politics* can be found in *Memorabilia* 3.4.6; 3.4.12, *Politics*, 258e-259 a, and *Laus* III, 680d-681 a. A good exposition of the main tenets of this teaching can be found in Deslauriers (2006, p. 55-59).

ruled (*tôn arkhoménon khárin estin*) or some common interest of the ruler and the ruled (*è koinoû tínos amphoîn*) (*Pol.* III, 1278b37-41). Yet, according to the Aristotelian teaching, although these two types of rules possess a certain similarity, they are not the same (*ou tôn autón dè trópon tês arkhês*) (*Pol.* I, 1259a40), because there is a fundamental difference that separates them. Aristotle states this difference as follows: whereas the relationship between husband and wife is a relationship between beings who are at the same time free and *equal*, the relationship between father and children is a relationship between beings who are certainly free, but *not equal*, since the father is older (*presbýteron*) than his child, and, being older, is complete (*téleion*) with regard to the development of those faculties that correspond to the fulfillment of human nature, fact that makes him fitter for command or leadership (*hegemonikóteron*). That is why Aristotle affirms that while the husband-wife rapport involves a government exercised politically (*politikós*), the father-child rapport involves a government exercised monarchically (*basilikós*), because the monarchic or royal rule (*arkhé basiliké*) rests on the superiority concerning the age (*katà presbeian*) (*Pol.* I, 1259b1-14). But the philosopher goes further: in fact, in order to guarantee more precision to his analysis, he observes that in regard to the type of rule that prevails between husband and wife, differently from what happens in actual political governments (*politikai arkhai*), in which rulers and ruled periodically interchange their roles (*metabállei tò árkhon kai tò arkhómenon*), holding office in turn (*árkhein katà méros*) with the purpose to maintain a certain equality, the government of a husband over his wife is permanent and hence unchangeable, because the male is by nature fitter for command or leadership (*hegemonikóteron*) than the female [except for those cases, adds Aristotle, in which the relationship is against nature (*parà phýsin*), that is to say, in those cases in which the man is effeminate] (*Pol.* I, 1259b2-10; III, 1279a8-13).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> As Deslauriers explains (2006, p. 67), “Aristotle claims that the relation between husband and wife is one of constitutional rule, although constitutional rule in which ruler and ruled do not exchange places”. Despite the fact that the Aristotelian statement that male are “fitter for command or leadership” (*hegemonikóteron*) than female evidently involves the conception of a certain supremacy of man over woman, the philosopher’s idea of considering husband’s rule over wife as a political government, based as such on the existence of a certain equality between these two beings, constitutes a genuine and surprising innovation in relation to the Greek ethos of the time. Saunders (2000, p. 97), commenting on this passage from *Politics*, correctly notes: “This paragraph is the nearest he [Aristotle] gets to treating women on an equality with men. At least some Greek men would have been surprised or even outraged by the description of their authority over their wives as ‘(like) a statesman’s’; for women were not thought to be concerned with the state. Aristotle marries to a deep conservatism a strongly independent initiative; but he still does not go as far as Plato.”

This argument is undoubtedly one of the central teachings of Aristotle's *Politics*, especially in Book I, and its fundamental theoretical point is the demonstration of two closely connected principles, namely: 1) the principle that there are different kinds of people subject to rule, and 2) the principle that, since there are different kinds of people subject to rule, there must therefore be different kinds of rule, not just one.<sup>19</sup> In any case, the key point to which I would like to draw attention in this analysis is that Aristotle clearly distinguishes, as explained above, the political government (*politiké arkhé*) from the monarchic or royal government (*basiliké arkhé*), by means of the idea that the basic feature of the former is the fact that it is exercised over free and equal beings, (*Pol. I*, 1255b20) requiring as such the institution of the periodical interchange of rulers (*arkhóntes*) and ruled (*arkhómēnoi*), whereas the essential characteristic of the latter is that it prevails in the relationships between beings who are free but not equal, inasmuch as its existence relies on the age difference that makes the older and more mature man superior to the younger and not fully developed one.

Now, one can say that this view of the nature of the political rule, or of the government proper of the city, is clearly marked by certain democratic trend, since the conception of the *polis* as an association of free and equal men, ruling and being ruled in turn, was the characteristic element of democracy (BERTI, 1979, p. 302-303; WOLFF (2008, p. 109). Even though Aristotle cannot be considered an unconditional partisan of the democratic system, insofar as he raises some objections and suspicions against it, his thought manifests thus a much more favorable disposition to that type of political regime than Plato,<sup>20</sup> seeming even to consider that there is somehow an inner tendency of the city to develop itself in the direction of a democratic organization.<sup>21</sup> This is indeed a lesson explicitly given by the philosopher in chapter 15 of book III, in a passage in which, aiming to explain how the historical development of the city took place, he describes the process by which the polis passed gradually from a monarchical regime – form of *politeia* that was proper of the primitive political associations – to less and less centralized systems of government (first aristocracy, later oligarchy), until reach democracy (*Pol. III*, 15, 1286b8-22).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See the explanations of Deslauriers (2006, p. 52-55; 59-65).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Barker (1958, p. liv): “Aristotle is, on the whole, less critical of democracy than Plato. He recognizes, towards the middle of the third book of the *Politics*, that there is, after all, much to be said on behalf the mass of people.” See also Aubenque (1993, p. 255-264).

<sup>21</sup> On this issue, see Strauss (1992, p. 36).

<sup>22</sup> For a brief commentary on this passage of *Politics*, see Laurenti (1992, p. 82-83).

