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Ordinary Badness in Aristotelian Ethics: A Virtually Forgotten Question

Abstract: In this paper, we aim to show the way in which a kind of moral badness, what we call *ordinary badness*, could be understood from Aristotelian ethical writings. First, we document the recognition of this type of badness in the Aristotelian source, which is seen in his presentation of “hoi polloi” (the Many). In particular, it is shown that “hoi polloi” are “phauloi”, one of the (specific) predicates that Aristotle uses to refer to moral badness. Secondly, we highlight the methodological function of “hoi polloi” in the description of incontinence and self-indulgence, and we show how the Many could be considered as a new class within the question of moral effort. Finally, and related to the result of the previous analysis, we document what could be an *aporia* in the Aristotelian description of the population of the polis, which brings us to join Ian Morris in his global understanding of Aristotelian political philosophy.

Keywords: Aristotle, moral badness, vice, incontinence, right rule, moral effort, indolence, hoi polloi

Introduction

The global topic of moral badness regarding Aristotle has not historically generated a profound interest in scholars, as opposed to the vast number of

studies on the parallel idea of moral good. Some related notions (e.g., that of incontinence) have indeed motivated many writings, but one can see there is a remarkable asymmetry between the attention given to the Aristotelian treatment of moral good, with the notion of virtue as the foremost idea, and the attention received by moral badness.

That is the first asymmetry. Another is specifically found within the (small) body of studies dedicated to the Aristotelian idea of moral badness, where one can detect a lack of attention to the phenomenon of “ordinary” badness, which in Aristotle’s view is neither extreme nor drastic. Recent evidence of this second asymmetry can be found in the volume *Evil in Aristotle*, edited by Professor Pavel Kontos in 2018, which has a part dedicated to “[k]akon in Aristotle’s Practical Philosophy” with five valuable papers on the issue. In spite of their undeniable usefulness, none of the articles properly addresses our subject, as three of them are about uncommon (and extreme) forms of bad behaviour (“Radical Evil in Aristotle’s Ethics and Politics” from the Editor Pavlos Kontos, “Aristotelian Demons” by Howard J. Curzer, and “Aristotle on Psychopathology” by Giles Pearson), a fourth is not about bad people but evil facts surrounding the virtuous (“Aristotle on Enduring Evils While Staying Happy” by Marta Jiménez), and the last one is about the moral dimension of a particular set of texts, the Constitutions (“The Political *Kakon*: The Lowest Form of Constitutions” by Richard Kraut). Thus, the question of how to deal with (and understand) ordinary badness from an Aristotelian point of view remains unanswered. Here, we have tried to answer it and subsequently contribute to correct the paradox concerning the Stagirite that the most common form of moral badness is usually the less studied, and vice versa.

It could be said, certainly, that Aristotle himself did not expend much theoretical efforts on this quality of ordinary badness, however, from a sociological point of view, we could at least ascribe *prima facie* the quality to “hoi polloi”, those who give sustenance to the city as most of the population and, in addition, can neither be fully virtuous nor particularly vicious (if otherwise the city itself would have difficulties in attaining its basic aims, as contemplative souls and extremely wicked people are not “productive”). Unfortunately, Aristotle’s ethical writings also lack a systematic description of the moral profile of those “polloi”, but thankfully there is enough information in the same writings to

produce a comprehensive view of this segment of population from an ethical standpoint, and in consequence show the essentials of ordinary badness.

Lastly, our approach also tries to fill a little blank in the exegesis of Aristotelian Ethics because given that Aristotle believed pure virtue and pure vice were rare, and that at the same time he was in any case convinced that “hoi polloi” were not good nor remarkably bad, the following ultimate question arises: What defines the intrinsic but manageable badness of the average person? From our analysis, the key to the answer is in the case of moral effort.

