

Aristotle Visits City College

George McKenna

For the past 36 years I have been teaching at City College of New York, a college with a long and distinguished history. Founded in 1847 under the leadership of Board of Education President Townsend Harris (who later became the first U.S. Consul General to Japan) the mission of City College was encapsulated in Harris's famous mandate: "Open the doors to all—let the children of the rich and the poor take their seats together and know of no distinction save that of industry, good conduct, and intellect." Since then it has lived up to this mandate, giving poor but talented young people the opportunity to make it into the middle class and add their own contributions to America. Its graduates have included Jonas Salk, Felix Frankfurter, and Colin Powell. Eight of its graduates have received the Nobel Prize. Today City College is one of twenty public institutions that make up the City University of New York (CUNY), which was established in 1961.

Despite its location in West Harlem, until the end of the 1960s it was nearly all white, largely because of its stiff entrance requirements, which were based upon a combination of grade-point averages and SAT scores. In 1969, Open Admissions was instituted, giving any student with a high school diploma the opportunity to enter at least a community college in CUNY; the senior colleges, including City College, also brought in many students who would not have gotten in under the old system. Today's City College student body includes about 36 percent blacks, 30 percent Latinos, 15 percent Asians, 10 percent whites, and 9 percent listed as "unknown." Open Admissions has been a controversial topic from the outset, and in recent years a new Board of Trustees has modified it considerably. As of the fall of 2000, City University began requiring entrance examinations and eliminating remedial programs in its senior colleges. City College itself implemented these requirements in the fall of 2001.

My purpose here is not to discuss Open Admissions or its new modifications, but to consider a broader question: How have we at City College of New York gone about educating students to become free and responsible citizens of our democratic republic? Since this question jibes nicely with a course I

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teach on classical political thought, it may be worth an attempt to discuss the mission of City College from an Aristotelian perspective. What follows includes some criticisms of City College, but I shall offer some praise as well—in particular, that CUNY was right to extend a hand to people who had been just about left out of public higher education in New York City.

On the face of it, I must admit, Aristotle seems to have little relevance to education at City College, or, indeed to most modern colleges and universities. Aristotle believed that higher education was for free men. I emphasize both words. It was for a male leisured class, who had slaves and women to do much of their household work. In contrast, most of our students at City College are women, and very few belong to any leisure class or have much leisure time. Moreover, if I strictly followed Aristotle, I would have to write off much of our curriculum. Performing arts, for example, Aristotle considered basically slavish—free men should appreciate music but not play it professionally—yet City College’s Davis Center for Performing Arts is one of the gems in its crown.

Having said all that, I remain persuaded that some of Aristotle’s insights could help us see both the strengths and weaknesses of City College. Let me posit three Aristotelian propositions, then see how they fit the flagship of City University.

Number one. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* begins as follows: “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good, and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.”¹ It sounds abstract, even tautological, but Aristotle fleshes it out with examples: the aim of the medical art is health; that of shipbuilding, a vessel; economics, wealth. Then there are some that are connected in a kind of chain: for example, bridle-making exists for the sake of riding; and riding, at least in the cavalry, is part of military strategy; strategy aims at victory, and victory is for the sake of peace. What Aristotle is talking about here is a hierarchy of ends. What are we doing this for? Why are we studying this? What do we hope to accomplish? Education has to have context, connections. It has to have *coherence*. We do not teach bridle-making simply because we think it amusing for people to make bridles. It is connected with larger ends that ultimately serve the community.

This brings me to the second of the three Aristotelian propositions: a political community, in the fullest sense of the word, cannot function without widespread public virtue. A despotism can function very well without it. In fact it functions best without it, because its subjects lack the virtue of courage to rise up against it, and in lacking temperance they can easily be pacified by bread and circuses. But a true political community, by which Aristotle meant people who are used to ruling and being ruled in turn,² requires a citizenry with virtuous habits.

Yes, habits. Aristotle did not believe that human beings are born good, nor did he think that virtue can be taught as a purely intellectual discipline, like

mathematics.³ He believed that if you were carefully habituated in virtue from childhood, by the time you were eighteen or so, you would probably be a good person. Why study ethics, then? Because the study of sound ethics sets an intellectual seal upon what otherwise would simply be habit. Now you can become maturely good, because you understand the intellectually defensible roots of your behavior. And you can deepen your goodness by seeing how it could apply to a variety of areas you did not learn about in your childhood.