Now, insofar as Aristotle assumes this point of view, it is not surprising that the first definition of the nature of the citizen (*polítes*) proposed by him in *Politics* III is a definition that fits only to a citizen of a democracy, as the philosopher himself actually promptly recognizes (*Pol.* III, 1275a22- b7). Nor is it impressive that he uses the generic term (*tò ónoma koinón*) for “political regime”, namely *politeía*, to designate what would be the right or correct form of democracy (*Pol.* III, 1279a38-39). Taking all this into account, it seems therefore really paradoxical that the philosopher supports the royal government in some moments of his work and comes even to vindicate the absolute kingship (*pambasileía*), i.e., that form of monarchical regime not subjected to any kind of juridical or legal control, as the best regime.<sup>23</sup>

In what follows, I will try to observe a little more carefully how Aristotle elaborates the defense of kingship in *Politics* III, searching to understand how it is possible to integrate this discursive procedure in the general theoretical framework of the typology of regimes that is formulated by the philosopher in this section of the work. In order to achieve this goal, I intend to show mainly two things: first, that the decisive principle established by Aristotle in his understanding of what constitutes a right political system is the principle of the public good, which is deduced directly by him of the purpose of political life and of the nature of the rule that is proper of the city; secondly, that the Aristotelian theory of the best political regime (*aríste politeía*), far from being simple, is radically complex and many-sided, inasmuch as it is based on the idea that the excellence of a form of government is directly linked

<sup>23</sup> The apparent incompatibility of the defense of absolute kingship with what Aristotle affirms in different parts of *Politics* about the nature of the city government and the functioning of the political life is an internal problem of the work originally noticed by Newman (1887, p. 288-300). But it must be noted here that this Aristotelian defense of the kingship is problematic not only from the point of view of the internal organization of the work, but also from an external point of view, i.e., from a point of view that takes into account the historical context in which this work is situated. In fact, as explains Kelsen (1937, p. 17-18), although by the time Aristotle wrote his *Politics* the days of glory of Athenian democracy had passed, the citizens of Athens still kept alive the spirit of freedom that characterizes this regime, considering the monarchical government incompatible with the *éthos* of the Greek man and proper only for barbarians. In the words of Kelsen (p. 17): “In Aristotle’s time royal rule was considered by the Hellenes as a barbarous form of government, a rulership over slaves, to which the republican Polis, the self-government of free men, the special constitution of the Greek nation, stood in startling contrast. He who in Hellas, and especially in Athens, declared kingly rule to be the best was faced with a prevalent opinion which regarded monarchy as barbarian dominion over slaves.” According to Kelsen (p. 18-19), one of the most eloquent spokesmen of this pro-democratic and radically anti-monarchist opinion was Demosthenes, whose voice rose passionately against the monarch Philip of Macedonia and for whom “to be governed by a king is [...] synonymous with being a slave”. Confronted with this “political atmosphere” and with the diffuse democratic spirit present in it, the Aristotelian discourse in favor of monarchy undoubtedly assumes an unusual and provocative character.

to the conditions and circumstances in which a regime exists, which means that the question of the best *politeia* does not have therefore an unique and homogeneous answer.<sup>24</sup> I believe that by understanding these elements we will become able to comprehend how Aristotle in his *Politics*, without denying the foundations of his thought, finds room to justify the monarchy as a legitimate political regime and to perform a consistent defense of the thesis according to which the absolute kingship can be considered as *ariste politeia* in some situations. Let us now, then, proceed to analyze these issues, seeking to clarify the fundamental philosophical meaning of the Aristotelian teaching concerning the monarchical regime.

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF REGIME (*POLITEÍA*) AND THE CLASSIFICATION OF FORMS OF GOVERNMENT IN *POLITICS* III

If in *Politics* I Aristotle developed a reflection on the genesis of the political community (*pólis*), which determined the foundations and the constituent elements of the city, *viz.* the household (*oikía*) and the tribes (*kómai*), in *Politics* III he goes a step further in his research and decides to investigate what forms of organization or regimes (*politeiai*) this political community can take, trying to understand their nature, their characteristics and their virtues (WOLFF, 2008, p. 83). This means that *Politics* III intends to elaborate a genuine typology of the fundamental political systems, which is both descriptive (because it aims to provide an overview and an explanation of the nature and the characteristics of the different regimes), and normative (because it aims to provide an axiological framework able to establish a hierarchy of the regimes, in which the worst ones are subordinated to the better ones).

The starting point of this Aristotelian typology is, of course, the attempt to define what the *politeia* or “political regime” is. With this purpose in mind, Aristotle considers, first of all, that it is the *politeia* and not the territory or the population the principle that truly defines the very character of a political association or city. In this sense, he asserts that a city is an association, and an association of citizens taking share in the same regime (*esti koinonía tis he pólis, esti de koinonía politòn politeías*), so that when the

<sup>24</sup> This point was rightly apprehended by Crubellier and Pellegrin as follows (2002, p. 199): “Il faut néanmoins reconnaître que, dans la philosophie politique d’Aristote, le problème de la constitution la meilleure se pose d’une manière plus complexe que pourrait laisser croire ce qui vient d’être dit. Que l’excellence constitutionnelle soit multiple, c’est une des thèses fortes de cette philosophie.”