“Hoi polloi” as “(hoi) phauloi”

More than fifty years ago, the reputed scholar Franz Dirlmeier made the following suggestion, which would have been based on bibliographical evidence: “Was Platon und Ar. [sic] im Einzelfall unter den Vielen verstehen, müsste untersucht werden”.¹ Since then, however, very few papers on Aristotle have paid fruitful attention to this kind of enigmatic advice, and only one accepted the challenge in a systematic way concerning Aristotelian Ethics: “The Moral Status of ‘the Many’ in Aristotle”, by Jan E. Garrett.²

Garrett distinguished three Aristotelian uses of “hoi polloi”, i.e., the merely quantitative, the statistical, and the ethical and sociological. This last one “roughly denotes the majority of human beings (within a given community or citizen-body) that fall short of perfection in certain ways”.³ However, this meaning could also be provided by the statistical use as according to Garrett: “[i]n some of these statistical uses, *hoi polloi* sometimes provides an evaluative norm, but one which is not an Aristotelian ideal as virtue is, since it suggests

¹ Aristoteles, *Nikomachische Ethik*, transl. Franz Dirlmeier (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1967), 271. The sentence is written referring to the first appearance of “hoi polloi” in the text.

² Jan E. Garrett, “The Moral Status of ‘the Many’ in Aristotle”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31 (1993): 171–189. After Garrett, Daniela Cammack (“Aristotle on the Virtue of the Multitude”, *Political Theory* 41 (2013): 175–202), Kevin M. Cherry (“Aristotle’s ‘Certain Kind of Multitude’”, *Political Theory* 43 (2014): 185–207), and Cathan Woods (“Aristotle’s Many Multitudes and Their Powers”, *Journal of Ancient Philosophy* 11 (2017): 110–143), have certainly dealt with the notion from a practical point of view, but in an instrumental way concerning aims mainly related to Political Philosophy, which is not the case of Garrett’s.

³ Garrett, “The Moral Status of ‘the Many’ in Aristotle”: 173.

but a “C” average, a mediocre achievement rather than “A” [sic].⁴ Subsequently, the following question emerges: what concept from Aristotelian moral terminology grasps this “mediocre achievement”, which indeed falls short of perfection but at the same time does not imply a deep moral failure? If we analyse the appearances of “hoi polloi” in the most relevant texts of Aristotelian Ethics, the answer would be: “hoi polloi” are “(hoi) phauloi”.⁵

To show this relationship, we will start from the third significant occurrence of “hoi polloi” in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE), where in connection with the ongoing (and decisive) explanation of the life of pleasure, Aristotle establishes the contraposition of “hoi polloi” and “hoi philokaloi” and says that in the former, pleasurable things are conflictive as the things considered pleasurable are not *naturally* pleasurable, while to the latter just naturally pleasurable things are indeed pleasurable.⁶ This contraposition runs in parallel to that in which Aristotle, in his exposition of the political friendship or “homonoia”, opposes “hoi phauloi” to “hoi epieikei” and says that “hoi phauloi” barely reach “homonoia” nor become friends,⁷ and we understand these two Aristotelian *loci* in the light of the following key passage in *Eudemian Ethics* (EE): “For the good is simple, whereas the bad [to kakon] is multiform; and also the good man is always alike and does not change in character, whereas the wicked [phaulos] and the foolish are quite different in the evening from what they were in the morning. Hence if wicked men [hoi phauloi] do not hit it off together, they are not friends with one another but they separate; yet an insecure friendship is not friendship at all”.⁸

Aristotle also employs this conceptual framework when speaking about egoism and love for oneself, and there “hoi polloi” are presented as fighting each other from their greed of money, honours and bodily pleasures as if these things

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ To confirm the specificity of the concept of *phaulos* regarding other concepts related to moral badness as *mochteros* or *akrates*, our previous work on this issue can be consulted: Carles José i Mestre, “The Aristotelian Moral Typology: A Contribution Regarding the Bad Side”, *Philosophical News* 14 (2017): 143–157.

