**ARISTOTLE**  
*A Definition of Justice* (pp. 111–123)

**Paragraph 1:** The various concepts of justice that exist are imperfect and incomplete because men base them on personal circumstances, without regard for absolute justice. Men also overemphasize the equality or inequality of material possessions rather than of people. But the state exists not merely to promote material life but to promote a good life. Thus, virtue and true community must be the concern of the state, or law becomes a mere convention without the power to make citizens good and just.

**2–3:** A state is not merely a group allied for the purpose of mutual protection and exchange. Rather, a state is a community of families and villages bound by friendship for the sake of promoting a happy, honorable life. Political society exists, then, not for mere companionship but to promote noble actions. And those who contribute most to such a society most deserve its benefits.

**4:** Those who favor one type of government over another have only a partial concept of justice.

**5–6:** People disagree about what ought to be the supreme power in the state: the masses; the few with wealth; the few with virtue; the one most virtuous man; or a tyrant. Each of these options may lead to injustice. Rule by the masses, the wealthy, or a tyrant can cause unjust distribution of property. Rule by the virtuous unjustly excludes everyone else from power.

**7:** The principle that the masses ought to have supreme power (democracy) contains an element of truth. For the masses, despite individual limitations, may collectively exercise good judgment. Such persons, however, should not be allowed to hold high offices; rather, they should participate in state affairs only as a group—in electing magistrates and in calling them to account. On the other hand, there are problems in allowing the masses to have such power. In the various professions and arts, we trust those who are well informed. Should we not leave the power of election to those who know the most about political affairs? Still, collective judgment of the many may be as good as or better than the decision of those with special knowledge.

**8:** Another objection to democratic government is that it gives many inferior persons more authority than it does the few people who are good. But in those democracies existing today, power resides not in any individual member of a given political body, but in the political body as a whole. For this reason, the many may claim to have greater authority than the few.

**9:** The preceding discussion suggests that whenever possible, good laws, not the authority of a person or group, should be the supreme power in the state. Laws vary from one government to another, but no form of government can be true unless its laws are just.

**10:** The highest aim of politics is justice, or the common interest. Men agree that justice is a sort of equality and that equality ought to have equality. But upon what should equality or inequality be based? Some say that positions of political authority should be awarded unequally to those who possess the qualities necessary for the composition of a state—qualities such as nobility, freedom, and wealth. For a state cannot be composed entirely of poor men or slaves. But if wealth and freedom are necessary elements for the state to exist, justice and valor are equally important.
ARISTOTLE (384–322 B.C.) is the great inheritor of Plato’s influence in Greek philosophical thought. A student at the Academy of Plato in Athens from age seventeen to thirty-seven, he was by all accounts Plato’s most brilliant pupil. He did not agree with Plato on all issues, however, and seems to have broken with his master’s thinking around the time of Plato’s death (347 B.C.). For example, in Aristotle’s comments on justice, drawn from his Politics, he treats matters that Plato addressed as well. In the Republic, Plato explored many issues of justice in the ideal state; Aristotle, however, is unconcerned with ideal states and examines justice only in oligarchies and democracies, the states with which Athens was familiar.

When Aristotle himself became a teacher in the Academy his most distinguished student was Alexander the Great, the youthful ruler who spread Greek values and laws to the rest of the known world. There has been much speculation regarding what Aristotle taught Alexander about justice; the thoroughness of the Politics implies that it may have been a great deal. A surviving fragment of a letter from Aristotle to Alexander suggests that he advised Alexander to become the leader of the Greeks and the master of the so-called barbarians of other cultures.

Aristotle discusses justice entirely in relation to the state. In his time, the state was a city-state, such as Athens with its surrounding areas. For him, the well-ordered state was the greatest of human inventions, of such noble value that other ideals must take second place to it. He did not put divinity or godliness first. A practical man, Aristotle was concerned with the life that human beings live on earth.