regime changes, the city necessarily changes too, acquiring another political framework. This means thus that the *politeia* is the fundamental element that gives identity and unity to a political *koinonía* (*Pol.* III, 3, 1276a6-1276b15). Taking forward this idea, Aristotle seeks then to establish the conception according to which, from a strictly political perspective, the regime so understood is the principle that determines how the participation of citizens in government bodies is set. Hence his definition of the regime as the order of the different public offices that exist in a political association (*póleos táxis tôn arkhôn*), and especially of that one which is the sovereign of all (*málista tês kýrias pánton*). In fact, Aristotle remarks, in every city the sovereign is the government (*kýrion mèn gár pantakhoû tò politeuma tês póleos*) and the government is the regime (*politeuma d'estin hé politeía*) (*Pol.* III, 6, 1278b8-11). Needless to say, such a definition, which identifies *politeuma* and *politeía*, shows us that for Aristotle what really defines the nature of a regime, from a strictly political point of view, is therefore the answer to the question: “Who rules?” (WOLFF, 2008, p. 85).

It follows from this argument that the first criterion that must be observed in the development of a typology of the political systems is a quantitative one, namely the number of rulers, which concerns essentially the size of governing body. According to this criterion, there are then three possibilities: the rule of one single man, the rule of few men, and the rule of a majority. Yet, as some commentators have observed, taking the quantitative criterion concerning the number of rulers as a principle of classification of the forms of government, Aristotle would not be proposing anything truly original. Such a classification of regimes was indeed a traditional conception of Greek political thought, a truism, so to speak, whose origin can be surely traced to the work of Herodotus (NEWMAN, 1887, p. 211-212; ROMILLY, 1959, p. 81-99; 1992, p. 150-152; WOLFF, 2008, p. 86). In this sense, the philosopher would be thus simply reinforcing a tradition, without introducing any conceptual innovation in it. However, in order to be a little fairer concerning the evaluation of this aspect of the Aristotelian political philosophy, we should say that Aristotle does not simply reproduce the traditional understanding of the types of regimes established by the antecedent thought, but searches to add to it something that is theoretically new, namely the demonstration of how the quantitative political typology advocated by that thought can be directly deduced from the very definition of the political nature of the regime as the government body. In other words, the originality of the Aristotelian thought in this field is to show, in a more systematic way, how to infer the

numerical classification of the regimes from the conceptual reduction of the *politeía* to *politeúma* (WOLFF, 2008, p. 86). However this may be, it is clear that in *Politics* the philosopher seems to regard this previous political taxonomy as something philosophically unsatisfactory and hence is lead to resort, in order to make his theory of regimes more consistent, to a second principle, whose nature is clearly axiological or evaluative, *viz.* the principle of common interest (*koinón symphéron*), or, as we could also say, of the public good. As noted above, this principle is deduced by him from his conception of the purpose of political life and of the specific kind of rule that is proper to the political life (BARKER, 1958, p. 113, note V; WOLFF, 2008, p. 87).<sup>25</sup>

The first step of the Aristotelian argument concerning these issues in book III is the resumption of the teachings set forth in Book I, which had demonstrated the essentially political nature of man and the fact that the end (*télos*) in view of which the city is established is the achievement of the good life (*tò dzên kalôs*) for all its members (*Pol.* III, 6, 1278b17-23). The fundamental idea recovered in this section of Book III by Aristotle is then that human nature cannot reach its full moral accomplishment except within a city and that the city is therefore an ethical association whose supreme goal is to give men the conditions not only of their mere living (*tò dzên*), but also and especially of their living well (*tò eú dzên*), that is to say, of their living in accordance with virtue or excellence.

As Laurenti opportunely indicates (1992, p. 65), the Aristotelian distinction between “living” and “living well”, essential not only to the specific argument the philosopher seeks to construct in this section of *Politics* III, but also to the teaching that the work aims to provide as a whole, bases itself on the conception of freedom as leisure, i.e., as availability of free time produced by the release from the exercise of manual labor, phenomenon that makes it possible for a citizen to devote himself to all those intellectual and moral occupations that are indispensable to the acquisition of virtue and political goodness. Furthermore, as Laurenti also remarks, behind this concept and the distinction between “living” and “living well” associated to it, one can see likewise the cleavage between necessary and disinterested things, between useful and beautiful, which was a common notion of the Greek traditional

<sup>25</sup> Cf. also the remarks elaborated by Wolff in his ‘L’unité structurale du livre III’ (1993, p. 93).

thought and whose formulation involved a contempt to all those occupations that belongs to the world of physical labor and manual activities.<sup>26</sup>

Whatever it may be, this first point having been established, the second step taken by the philosopher in the development of his argument is again a reassessment of a theory already elaborated in the context of book I, namely the theory that asserts the existence of different kinds of rules (*trópoi tês arkhês*) and according to which there is a fundamental distinction between the *arkhé* that characterizes the political community and the *arkhé* that characterizes the domestic control that a master exercises over his slave (DESLAURIERS, 2006, p. 67). Indeed, the central teaching Aristotle reminds us here (and whose principal features were explained above) is that while the rule of a master over a slave within the household [the despotic rule (*despoteía*)] aims mainly the interest of the master (*pròs tò toû despóτου symphéron*), and only accidentally (*katà symbebekós*) the interest of the slave (*pròs tò toû doúlou*), there are kinds of rule (e.g., the government exercised by a man over his wife, that of a father over his children, and the political government over citizens) that are defined precisely by the opposite characteristic, because they are exercised primary for the sake of the ruled (*tôn arkhónton khárin estin*), and only accidentally for the sake of the rulers (*Pol. III, 6, 1278b30-1279a8*). In regard to the political government itself, Aristotle remarks in addition that its exercise aims ultimately the interests of all, because, as far as exists in the political life the periodical alternation of rulers and ruled, thanks to a system of political rotation, each citizen can govern in turn (*katà méros árkhlein*), ruling and being ruled in different moments, which makes possible that after all everyone, rulers and ruled, has his interest contemplated.<sup>27</sup> This would show, according to the philosopher, that the nature of the political power and the method of its exercise aim thus to promote the common good, that is to say, the conditions of the good life to all citizens, in full accordance with the sovereign goal that