⁶ Cf. I, 9, 1099a7–14. Greek words in quoting or referring to EN passages are always from the Catalan-Greek Edition from Fundació Bernat Metge (cf. Bibliography).

⁷ Cf. NE, IX, 6, 1167b10.

⁸ 1239b11–16. English version from <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>, as in the other cases related to EE. Greek words from the corresponding Greek version of the text featured in Aristóteles, *Ética eudemia*, transl. A. Gómez Robledo (México: UNAM, 1994).

were the best things, since they have given themselves to the passions and settled into the irrational part of the soul.⁹ Shortly before, the same “hoi polloi” have been explicitly related to the notion of *phaulos*,¹⁰ but the place in which the relationship stands for itself has come much earlier, with the crucial presentation of form and content of will.¹¹ According to Aristotle, the two relevant profiles concerning this matter are that of “spoudaios” and that of “phaulos”, the first one featuring will as what is truly good and the second one anything (“to tuchon”) which appears to him as good (in this way recalling the already mentioned contraposition between “hoi polloi” and “hoi philokaloi”); some lines later, in 1113a32, the contraposition is now explicitly made between the “spoudaios” and “hoi polloi”, and it is said that the latter are literally *tricked* (as a result of an “apate”) about the proper matter of will as they systematically refuse pain as a necessary evil, and always prefer pleasure as a presumable source of good. This picture of “hoi polloi” (intrinsically bound to the concept of “phaulos”) is reinforced in 1124b5, in this case in contraposition to the magnanimous person.¹²

“Hoi polloi” as an (unexpected) evaluative norm

Now, as the relationship between “hoi polloi” and the idea of “phaulos” has been justified, the next step is to show how “The Many” are considered by Aristotle as an evaluative norm (in Garrett’s terms) that works as an ethical criterion. In order to do so, we should pay attention to the following passages from NE (all of these and subsequent English quotations of the text are from Ross translation as featured in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. 1985. ed. J. Barnes. Princeton University Press):

⁹ Cf. NE, 1168b15–21.

¹⁰ Cf. NE, 1166b6–12.

¹¹ Cf. NE, III, 6, 1113a25–32.

¹² Some other scholars have previously pointed out the relationship between “polloi” and “phauloi” in Aristotle: cf. Grant Alexander, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1884), vol. 1, 125; Gerald F. Else, *Aristotle’s Poetics: The Argument* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957), 78, and Ingemar Düring, *Aristoteles: Darstellung und Interpretation seines Denkens* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1966), 446 and 458. Garrett also does, but somewhat erratically (cf. “The Moral Status of ‘the Many’ in Aristotle”: 189).

[...] with regard to the pleasures peculiar to individuals many people go wrong and in many ways. For while the people who are 'fond of so and so' are so called because they delight either in the wrong things, or more than most people do, or in the wrong way, the self-indulgent exceed in all three ways; they both delight in some things that they ought not to delight in (since they are hateful), and if one ought to delight in some of the things they delight in, they do so more than one ought and than most men do. [A: Book III, Chapter 11, 118b21–27]

Evidently, since 'fond of such and such an object' has more than one meaning, we do not assign the term 'ambition' or 'love of honour' always to the same thing, but when we praise the quality we think of the man who loves honour more than most people, and when we blame it we think of him who loves it more than is right. The mean being without a name, the extremes seem to dispute for its place as though that were vacant by default. [B: Book IV, Chapter 4, 1125b14–16]

With regard to the pleasures and pains and appetites and aversions arising through touch and taste, to which both self-indulgence and temperance were formerly narrowed down, it is possible to be in such a state as to be defeated even by those of them which most people master, or to master even those by which most people are defeated; among these possibilities, those relating to pleasures are incontinence and continence, those relating to pains softness and endurance. The state of most people is intermediate, even if they lean more towards the worse states. [C: Book VII, 7, 1150a9–15]