Now for the third proposition. Education in virtue is something that extends far beyond books and classrooms. The society itself—its laws, rules, and customs—is an educator, for better or for worse.⁴ Plato went so far as to suggest that all laws should have extensive philosophical preambles explaining why they are necessary.⁵ Aristotle did not go that far. He thought that citizens would draw their own conclusions from the way the society organized itself, how it meted out its rewards and punishments, and what actions seemed important to it.

Now let me try to apply these three propositions to City College of New York.

First: ends, means, and coherence. Not long ago, I met with some other members of my department, to consider a replacement for a retiring constitutional law professor. Very much present there was the City College affirmative action officer. She gave us instructions as to how we should interview the candidates, what questions it is permissible to ask and what questions are not allowed. She gave us postcards that we were to present to the job candidates; they were to mail back to her, anonymously, information on their “ethnicity” and gender. Then, when we made up a shortlist of candidates, we were to check off the same information about them. The affirmative action officer was then to decide whether or not to approve our list. Her approval was to depend on whether our list included sufficient representation of “protected” categories. In the main, these are categories of race and gender. The races were arranged alphabetically, starting with Aleuts.

Why were we doing this? Because the College wants diversity. Diverse talents? Diverse points of view? Diverse cultures? Not necessarily. Diverse what, then? Diverse skin colors and genders. Why do we want that? Is there some connection to wider or deeper knowledge of constitutional law, or skill in teaching it, or ability to relate to our students? Maybe, but we don’t know that, and the College hasn’t the slightest interest in finding out. It just wants biological diversity.

Aristotle, I think, would be puzzled. If every action and every art aims at some good, and there are hierarchies of goods, where is the good of purely physical diversity?⁶ At what higher good is it aimed? Or is it simply a kind of fetish, as if a society decided that it valued bridle-making for its own sake, entirely apart from its usefulness for riding or for anything else? I do not have answers to these questions, but I ask them again and again at such meetings,

despite the embarrassment they cause. But to leave them unasked is to be complicit in a policy that seems to be based on incoherence, and that is a strange policy for an institution of higher learning.

Aristotle's second proposition is that a republic can't function very long without widespread public virtue, and virtue is something that is acquired by habituation. One of the remarkable things about teaching at City College is the joy of conversing with its students. These are people of decidedly modest means who, in a sense, are aristocrats. They are survivors. They have come through some tough neighborhoods in New York City, or they and their families have had the pluck to immigrate, resettle in a new country, and struggle with a new language. Almost all of them work at least part time, many of them full time, and a surprising number have children. They have come through secondary schools with decent enough grades to make it to a senior college, and though their writing skills are usually deplorable, they possess a certain kind of moral intelligence. Sometimes you see smiles and nods of recognition when they hear something that fits their own experiences. I saw that reaction after I noted Aristotle's view that ethics cannot be taught to adults from a book but has to be instilled early on in children. These young people, many of them from extended families, or at least raised in close contact with grandparents, were brought up with clear-cut moral codes, which is one of the reasons that they *have* survived. They are startled to find Aristotle affirming what they already know from their experience. I am glad that City College has these young people. They are its greatest asset.

Number three. Aristotle said that we learn ethics not just from books and classrooms, but from the society around us—its laws, its rules, its mores. Every university is itself a little city-state. In fact, City College, with its 9,000 students and its 1,400 faculty, staff, and administrators might be just about what Aristotle would consider a reasonably sized *polis*. So, what can we all learn from the rules and laws of our little city-state? Well, the main rule is that there are no rules, or at least none that are predictable and certain. Take student retention, for example. The rules say that a student is dropped if the student's average dips below 2.0 for two semesters in a row. But in 1989, in response to demands from student leaders who took over buildings and blocked access to classrooms, City University instituted a policy of letting students who get "F"s retake the courses (up to 16 credits) and have only the second grade counted in their overall average. I have had students beg me to give them an "F" instead of a "D," so that they can bring up their average. But even these permeable rules are often stretched; dismissal here does not mean dismissal. It means that the student gets a letter saying not to register again. But the letter can be appealed, and the appeal usually results in reinstatement.