<sup>26</sup> Laurenti says (1992, p. 65): “Tale libertà nel senso piú vasto rende comprensibile la distinzione già incontrata tra *tò dzên* e *tò eú dzên*. La distinzione sottende due tra le categorie piú emblematiche del pensiero greco, particolarmente evidenziate da Aristotele, necessariò//disinteressato, utile//bello. Al disinteressato, al bello l'uomo arriva dopo che há soddisfatto il bisogno: bello è lo speculare delle scienze, il piacere della contemplazione, il godimento d'una nota musicale, la gioia dello sforzo per raggiungere la virtù, un mondo di cose in cui domina sovrana la libertà. Le cose necessarie le amiamo in vista di qualcosa diverso da loro, perché ci mettono in grado di raggiungere un qualche fine: queste ultime, invece, le cose belle, le amiamo per sé, anche se non otteniamo niente. Ma solo l'uomo libero può intendere questo ragionamento, non lo schiavo che in ogni cosa cerca l'utile, perché sull'utile ha impostato la sua vita e niente riesce a capire oltre l'utile.”

<sup>27</sup> On this subject, see the comments of Newman (1887, p. 244-245), Tricot (1970, p. 196, n. 3), Aubonet (2002, p. 20-21) and Berti (2012, p. 78).

is established as the very reason of the city existence. The conclusion deduced by Aristotle from what has been said is that the common interest [*tò koinè(i) symphéron*] is indeed the fundamental principle that should guide the exercise of political power, so that all regimes (*hósai politeiai*) that seek (*skopoúsi*) this principle are correct (*orthai*) and in accordance with absolute justice (*katà tò haplós díkaion*), while those that do not respect it are defective and deviated forms from the correct ones (*hemartémenai pásai kai parekbáseis tôn orthôn politeiôn*). Concluding his argument concerning this matter, Aristotle states then that these deviated regimes have a despotic character (*despotikai gár*), precisely because, searching to benefit the interest of rulers, they are akin to the rule of a master over his slaves, feature that is incompatible with the very essence of the city, which is by definition an association of free man (*he dè pólis koinonia tôn eleútheron estín*) (*Pol.* III, 6, 1279a9-21).

After having established the two fundamental criteria which allows a better method of classifying the political regimes, namely the number of rulers and the purpose of political life (the achievement of common good), Aristotle can finally proceed to the elaboration of a typology of systems of government in which the fundamental *politeiai* are identified and distinguished as follows: there are three whose nature is correct (*orthai*), namely kingship (the good rule of one man), aristocracy (the good rule of few), and republic or *polity* (the good rule of the majority),<sup>28</sup> and three whose nature is corrupted or deviated (*parekbáseis*), namely tyranny (the perverted rule of one man), oligarchy (the perverted rule of few), and democracy (the perverted rule of the majority) (*Pol.* III, 7, 1279a22-1279b10). As one can easily see, the main teaching that derives from this typology is that justice and the political good can be achieved in the city through different systems of government, not depending therefore on a single form of regime or power organization. R. Bodéüs apprehended very well this element of the Aristotelian political teaching and correctly expressed it as follows: “The great lesson of Aristotle here is to expose to everyone that justice - in other words, the political good - can be instituted unreservedly in different species of constitutional systems, and therefore it does not depend, by any means, on the fact that the government is a monarchy (kingship), is in the hands of a few (aristocracy) or of the many (republic).” (BODÉÛS, 2003, p. 69). This means thus that good political rule can take various and

<sup>28</sup> As mentioned above, Aristotle uses in Greek the generical term for “regime”, i.e., *politeia*, to designate the good form of popular government. This use reflects maybe, as also explained above, the presence of a democratic trend in the Aristotelian thought, which leads the philosopher to judge that there is a tendency of the political association to develop itself in the direction of democracy.

heterogeneous institutional forms, which produce thus different legitimate ways of solving the problem of sovereign authority within the city. In this theoretical scheme, even though kingship appears as the system that exhibits the most elevated concentration of power and whose monocratic nature would seem, at least on a first approach, counteract what is proper of the political organization of the city, the rule put into practice by a king is explicitly stated as a form of government as legitimate as that is found in an aristocracy or even in a republic, since the principle that defines the essence of the genuine exercise of political power – the search of the common interest or of the public good – is entirely contemplated and preserved by it.

