Aristotle’s Criticisms of Socrates’ Communism of Wives and Children

Introduction
Aristotle’s criticisms of Plato’s Republic and Laws in the second book of his Politics have appeared to most commentators to be signally unconvincing. They seem to miss the point, beg the question, distort the sense or focus on the merely trivial. As one translator has put it, Aristotle is ‘puzzlingly unsympathetic’, ‘obtuse’ and ‘rather perverse’ as a critic of Plato. But while many accept this judgement few draw attention to the implications. These criticisms are one of the few cases in the Aristotelian corpus where we also have the original works of the philosopher being criticised. They constitute a test-case to determine Aristotle’s fairness in transmitting and criticising the thought of others. If he does this so badly in the case of Plato where he can be checked, we must suppose the same in the case of other philosophers where he cannot. The significance of this result for our study of the Pre-Socratics, for instance, where Aristotle is usually our best authority, needs no stressing. So some serious re-examination of these chapters from the Politics would seem to be in order. For reasons of space I must limit myself here to the criticisms of common wives and children in the Republic.

The Division of Aristotle’s Text
These criticisms are given in chs. 2–4, and Aristotle begins by listing them:

Having wives in common has both many other difficulties and also (1) the difficulty that the cause because of which Socrates says it is necessary to legislate in this way does not appear to follow from the arguments. Still further, (2) the end

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which Socrates says should be present to the city, as it is now talked about, is impossible, and (3) as to how it is to be distinguished nothing is defined. I mean that it is best for the city to be to the greatest extent all one. For this is the supposition Socrates takes.2

I have numbered each division for ease of reference. Most commentators generally take (2) and (3) to be referring to the same criticism,3 but they disagree over which criticism this is. For at line 1261a13 where division (2) begins, there is a dispute about whether a comma should be inserted after pros. If one puts the comma in one gets the translation I have given above, if one does not one gets, following Newman, something like this:

And again (2) as a means to the end which Socrates says should be present to the city, the scheme now spoken about is impossible, and (3) as to how it should be qualified nothing is defined.4

All agree, however, in saying that (1) is a distinct criticism and that it refers to chapter 2 where Socrates’ hypothesis that the city should be to the greatest extent all one is criticised. But there is good textual reason to doubt this. In chapter 4 there is a passage whose phrasing recalls (1).

In general there must necessarily happen through such a law [the law about common wives and children] the opposite of what correctly enacted laws should cause and also the opposite of the cause because of which Socrates thinks it thus necessary to set up his arrangement about wives and children.5

Here Aristotle is saying that Socrates’ cause for having common wives and children will not happen as a result of the law about common wives and children but rather the opposite will. The cause is said to be friendship or oneness understood as friendship,6 and throughout chapter 4 Aristotle claims that Socrates’ arguments that common wives and children will produce such oneness are false. Division (1) says that the ‘cause’ for having common wives and children ‘does not seem to follow from the arguments’. In fact the word translated ‘follow’ also means ‘happen’ (as it does in the last quotation), and it is in participial, not infinitival, form. One might, therefore, better translate (if a little awkwardly): ‘... is not manifest in happening from the arguments’. Division (1) then says, in effect, that Socrates’ arguments signally fail to show that oneness, the cause for having common wives and children, will happen as a result of having common wives and children. But this is exactly what the quotation from chapter 4 says. Division (1) therefore

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2 1261a10-16
4 The Greek is either: I ôè îtphe, tb raoc ii cfî irhXr &Iv thp or Itt ôè îtphe tb raoc
5 The Greek reads: iiAoc i au izvayioi toivatov t& thy toto V 6 V ltpOallKEt to hp9ô ícet vh cdldouç ylvraaç, iai â ijv alt lcqv b EwicP&niç o {irw o ègiv thrtEv t&s ãct pt t& técva lea’ taç yuVaiKac. The Greek of Division (1), 1261a11-12, reads: ica’t t’ jv ait{av p &Iv vEvol OërfiaOat thy tphito to b uicpá o paiv aup4kxivov 1K mv hyov
6 126?b27-31??
must refer to what is going on in chapter 4 and not, pace the prevailing consensus, to what is going on in chapter 2.