Now the man who is defective in respect of resistance to the things which most men both resist and resist successfully is soft and effeminate; for effeminacy too is a kind of softness [...]. For if a man is defeated by violent and excessive pleasures or pains, there is nothing wonderful in that; indeed we are ready to pardon him if he has resisted [...]. But it is surprising if a man is defeated by and cannot resist pleasures or pains which most men can hold out against, when this is not due to heredity or disease, like the softness that is hereditary with the kings of the Scythians, or that which distinguishes the female sex from the male. [D: Book VII, 7, 1150b1–15]

[...] those who become temporarily beside themselves are better than those who have the rational principle but do not abide by it, since the latter are defeated by a weaker passion, and do not act without previous deliberation like the others); for

the incontinent man is like the people who get drunk quickly and on little wine, i.e. on less than most people. [E: Book VII, 8, 1151a1–6]

Now incontinence and continence are concerned with that which is in excess of the state characteristic of most men; for the continent man abides by his resolutions more and the incontinent man less than most men can. [F: Book VII, 10, 1152a25–27]

(A) is presenting the following triad: the self-indulgent agents (*akolastoi*), the so-called “*filotoiuton*”, and “*hoi polloi*”, the first ones doing wrong *absolutely*, the third ones *partially* and the second ones more than “*hoi polloi*” but without achieving the extreme bias of self-indulgency. Thus, the Many are taken here as a reference when considering a phenomenon of moral badness, becoming the opposite figure to “*akolastoi*” regarding excess. In (B), the Many are still an ethical reference, but as agents doing wrong by default (“we praise the quality we think of the man who loves honour more than most people”), and in the sequence (C) – (D) – (E) – (F) they maintain their “guiding” role, but now it concerns the issue of incontinence. It seems clear then that “*hoi polloi*” had a relevant place in Aristotelian comprehension of moral life, but the challenge is to discover a consistency in the totality of their different occurrences in Aristotelian Ethics, particularly regarding the issue of badness.

In order to do so, we could begin by comparing the “statistical” presentation of incontinence that we find in sequence (C) – (D) – (E) – (F), with some passages of the “practical” presentation of this phenomenon in relationship with “*akolasia*”, which can be found in chapter 8 of Book VII of NE:

[...] incontinent man is likely to repent [...] for incontinence is contrary to choice while vice is in accordance with choice [...]. Now, since the incontinent man is apt to pursue, not on conviction, bodily pleasures that are excessive and contrary to the right rule, while the self-indulgent man is convinced because he is the sort of man to pursue them, it is on the contrary the former that is easily persuaded to change his mind, while the latter is not. [...] there is a sort of man who is carried away as a result of passion and contrary to the right rule – a man whom passion masters so that he does not act according to the right rule, but does not master to the extent of making him ready to believe that he ought to pursue such pleasures without reserve; this is the incontinent man, who is better

than the self-indulgent man, and not bad without qualification; for the best thing in him, the first principle, is preserved. [G: Book VII, 8, 1150b30–1151a25]

Next, we have to compare both presentations, the statistical and the practical, with a third we could call “scientific” which is featured in chapter 3 of the same Book and from which we need to retain the following passage:

[...] a man behaves incontinently under the influence (in a sense) of a rule and an opinion, and of one not contrary in itself, but only incidentally – for the appetite is contrary, not the opinion – to the right rule. [H: Book VII, 3, 1147b1–4]

Given all these passages, we can see that incontinence is presented as a minority behaviour (statistical approach) which consists of a *provisional* suspension of good judgement about the due way of conduct regarding appetites (scientific approach), a suspension caused by a moment of *almost* overpowering passion, which in turn favours the subsequent repentance (practical approach). At the same time, and according to (C), continence is a statistical minority as well, while scientifically it can be presented as a particularly effective determination regarding the right resolutions which causes the right execution of the corresponding right acts, *in spite of a particularly strong passion against*. And between one and the other we find the conduct of “hoi polloi”; a conduct useful for presenting continence from a sociological point of view but still demanding some clarification from scientific and practical standpoints.