This feature of the theory of governmental systems developed by the *Politics*, which gives to the Aristotelian conception of the best regime a pluralistic and multifaceted character and which leads an author like Bodéüs (2003, p. 70) to speak, concerning the political thought of Aristotle, of “relativism of political good”, becomes even more visible in the sequel of book III, in those arguments through which the philosopher seeks to show how each of the right political regimes mentioned above – kingship, aristocracy, and republic (or *polity*) – can be considered the best one, if one examines the different social contexts and takes then into account the plurality of the political and moral circumstances. It must be remarked here that this aspect of the Aristotelian theory of regimes was, in general, relatively misunderstood by many of the Aristotle’s readers, who tended to observe it as the expression of analytical inconsistencies and philosophical hesitations. It cannot be denied, it is true, the non-linear and even lacunar character of the Aristotelian argument at this point of *Politics*, which gives the readers the impression that this argument presents here and there some inconsistencies and *aporiai* (*Pol.* III, 10, 1281a11-39).<sup>29</sup> Despite this problem, I think it is possible to save the philosophical core that sustains this important section of the work by bringing up and properly comprehending that element mentioned above, namely the fact that Aristotle’s political theory does not intend to provide an one-sided and simple answer to the question of the best *politeia*, but seeks rather to investigate the different possibilities of achieving the good government and the civic excellence in heterogeneous political contexts. This point was very well grasped, among others, by P. Pellegrin, who in order to emphasize the complex nature of the Aristotelian theory of regimes draws our attention to the fact that this theory is not based on the idea that there is only one form

<sup>29</sup> For further comments, see Wolff (1993, p. 295).

of political excellence. In this sense, the same author remarks that, when the philosopher says in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE* V, 10, 1135a3-5.) that there is one excellent regime everywhere (*pantakhoû*), the adverb “everywhere” must be understood in a distributive sense, i.e., as meaning “in each place” or in “each region”, which is to say that the political excellence must be conceived in the light of the different political contexts and of the different moral dispositions or *éthe* that characterizes each people or population.<sup>30</sup> Undoubtedly, we find here a principle accepted by Aristotle in a decisive way in the development of his argument and it is precisely this principle that leads the philosopher to assert, near the end of his discussions in book III, that there is for each political situation and for each type of population a system of government (kingship, aristocracy, democracy, and even despotism) that is the most suitable to its particular condition. (*Pol.* III, 17, 1287b36-41; 1288 a8-15)<sup>31</sup> This explains why in the context of *Politics* Aristotle’s argumentation can recognize, without being inconsistent, sometimes the aristocratic government (*Pol.* III, 9, 1281a2-8; III, 15, 1286b2-7), sometimes the popular government (*Pol.* III, 11, 1281a39-1282b13), and sometimes the kingship (*Pol.* III, 13, 1284a3-17; 1284b25-34; 18, 1288a15-29) as the best political regime.

Regarding the kingship (*basileía*), specifically, one must remark that Aristotle seeks to provide not only a vindication of its legitimacy and of its political righteousness, but also an energetic defense of its absolute form (*pambasileía*), which can be considered in some circumstances, according to the philosopher, as the best regime. Concerning that issue, the Aristotelian argument proceeds from a double approach and involves the use of different principles that are somehow independent from each other. The first approach has a pure theoretical nature and bases itself on the argument according to which, being the main purpose of political life the achievement of virtue, as already demonstrated, if in a city an exceptional political situation takes place concerning the emerging of a man of extraordinary or transcendent virtue, there is no other procedure to be adopted with regard to this outstanding man but to grant him full powers, raising him above the law itself and instituting accordingly an absolute kingship. On the other hand,

<sup>30</sup> Commenting the *Nicomachean Ethics* passage quoted above, Pellegrin says (1993, p. 22): “Ce ‘partout’ (*pantakhoû*) est évidemment distributive: dans chaque cas il n’y a qu’une forme (espèce?) de constitution qui est ‘naturellement la meilleure’, compte tenu des conditions. Et de ce fait ce qui est juste dans un système constitutionnel ne l’est pas forcément dans un autre.” Cf. also Crubellier; Pellegrin (2002, p.197-198).

<sup>31</sup> See also *Pol.* IV, 1, 1288b21-27.

the second approach has a sociological and historical character and proceeds from the empirical verification of the fact that the absolute monarchical rule that exists in some nations and cities, exercised by an actual king entrusted with unfettered powers over every issue, is the most suited to the character of certain people and to the particular situation of some political associations.<sup>32</sup> In the final section of this paper, I will try to analyze more carefully all these elements in order to reach a better understanding of how Aristotle articulates his vindication of kingship in *Politics*.

### 3. THE ARISTOTELIAN VINDICATION OF KINGSHIP

As is well known, the Aristotelian argument in favor of the kingship appears in chapter 13 of *Politics* III, in the context of a discussion about the different principles and values (property, birth, freedom, numerical superiority) that are mobilized by different parties to justify their claims to civic honors and political power (NAGLE, 2000, p. 119). After recognizing certain validity of these principles as factors that bring some real contribution to the existence of the city, the philosopher remarks, however, that none of them can be erected as the sole and sufficient criterion in the allocation of the political offices and in the execution of the task of deciding who should govern the city (as partisans of democracy intend to do with freedom, on the one side, and the partisans of oligarchy intend to do with wealth, on the other side), for each of these principles reveals itself as a biased and unilateral rule with regard to justice taken in its absolute sense (*haplôs*) (*Pol.* III, 13, 1283a23-31). What Aristotle has here in mind in talking about justice taken in an absolute sense has to do with his previous discussions about justice as a distributive principle elaborated in *Politics* III, chapters 9-12, discussions that constitute, in its turn, as the philosopher recognizes, a recovering of the argument on the subject proposed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* V, 3. Such discussions had determined in effect that justice is a rule which prescribes that the allocation of public offices and civic honors in a political community must be done according to a certain proportion, that is, according to the observation of the different merits of the parties that constitute the city, which requires an analysis of the