Other rules, or mis-rules at City College, are petty when considered singly, but there are so many of them that their cumulative drag on the educational process is really quite strong. They flow from the fact that no one, finally, is in

charge; indeed, no one has been in charge for more than a decade. The right hand does not know what the left hand is doing. The people in the physical plant seem annoyed that teaching is going on in their buildings. I have taught classes with workmen literally drilling through the other side of my classroom wall. Fire alarms sound so often, for no apparent reason, that nobody pays the slightest attention to them anymore. They do not seem to be able to keep the escalators working. I have had friends tell me how funny they feel in a department store when on occasion they have had to walk up a stationary escalator. It does not feel funny to me at all. It is impossible for an ordinary professor even to understand the language of City College administrators. Here is an example. The normal limit of students for a single introductory course is 40. For some years now, in order to save money, the administration has been seeking ways to increase that number. When, without my permission, 55 students were signed into my class by an associate dean, I protested to the dean. He then promised me someone to help mark the papers. I suggested an adjunct who was teaching a course in my department, and it was agreed that some money would be added to his salary for paper-marking. Everything went smoothly till the end of the semester when he complained that he had been paid less than promised. I called the dean and spoke to his phone mail. The following day my phone mail carried this message from the dean's assistant:

Professor McKenna, hi, this is _____. I'm sorry I didn't get back to you yesterday. . . . I will try to leave this message for you because I have a feeling we're not going to touch bases today. I have two doctors' appointments this afternoon and I'm going to lunch from twelve to one. . . .

However, [regarding your paper grader]. In September he was put in for 45 hours, okay?, and he should have gotten paychecks for \$372.03. Then, in November, the dean told me you would . . . pay him for one credit. Now I think there was a confusion between credits and hours here. One credit is three hours. No. Right. Well, anyway, I put him in for fifteen hours more, so he went from forty-five hours to sixty hours. Then the dean said no, that wasn't correct, we were paying him too much money to, for, correcting papers and he only wanted to pay him three hours' worth, not, not a credit—you know—not, three regular hours, not a course—anyway it got very confusing here.

So he started out at forty-five hours and he went to sixty hours. At sixty hours he received two checks for \$516.70. However, he wasn't supposed to be getting paid for sixty hours, he was supposed to be getting paid for forty-eight hours, okay? So, when that was realized by Payroll they decreased it, but they had to take the money away because he was being overpaid at the \$516. So his last paycheck should have been \$305.89 and that's the remainder of what his paychecks will be. Totaled up, it should come to be \$2,696.64, or a little bit more because of the pay increase that came into effect. At \$2,696 or maybe \$2700. If he has any further questions, have him take all his paychecks, or rather pay stubs, to _____ in the Payroll Office.

As you are aware, I will no longer be here after Wednesday, so, if I don't see you—happy holidays.

This was one of the loonier communications I've gotten over the past couple of years, but in its general opaqueness and confusion it was not at all atypical. I could quote from scores of administration memos and phone messages, if only I had saved them. By the way, the person who left this message did not leave the College. She was transferred to the City College Information Office!

I am afraid that the message students take away from City College is that they live in an unpredictable, largely incomprehensible world with rules that can change from week to week without notification, and that to succeed you have to fly below the radar, live by your wits, and ignore the rules when they get in your way. There are communities within City College, but the place as a whole is not in any meaningful sense a community.

Aristotle had complicated feelings about democracy. He considered it a deviant form of government, but the least deviant. (Tyranny, the deviation from monarchy, was the worst.)⁷ In any case, he insisted that if we are going to have a democracy, our education should teach us to value a constitutional, lawful, democracy. Unfortunately, he added, the most democratic ones do the opposite. "So in democracies of this sort, everyone lives as he likes, and 'according to his fancy', as Euripides says. But this is bad. For living in a way that suits the constitution should be considered not slavery, but salvation."⁸

My hope is that, under new leadership, City College will finally acquire a constitution—not just in name but in fact. That, I continue to believe, will be its salvation.

Notes

1. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), I.1.
2. *Politics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), III.4.
3. *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.4; II.1.
4. *Ibid.*, X.9.
5. Plato, *Laws*, trans. John M. Cooper, in John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), IV, p. 1409.
6. In conceding that democracy might have at least one advantage over aristocracy, Aristotle also seems to praise diversity. "For the many, who are not as individuals excellent men, nevertheless can, when they have come together, be better than the few best people, not individually but collectively, just as feasts to which many contribute are better than feasts provided at one person's expense." (*Politics*, III.11.) In other words, democracy is like a pot-luck supper, where the diversity of dishes may add up to a more interesting dinner than anything prepared by a single cook, however excellent the cook might be. But this assumes that the many cooks will indeed prepare a variety of dishes. Selecting the cooks on the basis of skin color hardly guarantees that result.
7. *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII.10.
8. *Politics*, V.9.