How do “hoi polloi” actually act?

According to Aristotle, the Many tend to the worse states (“C” passage), and different applications of this idea can be found across the texts, for instance at 1121b15, where it is said that “most men are fonder of getting money than of giving”. From a more general point of view, however, how should we understand this “tendency to the worse states”? We could go back to the practical and scientific presentations of incontinence, but then new questions appear, all of them entirely pertinent: What is the relationship of “hoi polloi” with the “right rule” (“G” and “H” passages)? Are they just *partially* suspending some

kind of good judgement about appetites and, in consequence, not acting entirely badly? Are they showing any kind of repentance? In order to answer this ensuing battery of questions we should recall the following passage in the final part of EN (the cursive is ours):

Now if arguments were in themselves enough to make men good, they would justly, as Theognis says, have won very great rewards, and such rewards should have been provided; but as things are, while they seem to have power to encourage and stimulate the generous-minded among our youth, and to make a character which is gently born, and a true lover of what is noble, ready to be possessed by virtue, *they are not able to encourage the many to nobility and goodness*. For these do not by nature obey the sense of shame, but only fear, and do not abstain from bad acts because of their baseness but through fear of punishment; living by passion they pursue their own pleasures and the means to them, and the opposite pains, and have not even a conception [oude egnoian] of what is noble and truly pleasant, since they have never tasted it. What argument would remodel such people? It is hard, if not impossible, to remove by argument the traits that have long since been incorporated in the character; and perhaps we must be content if, when all the influences by which we are thought to become good are present, we get some tincture of virtue.¹³

If we analyse the literacy of the argument, we should concede that Aristotle is not denying that the Many can reach some productive understandings about good life, nor is he attributing them any kind of natural incapacity for enjoying that life; he is strictly pointing out a correlation between ways of living and moral aspirations. Of course, the way of living is *moved* by one's own nature (the Many, for instance, "do not by nature obey the sense of shame"), but the possibility we are considering would not be *against* nature (one of the axioms of Aristotelian practical philosophy), as the following passage of EE shows:

For if living finely depends on things that come by fortune or by nature, it would be beyond the hopes of many men, for then its attainment is not to be secured by effort, and does not rest with men themselves and is not a matter of their own conduct; but if it consists in oneself and one's own actions having a particular

¹³ X, 9, 1179b10–15.

quality, the good would be more common and more divine – more common because it would be possible for more people to share it, and more divine because happiness would then be in store for those who made themselves and their actions of a particular quality.¹⁴

Therefore, despite their moral imperfections, the Many are neither technically excluded from moral good nor are they on the edge of deep moral failure. Furthermore, their behaviour is considered as an evaluative norm regarding different moral phenomena, and as Aristotle sees the Many in a homogeneous way, we must concede that the moral life they live is the moral life of most human beings; at least concerning the ethical reflection of the Stagirite. And this is further substantiated by the fact that continent and incontinent agents, as with self-indulgent and temperate ones, are all rare and, in a manner of speaking, exceptional (even all put together, they would represent a minority of moral life).¹⁵