<sup>32</sup> I follow here the interpretation proposed by B. Nagle in his article 'Alexander and Aristotle's *Pambasileus*' (2000, p. 117-132). According to this author, Aristotle in *Politics* III, in developing his defense of the absolute kingship, mentions two different kinds of kings: the one ideal (or theoretically constructed), the other historical. In the words of Nagle (p. 118): "In the discussion of kingship in *Politics* III, Aristotle describes *two* kinds of absolute kings, the one real and the other theoretical, the latter being part of his analysis of who should be sovereign in the state."

contributions that each of these parties can provide in respect of two crucial things, namely the maintenance of political life as a whole, on the one hand, and the achievement of the ultimate goal of the city, on the other hand. Justice thus understood consists then ultimately “in giving people what they deserve” (SANDERS, 2007, p. 263), that is, in assigning to each social group of the *pólis* its due in consonance with its worth and its political value. As Aristotle himself puts it: “Justice is relative to persons; and a just distribution is one in which the relative values of the things given correspond to those of the persons receiving.” (*Pol.* III, 9, 1280a16-18, Barker translation). Evidently, since the city is not a mere material or economic association, but a moral community which was founded to propitiate the good and perfect life for its members, virtue is the main value in view of which the city exists, so that those men who excel in this respect deserve much more power than the others (*Pol.* III, 9, 1280a31-1281a8; III, 13, 1283a23-26).<sup>33</sup>

Taking this argument further, Aristotle comes then to the analysis of the following case: let us suppose a man arose in the political community, standing out from the others for his unparalleled excellence (*diaphéron kat'aretês hyperbolén*). Well, it is evident that would be impossible to treat such an exceptional man as a mere part of the city (*méros póleos*) (*Pol.* III, 13, 1284a3-8). In fact, it would be a serious injustice against him to try to submit him to the equality rule that is applied to the ordinary citizens in normal political conditions, such is his supremacy in regard to virtue and political capacity (*ánison tousoûton kataretén óntes kai politikèn dýnamin*). Furthermore, because of his moral supremacy, this extraordinary individual can be probably considered as a kind of “god among men” (*hōsper gár theòn en anthrópōis eikòs eínai tôn toiûton*) and since legislation (*nomothesia*) applies only to men who are equal (*ísoi*) as regards birth [*tô(i) géno(i)*] and political capacity [*tê(i) dýnâmei*], it must be admitted that individuals of these kind are by themselves their own law (*autoí gár eisi nómoí*) (*Pol.* III, 13, 1284a8-14). It would be ridiculous, adds finally the philosopher, intend to legislate for those who stand out because of a higher *areté*, and the ones that achieve such an *areté* can perfectly say to those who wish to submit them to a legal or conventional standard what the lion in the fable narrated by Antisthenes told

<sup>33</sup> Robinson explains this crucial point in the following terms (2004, p. 28): “Justice is equals for equals and unequals for unequals. The question is: unequals in what respect? This depends on the purpose of the city. The purpose of the city is not possessions, nor alliance, nor commerce, but goodness and the good life. Hence what counts is inequality in political goodness.” On this subject, see also the notes by Saunders (1992, p. 209-210).

to the hares claiming full equality in the animals' assembly: "Where are your claws and sharp teeth?" (*Pol.* III, 13, 1284a14-17).

As one can easily see, this argument proposed by Aristotle does not represent an apology of tyranny, as some might probably think under the influence of a superficial reading, but it is rather a hard-hitting defense, inspired visibly by a Platonic theme,<sup>34</sup> of the theoretical possibility of the emerging of a godlike man who, by his incomparable excellence and political capacity, would constitute an extraordinary or unusual case, which as such could justify the establishment of an absolute kingship in the city. Now, according to Aristotle, in democracies the procedure of ostracism was precisely the political mechanism invented to deal with the problem of the rising of exceptional men, because democracies seeks the equality of the citizens above anything else (*diókein tèn isóteta málista pánton*).<sup>35</sup> In fact, in democracies the political expedient of ostracism is used as a form of excluding of the city that individuals who have become excessively superior to others (either because of their wealth, or because of their influence, or because of their political capacity) with a view to securing certain homogeneity among citizens and therewith to maintaining the balance of the political order. As Aristotle suggests, it is possible to conjecture that this practice is not an recent invention (the story of Heracles, who was removed of the ship Argos and abandoned by its crew – the Argonauts – because of his excessive weight, is a case in point) and although this is a method preferably implemented by democratic regimes in virtue of its egalitarian *éthos*, it is no less used in tyrannies and oligarchies as an efficient expedient to neutralize and to exile that individuals who have gained some kind of political ascendancy over his fellow citizens (*Pol.* III, 13, 1284a17-b21). Still exploring this subject, the philosopher arguments that the procedure of ostracism can be legitimately implemented also in some legitimate regimes as a way of stabilizing the city and preserving a salutary proportion (*symmetría*) among its parts by casting out those individuals who stand out from other citizens for some reason other than virtue or excellence (*Pol.* III, 13, 1284b3-17).

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, what Plato says in *Politicus* 292a *et seq.*, and in *Laws* IX, 875c-d.

<sup>35</sup> About the search for equality as the fundamental feature of the democracy, cf. Plato (*Rep.* VIII, 557a - 558c; 563b), and the following remarks of Romilly (1992, p. 113): "La démocratie athénienne, en un siècle, a fait progresser l'égalité – avec même quelque excès, selon certains esprits du temps; mais elle l'a fait progresser en facilitant la participation aux débats et en élargissant l'accès aux fonctions. Participer tous également aux décisions publiques, que l'on fût riche ou pauvre, était la grande revendication, presque la seule."