In the passage that follows, which comes from Book III, Chapter 11 of the Politics, a few issues concerning Greek society are clarified. The most startling information for the modern
reader may be the fact that Aristotle accepted the practice of slavery as the norm. During this era wars were frequent, and the losers were ordinarily killed or placed into slavery. Thus, for powerful and victorious states such as Athens, slaves were abundant. However, the classical Greek institution of slavery was unlike the modern institution in the West during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, Greek slaves had some rights and privileges and were not debased as a matter of course.

In this passage Aristotle discusses the rights of the freeborn but not those of slaves, who have, he tells us, no choices in how they are to live. Indeed, Aristotle differed from many of his contemporaries in believing that slaves deserved to be slaves in the same way that prisoners deserved prison. (This view is not acceptable to us today, but it was a widely held belief for thousands of years, and not only in the West. Such a stance was not seriously challenged until the modern period beginning in the seventeenth century.) Justice, therefore, in Aristotle’s view, was a question that centered on the relationship of the state to the noble and freeborn, and almost certainly only to the men among them.

At the beginning of the passage Aristotle also makes a distinction concerning how justice functions in two forms of government: oligarchy and democracy. An oligarchy is a government by the few, such as a clique of high-born-military men or closely related men. In an oligarchy, justice is based on inequality: the small elite group is superior and all others are inferior. A democracy is a government by the many: the wealthy, the less wealthy, and the poor. For those who champion democracy, everyone is equal; the wealthy have the same vote as lesser property holders. During Aristotle’s time, however, women and slaves had no voice in either form of government. Only free men were represented. In an oligarchy, Aristotle argues, justice implies inequality only between those people who are unequal. In other words, the oligarchs cannot declare themselves superior by arbitrary decree. If other people are superior to them, they must be recognized as such.

On the other hand, Aristotle tells us that democrats who say justice lies in equality must also recognize that some people are simply not equal to others. In examining the nature of equality, he points out that most people are “bad judges in their own affairs” (para. 1) because they are primarily concerned with themselves and cannot clearly see themselves in relation to others. Justice exists between equals, he says, but individuals talk holistically about justice when they are actually referring only to a part of it. Aristotle discusses matters of equality of wealth, equality of physiology
and beauty, equality of virtue, and equality of talent, demonstrating that there are far too many kinds of equality for anyone to cite only one as the absolute. Consequently, politicians must concern themselves with the kinds of equality that relate to the responsibilities of being part of the state.

In discussing issues of justice, Aristotle also addresses the nature of the state. In an earlier portion of this discussion, Aristotle expresses a principle that would later be stated by Rousseau: the state begins with the family, proceeds to the village and then to the surrounding community, and ends with the city-state. This natural progression implies a very large size for a city-state in which inter-marriage within the state is a defining feature. Trade and other interactions with neighboring states follow as a matter of course.

Aristotle views these exchanges as based on friendship: “for the will to live together is friendship. The end of the state is the good life, and these are the means towards it” (para. 2).

Aristotle always sought the end consequence of every art he wrote about: “In all sciences and arts the end is a good, and the greatest good and in the highest degree a good in the most authoritative of all [arts]—this is the political science of which the good is justice, in other words, the common interest” (para. 10). This comment implies that the interest of the whole—the commonwealth that comprises the state—is superior to the interest of the individual. Thus, justice is key to the happiness of the community. He says at the end of the passage, “if wealth and freedom are necessary elements, justice and valour are equally so; for without the former qualities a state cannot exist at all, without the latter not well” (para. 10).