¹⁴ 1215a12–19. An alternative view (although not strictly contrary) to our conjugation of the different sides of “hoi polloi” can be found in Garrett, “The Moral Status of ‘the Many’ in Aristotle”: 182: “[...] continence and incontinence fall on opposite sides of the average with respect to ‘abiding’ and ‘not abiding’, not with respect to the correctness and incorrectness of the moral beliefs against which appetite rebels. Most *fauloi* [i.e., ‘hoi polloi’] are intermediate between those who entirely ‘abide’ and those who always fail to ‘abide’, though perhaps they lean towards ‘the worse’ (1150^a15–16): which is to say, they give into what *they* regard as temptation more than they overcome it”. In this case, however, the *matter* of acts would not be relevant, and the feature of “C” and “D” passages does not endorse this reading. More specifically on “C” passage vid. also Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, vol. 2, 210–220, where he’s interpreting Aristotle in a similar way to Garrett’s: “[continent and incontinent are fixed] relatively to what is, as implying more or less continence than people in general have. And yet there is evidently some reference beside to the standard of what ought to be, else it could not be said that people in general verge rather to the worse side. [...] To represent the majority of mankind as possessing a mediocre moral character, neither eminently good nor bad, but inclining to weakness, was in accordance with the Greek point of view”. We think our reading is more in accordance with Aristotelian literacy. And yet another alternative or supplementary reading on these issues is Burnet’s interpretation of “A” passage in *The Ethics of Aristotle* (London: Methuen & Co., 1900), 158: “[w]hat *hoi polloi* do would be the average or *arithmetike mesotes*, not the *mesotes pros hemas*”; this suggestive reading, however, is followed by quite an odd affirmation: “[b]ut any wide divergence from the average raises the presumption of excess or defect”, as it seems there is no room for justifying the adversative formula.

¹⁵ We are not counting agents exemplifying bestiality or “theriodes”, neither agents exemplifying the opposite vice to self-indulgence, as both possibilities would be extremely rare for

Thus, having got to this point, we can distinguish up to five kinds of *specific* general behaviour regarding “necessary” pleasures and the influence of passion in the way these pleasures are reached: 1) the temperate agent, who assumes and brings to practice the basic precepts of the right rule (“orthos logos”) without having any conflict between intelligence and desire, 2) the continent agent, who assumes and brings to practice the basic precepts of the right rule but has to fight against contrary strong desires, 3) the typical member of the Many, who is not keen on following the basic precepts of the right rule (which nevertheless may appear clearly enough to him/her¹⁶) but who is able to follow these precepts via coercion, 4) the incontinent agent, who fails systematically in accomplishing the basic precepts of the right rule because, although he/she entirely assumes them, he/she is not able to override the strong passion which pushes him/her against those precepts (and is then typically repentant), and 5) The self-indulgent agent, who does not undertake the basic precepts of the right rule because he/she does not accept them and acts in consequence.¹⁷

Aristotle; in this sense, vid. v.g. EN, III, 11, 1119a5–6 (Ross translation): “People who fall short with regard to pleasures and delight in them less than they should are hardly found; for such insensibility is not human”. Also, it almost goes without saying that we are strictly referring to *agents* and not to *acts*, as sometimes a member of the Many, an incontinent and a self-indulgent may perform similar bad actions.

¹⁶ We are introducing the double gender in order to “actualize” the Aristotelian perspective, as we could also consider the existence of some kind of “Many” in our societies, which would be (at least) bivalent regarding the matter of gender. The same idea is applied to the other figures of the classification.

¹⁷ This classification would be in accordance with Gauthier’s classical general approach to Aristotle’s moral typology, which he presents in historical terms: “[I]’exaltation de la continence et la négation de l’incontinence vont de pair dans la morale socratique [...]. La polémique anti-socratique amène ainsi Aristote à délimiter un niveau de vie morale qui ne se ramène ni au vice ni à la vertu. [...] En reconnaissant la possibilité d’une nouvelle hypothèse, en définissant un état moral qui n’est ni vertu ni vice, Aristote va tenter d’accorder ses vues théoriques à la réalité concrète. A ceux qui ne peuvent être ni tout à fait vertueux ni pleinement vicieux, il offre encore un idéal à rechercher, un mal à éviter: c’est la continence et l’incontinence. L’incontinent, sans être à proprement parler un vicieux, s’abaissera cependant au-dessous du vulgaire; il se laissera vaincre par le plaisir là où la plupart se montrent assez forts pour tenir bon; quant au continent, on le jugera digne de louange; c’est qu’il s’élève au-dessus de la foule, lui qui demeure vainqueur là où le plus grand nombre ont le dessous” (Aristote, *L’Éthique à Nicomaque*, transl. R.A. Gauthier and J.Y. Jolif (Louvain–Paris: Institut Supérieur de Philosophie de l’Université de Louvain, 1970), 580–581).