Nevertheless, Aristotle adds, if the practice of ostracism in the case of most regimes is a relatively justifiable method to deal with the problem of a citizen that for some reason other than virtue becomes politically outstanding, in the case of the best political regime (*epi tês aristês politeías*) and of the rising of a man who is really exceptional with regard to virtue the situation radically changes. In fact, in the best regime, i.e., in the regime that aims to excel all others concerning the virtue, it is impossible to remove or banish from the city a man who would be really superior to others not with regard to power, wealth or popularity, but precisely with regard to virtue (*diaphéron kat'aretén*). On the other hand, it is also out of question to subordinate this outstanding individual to the common or ordinary rule, because that would amount to intend to command Zeus himself. As a consequence, the only solution left, “which seems to be the natural one” (*hóper éoike pephykénai*), “is for everyone gladly to obey such a man, and for such men to be perpetual kings in the cities” (*hóste basiléas einai tous toioutous aidíous en taís pólesin*) (*Pol.* III, 13, 1284b22-34, Robinson translation).<sup>36</sup>

Aristotle will retake the same argument at the end of Book III and will restate in this context his defense of absolute kingship, making it clear, once again, that a royal rule not subject to legal control may be accepted in certain circumstances as a truly excellent system of government. Indeed, in chapter 17, the philosopher decides to return to the problem of legitimacy of kingship and, with this purpose in mind, begins by setting out the principle that the just and the advantageous are connected to specific political conditions, so that in a society composed by equal and similar men entrust one single individual with the sovereign power cannot be regarded neither as advantageous nor as just, constituting rather, in that case, a political alternative that should be avoided. However, he adds, it is possible to think of an exceptional situation in which the virtue of one man is excessively superior to that of all other members of the community, situation that as such would represent a rupture of the moral balance that prevails in an ordinary political context. In that case, when a family or a single citizen have a virtue so outstanding that transcends that of all other citizens gathered, it is just that such family or such citizen hold the

<sup>36</sup> As Robinson remarked, the conception presented in this section of *Politics*, concerning “the outstandingly good man, so good that there is no comparison between him and the rest”, was “a real and permanent belief of Aristotle’s”. Robinson connects opportunely this belief with the ideal of the magnanimous man (*megalopsykhós*) exposed by the philosopher in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “It is probably inconsistent with some other beliefs of his; but Aristotle did worship, or at least look up to with awed respect, some ideally highminded or ‘megalopsychic’ person who ‘demands great honor and deserves them’ (*Nic. Eth.* IV 3).” (ROBINSON, 2004, p. 48).

royal dignity and be entrusted with absolute powers. As a matter of fact, in Aristotle's view this solution accords not only with the principle of justice, but also with it is most appropriated. His fundamental idea is that a man of outstanding merit and virtue cannot be treated like other men, so that it is out of question to punish him by death or exile. As his extraordinary excellence puts him above all other individuals gathered, he must therefore dispose of the prerogative of the sovereign power for life and definitively (*Pol.* III, 16, 1288a15-29). Here we find the philosophic and theoretical justification of absolute kingship developed by Aristotle in *Politics*, which is supported by the conception of the virtue as the purpose of *pólis* and by the demand that in the best regime, when in the city a man comes who transcends all the others for his excellence, it is therefore perfectly just to entrust him with the unfettered rule over all political matters (NAGLE, 2000, p. 121-122).

However, as mentioned above, Aristotle brings another argument to justify absolute kingship in *Politics*, an argument founded not in the principle of virtue and in the hypothetical case of a man of supreme *areté*, but in criteria that have, so to speak, a sociological character, since they are based on the observation of the nature of the different types of societies and people. To understand this argument correctly, it is necessary to observe that in *Politics* III, chapter 14, the philosopher distinguishes five forms (*eide*) of kingship (*basileía*): the kingship of the Lacedemonian regime [*he gàr en tē Lakonikē politeia(i)*], which is according to law (*katà nómon*) and which constitutes a hereditary and permanent generalship (*strategía dià bíou*); the kingships found among barbarians (*basileiai tōn barbáron*), which are also according to law and traditional (*katà nómon kai patrikaí*), but which are characterized by the despotic power (*despotiké arkhē*); the kingship that existed among the ancient Greeks (*en toís arkhaioís Hélessin*), proper of the so called *aisymnetai* (*hoús kaloúsín aisymnétas*), which was an elective tyranny (*hairéte tyrannís*) and which differed from the barbaric “not in not being legal but only in not being traditional” [*diaphérousa de tēs barbarikēs ou tō(i) mē katà nómon allā tō(i) mē pátrios eínai mónon*]; the kingships of the heroic age (*hai katà toús heroikoús khrónous*), which was based on the subjects consent (*hekousiai*) and in which the kings “controlled the command in war and such sacrifices as were not sacerdotal” (*kýrioi d'èsan tēs te katà pólemon hegemonías kai tòn thysiôn, hósai mē hieratikaí*), besides of deciding the lawsuits (*kai pròs touitois tās dikas ékrinon*); and finally that form of kingship in which “one man controls everything just as each nation and each city controls its public affairs”; such a kind of monarchical government, adds the philosopher, is “parallel to

household management” (*tetagméne katà tèn oikonomikén*), “so this kingship is a household management of a city and of one or more nations” (*houítos he basileía póleos kaì éthnous henòs è pleiónon oikonomía*) (Pol. III, 14, 1284b35-1285b29, Robinson translation).