Aristotle’s Rhetoric

Aristotle’s Rhetoric is probably the most influential treatise on rhetoric worldwide. Yet this passage from Politics, like many of his scholarly discussions, does not use especially rousing or stirring rhetoric. The reason may lie in the fact that this work was meant as a teaching treatise, a document for students of political science. Indeed, the passage is structured as an argument that masquerades as an examination of the facts. Aristotle argues for a state that is democratic in nature, in which the wealthy do not necessarily have the largest say and in which the poor are not encouraged to pillage the rich in the name of equality. Moreover, in this state, the poor have a voice in government, although not at the highest levels. Women and
slaves, being unequal, have no voice in government, yet their concerns are expected to be considered in a well-ordered state.

A number of interesting hypothetical questions arise in the course of the discussion. For example, Aristotle imagines a government in which those "who are not rich and have no personal merit" (para. 7) are permitted to share the greatest offices of the state. He sees them as eventually giving in to incompetence and crime. Yet he also believes it is essential to give them some role in government, and he uses the analogy of mixing "impure food" with "pure" to produce an "entire mass more wholesome than a small quantity of the pure would be" (para. 7). This argument is consistent with Aristotle's earlier discussion of who should rule. Should the best person rule? The wealthiest? The most valorous? He discards all these possibilities one by one in favor of democracy, that is, rule by the many. His argument centers on an astonishingly modern hypothesis: that the decisions of the many are less likely to be extreme and more likely to be right than the decisions of the few.

Aristotle is famously methodical in his approach to any question, breaking it down into parts, categorizing the parts, and addressing each in turn. He is careful not to lose the reader in the details, and he stops often to recapitulate the argument. He uses carefully chosen analogies to help his argument along. In the last paragraph, for example, he talks about flute players as analogies for citizens at large. If there are many good flute players and only a few excellent flutes, it is wise to give the best flutes to the best players, not to the wealthiest, the noblest, the most virtuous, or the most valorous. This analogy is an example of justice in relation to inequality. Nevertheless the point is that excellence (in this case, musical excellence) is recognized, and in being recognized justice is done. This forceful and sensible example works in the common interest. Therefore, in a community, proper recognition of equalities and inequalities among people will result in justice. And without justice no state can exist well.

**PREREADING QUESTIONS:**
**WHAT TO READ FOR**

The following prereading questions may help you anticipate key issues in the discussion on Aristotle's "A Definition of Justice." Keeping them in mind during your first reading of the selection should help focus your reactions.
How does Aristotle define the state?

Establish Aristotle's attitude toward the concept of equality and inequality.

A Definition of Justice

Chapter 9

Let us begin by considering the common definitions of oligarchy and democracy, and what is justice oligarchical and democratical. For all men cling to justice of some kind, but their conceptions are imperfect and they do not express the whole idea. For example, justice is thought by them to be, and is, equality, not, however, for all, but only for equals. And inequality is thought to be, and is, justice; neither is this for all, but only for unequals. When the persons are omitted, then men judge erroneously. The reason is that they are passing judgement on themselves, and most people are bad judges in their own case. And whereas justice implies a relation to persons as well as to things, and a just distribution, as I have already said in the Ethics, implies the same ratio between the persons and between the things, they agree about the equality of the things, but dispute about the equality of the persons, chiefly for the reason which I have just given — because they are bad judges in their own affairs; and secondly, because both the parties to the argument are speaking of a limited and partial justice, but imagine themselves to be speaking of absolute justice. For the one party, if they are unequal in one respect, for example wealth, consider themselves to be unequal in all, and the other party, if they are equal in one respect, for example free birth, consider themselves to be equal in all. But they leave out the capital point. For if men met and associated out of regard to wealth only, their share in the state would be proportioned to their property, and the oligarchical doctrine would then seem to carry the day. It would not be just that he who paid one mina should have the same share of a hundred minae, whether of the principal or of the profits, as he who paid the remaining ninety-nine. But a state exists for the sake of a good life, and not for the sake of life only: if life only were the object, slaves and brute animals might form a state, but they cannot, for they have no share in happiness or in a life of free choice. Nor does a state exist for the sake of alliance and security from

1 oligarchy and democracy Government by the few and government by the many, respectively.