The case of moral effort

The preceding classification implicitly incorporates a valuation of the *moral effort* of each of the agents in developing his/her behaviour. Therefore, the temperate agent has become temperate through a successful moral effort which ceases on reaching the harmony between intelligence and desire regarding the right rule, the amount of effort depending on the respective moral starting point as human beings naturally differ regarding their original proximity (or not) to virtue; the continent agent is he/she who in respect of the right rule *successfully* expends a moral effort regarding basic appetites about touch and taste, but cannot cease to expend this effort as he/she does not (yet?) have the due accordance between intelligence and desire; on the contrary, the incontinent agent is he/she who, also from the lack of due accordance between intelligence and desire, *unsuccessfully* expends a moral effort regarding those basic appetites,¹⁸ while the self-indulgent agent has “successfully” expended a moral effort against the right rule to become self-indulgent, and now shows accordance between intelligence and desire in respect of vice. What about the Many then? What relationship do they have with moral effort? Although the primary source is not entirely explicit about this, there is enough evidence within to affirm that the trait that actually defines the Many in respect of this issue is *the lack of effort*; this being a kind of moral *indolence*, which in fact is what best characterises their behaviour. A trait which Aristotle thematises through the concepts of “ameleia” and “argia”, which in turn can be related to the idea of being “phaulos”, the moral predicate corresponding to “hoi polloi”.¹⁹

However, far from constituting a serious problem for the city, this majority of moral indolence is what facilitates its regular function, as the morally indolent agent is keen on adapting his/her behaviour to law *via coercion*, being

¹⁸ This picture especially applies to the incontinent by weakness, i.e., who (rightly) deliberates but does not stand in the resolution of his/her deliberation because of passion.

¹⁹ For the very concepts of “ameleia” and “argia” in NE, cf. respectively 1113b15–1114a2 and 1166b10–11; a remarkable presentation of the former can also be found in EE, 1225b11–16. Both concepts reflect the moral attitude that is strictly opposed to that of “spoudaios”, the ethical counterpart of the agent “phaulos” (cf. *supra*). Thus, ‘spoudazein’ means “to be busy, eager” (cf. *A Greek-English Lexicon*, by Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott), which opposes the laziness or inaction related to “ameleia” and “argia”.

neither strictly convinced about the “goodness” of vice (unlike the self-indulgent) nor systematically dragged by passion (unlike the incontinent). Therefore, we can conclude that this segment of population is the segment which in fact facilitates the city itself, as in addition it is them who typically take on the productive task.²⁰ As a corollary of the argument, it could also be said that the indolent many permit the virtuous few, as the latter need the scenario we have been describing to enjoy virtue and even to attain it.²¹

Conclusion: The sociological aporia

Thus, the Many are a kind of cushion between virtuous/continent and vicious/incontinent agents, with these latter groups marking the limits of the city’s moral life. And Aristotle is in general quite magnanimous with those who are left in between, especially regarding political issues.²² However, from a sociological point of view there is an aporia that should be noted. Let us look at the following passage from *Politics* (Jowett translation with Greek words from the Spanish-Greek edition of Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, cf. Bibliography):

Now in all states there are three elements: one class is very rich, another very poor, and a third in a mean [hoi mesoi touton]. It is admitted that moderation

²⁰ For the relationship of the Many with the right rule, cf. also EN, 1102b33–1103a1: “That the irrational [to alogon] element in some sense persuaded by a rational principle is indicated also by the giving of advice and by all reproof and exhortation.” Which should be understood in the light of 1102b29–31 (Ross translation in both cases): “[...] the irrational element also appears to be two-fold. For the vegetative element in no way shares in a rational principle, but the appetitive and in general the desiring element in a sense shares in it, in so far as it listens to and obeys it”.