According to the analysis of Nagle, this last form of kingship, which is a sort of a *pambasileía*, distinguishes itself from the *pambasileía* of a man of extraordinary virtue described in chapter 13 because it is not a theoretical construction, inspired by platonic reasons, but a historical phenomenon. In the words of Nagle (2000, p. 123): “The absolute king of ch. 14 is simply a *de facto* ruler of *poleis* and *ethne*, a despot who rules according to his will, a shade only distinguished from a tyrant by the fact that he rules over willing subjects.” Moreover, remarks Nagel, in talking about this sort of *pambasileia*, Aristotle had certainly in mind a specific form of political structure, *viz.* the Macedonian kingship, and it is sure that the events related to the advance of this regime over the Greek world forced the philosopher to discuss the question of absolute kingship no more in pure theoretical terms, but taking into account some concrete historical phenomena. As Nagle puts it: “The debate over kingship was not merely about the hypothetical king of Plato or even the long tradition regarding tyranny in popular thought. He must surely have had to factor in the reality of Macedonian overlordship and its implications for Greece and political theory.” (NAGLE, 2000, p. 128). This means that in chapter 14 Aristotle provides us therefore a succinct description of five forms of empirical *basileiai*: two that belong to the past, namely the *basileia* of the *aisymenetai* and that of the heroic age, and three that actually exist, namely the *basileía* of Spartans, that of the Barbarian people, and that of an absolute king exercising unfettered power over a city (*polis*), over a tribe, or over a collection of tribes, whose most prominent example was the Macedonian regime.

Well, according to Aristotle, it is perfectly possible that a population presents some political and moral characteristics that justify the establishment of a royal government in certain situations. In this sense, the philosopher remarks that although no community is naturally (*katà phýsin*) destined to a tyrannical government (*tyrannikón*) there are some people who are by nature (*phýsei*) inclined to a royal government (*basilikón*), while others are predisposed to a despotic government (*despotikón*), and others, finally, to a political government (*politikón*), so that all these forms of rule can be considered advantageous (*symphéron*) and right (*dikaion*) depending on the nature of the people to

which they apply (*Pol.* III, 1287b36-41). Concerning the people predisposed to a political government, Aristotle explains that they are those who constitute communities formed by similar (*homoiói*) and equal (*isoí*) citizens, among which it is neither advantageous (*symphéron*) nor right (*dikaion*) that one man rules as sovereign over all things (*oúte symphéron estín oúte díkaion héná kýrion éinai pánton*) (*Pol.* III, 1288a1-5). However, in communities where such equality does not exist or where the equality is no more a political fact, kingship and even despotic government appear as legitimate forms of rule. That is the case, according to Aristotle, of the barbarians, whose servile nature is perfectly fit to despotism, (*Pol.* III, 1285a19-22) and of that people capable of engendering “some particular stock, or family, pre-eminent in its capacity for political leadership”, whose *éthos* is thus prone to royal government (*Pol.* III, 1288a8-9). As Nagle remarks, Aristotle thinks that would be also the case for some Greek *poleis* of the time, whose political disorder would have undermined its republican *ethos*, making them accordingly suitable to the rule of a Macedonian king, who should reign over a Greek population not as a Barbarian despot over his servile subjects, but in a political way, i.e., aiming at the interest of the ruled (NAGLE, 2000, p. 129-132). In short, the fundamental lesson Aristotle intends to propose here to his readers is that is not reasonable to intend to establish political equality everywhere, because different populations and societies require different types of political arrangements, and it is this sociological evidence that makes kingship the best regime in some political circumstances (ROBINSON, 2004, p. 64-65).<sup>37</sup>

As one can see by the elements developed above, Aristotle presents clear arguments in favor of the kingship in his *Politics*, intending to explain under what circumstances it is possible to consider this regime as a legitimate form of government and even, in some cases, as the best political solution with regard to the question concerning who should govern a city. I believe this paper has succeeded in showing that these arguments in favor of the royal

<sup>37</sup> The close observation of the main discursive developments contained in this Aristotelian argument shows us how it is an exegetical error to reduce the defense of the kingship that appears in it to a purely ideological panegyric of Macedonian monarchy, as Kelsen does (1937, p.20; 31-32; 35-37; 62-63). It is true, of course, as we have seen, that Aristotle had in mind in some moments of his discourse on kingship the Macedonian monarchy, but this does not mean in any way that the philosopher was simply elaborating a discourse whose primary and most fundamental intent would be simply justify the particular political interests of Macedonian kings, a discourse which as such would function thus merely as a pro-Macedonia propaganda in the face of Greek public opinion. The Aristotelian vindication of the kingship, being genuinely philosophical, is based, as has been shown, on the observation of things and on consistent arguments, not on an ideological compromise with a specific historical regime.

rule or kingship do not compromise the principles of Aristotelian political philosophy, but constitute rather a theoretical element that can be perfectly integrated into the reflection on the forms of government proposed by the philosopher in *Politics* III, reflection whose complex and many-sided character aims precisely to investigate the different possibilities of achievement of the “political good.”

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**RESUMO:** A proposta principal do presente artigo é compreender o caráter complexo e multifacetado da teoria dos regimes elaborada por Aristóteles, no livro III da *Política*, e, por meio disso, identificar os principais elementos filosóficos e conceituais que tornam possível ao filósofo, nesse momento da obra, efetuar uma vigorosa defesa da tese segundo a qual a realeza pode ser considerada, em determinadas circunstâncias políticas, como a melhor forma de governo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Aristóteles. Cidade. Realeza. Regime.

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