²¹ Garrett seems to think in a similar way when talking about the Many as when he says “[t]his group may be *fauloi* and in some sense *bad*, from the point of view of the human *telos*. But individually they are of little danger to the practicable health of the body politic. The danger comes largely from the appetites and passions of the powerful and wealthy, in so far as these are not tamed by good upbringing, or from the appetites and passions of the Many when they act collectively, without the governance of law, which is a sort of reason” (“The Moral Status of ‘the Many’ in Aristotle”: 188).

²² Cf. v.g. *Politics*, 1281a39–b12.

and the mean are best [to metrion ariston kai to meson], and therefore it will clearly be best to possess the gifts of fortune in moderation; for in that condition of life men are most ready to listen to reason. But he who greatly excels in beauty, strength, birth or wealth, or on the other hand who is very poor, or very weak, or very much disgraced, finds it difficult to follow reason. Of these two the one sort grow into violent and great criminals, the others into rogues and petty rascals. And two sorts of offenses correspond to them, the one committed from violence, the other from roguery. [...] this is the class of citizens which is most secure in a state, for they do not, like the poor, covet their neighbors' goods; nor do others covet theirs, as the poor covet the goods of the rich; and as they neither plot against others, nor are themselves plotted against, they pass through life safely. [1295b1–33]

If we put the previous passage alongside a passage from NE which we have already (partially) quoted, 1168b15–23, we will find a sort of inconsistency in the Aristotelian source. The complete passage is as follows: “Those who use the term as one of reproach ascribe self-love to people who assign themselves the greater share of wealth, honours, and bodily pleasures; for these are what most people [hoi polloi] desire, and busy themselves about as though they were the best of all things, which is the reason, too, why they become objects of competition. So those who are grasping with regard to these things gratify their appetites and in general their feelings and the irrational element of the soul; and most men [hoi polloi] are of this nature (which is the reason why the epithet has come to be used as it is—it takes its meaning from the prevailing type of self-love, which is a bad one); it is just, therefore, that men who are lovers of self in this way are reproached for being so”.

It does not seem that “hoi mesoi” from the first passage and “hoi polloi” from the second one can be incarnated by the same people. One could think that “hoi mesoi” are a minority that Aristotle would like to become a majority, but other appearances of the concept, particularly in *Politics*, do not suggest such a normative role in Aristotelian sociology. On the other hand, if “hoi polloi” are the majority segment of population as the expression itself suggests and we focus on the first passage, then we will almost be obliged to consider them as very poor people, and in this case the political relevance (at least in a passive way) that Aristotle generally ascribes to them cannot apply. Therefore, we must prudently concede that the source concerning the issue is not exhaustive, and

may join Ian Morris when he says, regarding some appearances of “hoi mesoi” in *Politics*, that “[s]cholars have tried in vain to make sense of these passages, but their ambiguity may be an important part of Aristotle’s thought. The *Politics* was not an objective account of social relations. [...] Aristotle reshaped popular ideas of the middle way for his own ends”²³

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²³ Ian Morris, *Archaeology as Cultural History: Words and Things in Iron Age Greece* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 119. Garrett does not seem to consider any aporia: “[b]ecause the Many are typically the majority, and these elites due to fortune are small, and frequently overlapping, minorities, we can expect the Many to contingently coincide for the most part with the joint *complement* of these classes, i.e., especially with those neither nobly born nor rich nor possessing a great deal of power. Further, if there is a relatively small middle class, and to the extent that, as Aristotle seems to think, the middle class is somewhat protected by its middling status from the degrading pressures associated with life at either social extreme, the Many will largely be made up of the lowborn, the poor and the relatively powerless” (“The Moral Status of ‘the Many’ in Aristotle”: 184–185).

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