Aristotle’s divisions (2) and (3) must now somehow refer to what is going on in chapters 2 and 3. But the criticisms in chapter 2 in particular are criticisms of the end, that is, of oneness, so these divisions must refer to criticisms of the end, not the means to it. Hence we have no choice but to insert the comma after pros, and take the first translation given above, not the second one offered by Newman. Further, the opening words of chapter 3 make it dear that the criticisms in that chapter are distinct from those of chapter 2, so we must, again pace the consensus, regard divisions (2) and (3) as outlining distinct criticisms.

The criticisms in chapter 2 are directed at Socrates’ hypothesis that the city should be to the greatest extent all one and those in chapter 3 at his argument based on ‘all saying mine and not mine together’. These remarks refer us to the passage in the Republic where Socrates argues that the communist city he and Glaucon have set up is best. Socrates does this through an appeal to oneness which he persuades Glaucon is the best thing for a city. It is in the course of explaining this oneness that Socrates introduces the remarks about all saying mine and not mine together. Only after he has done this does he start to argue that the communist city must be the most one because communism is what will secure everyone’s saying mine and not mine together.7 In other words, the way Socrates brings oneness and communism together is first by speaking about oneness as all saying mine and not mine together and then by showing that in communism that is how everyone will speak. Everyone saying mine and not mine together is, we might say, the way Socrates speaks about oneness. But this is exactly what Aristotle says is the topic of division (2), namely oneness in the way Socrates speaks about it. Division (2) must therefore refer to chapter 3.

By a process of elimination division (3) must now refer to what Aristotle does first in chapter 2. But division (3) says that how the end, oneness, is to be distinguished has not been defined, so the arguments of chapter 2 must be understood as directed not at something Socrates says but at something he does not say and should have said. This will significantly affect how Aristotle’s remarks in chapter 2 are to be interpreted. First one might note that, if I am right, Aristotle’s three divisions refer to the contents of chapters 2-4 in exactly the reverse order. A perfect example of ‘ring-composition’.8

Aristotle’s Criticisms in Chapter 2

The criticisms given in chapter 2 are criticisms of Socrates’ supposition that it is best for the city to be to the greatest extent all one.

And yet it is clear that as the city advances and becomes more one it will not be a city. For the city is by nature a certain multitude and becoming more one it will first be a household instead of a city and then a single human being instead of a household. For we would say that the household is more one than the city and the individual more one than the household. So if someone were able to do this they should not do it, for they would do away with the city.9

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7 Republic 461e5-462c8; also 463e1-464a10
8 Taking a list in reverse order can be found throughout Aristotle’s writings
9 1261b16-22
The objection of most commentators to this is that Aristotle has simply distorted what Socrates means by unity from unity in the sense of oneness of sentiment to oneness in the sense of numerical unity. That Socrates means unity of sentiment is true, but charging Aristotle with denying this is groundless. It does nothing to deflect the criticism. For suppose we admit Socrates intends the city to be one in the sense of all the citizens feeling in the same way. Is it still not the case that the household and the individual are going to be more one in this sense than the city? Is not a household, with fewer people and people all belonging to the same family, more likely to be one in feeling the same way than a city with many people belonging to many families? And surely an individual is going to be more one in this sense even than a household?

We should, in fact, consider more carefully Aristotle’s precise words. For he says, not that Socrates’ supposition is that the city should be one, but that it is that the city should be one to the greatest extent. What Aristotle then objects to is not oneness as such but progressive oneness. In other words, what Aristotle seems to be saying is that oneness might indeed be necessary for the city to have, but there must be some way of distinguishing and limiting this oneness to stop it going too far. His objection to Socrates would then be that Socrates does not provide any means of stopping. To make this point Aristotle does not need to say anything about what sort of oneness Socrates has in mind. All he needs to say is that the city is some kind of multitude. For if the city is a multitude it cannot be altogether one, so the oneness it has must be limited or distinguished in some way to prevent the oneness from destroying the multitude. Hence that is all Aristotle does say, that the city is a multitude, and then proceeds at once with his criticism.

It is Aristotle’s studied brevity here that gives many commentators the impression that he has misunderstood what Socrates means by unity. But this impression can easily be avoided if one reads Aristotle’s argument, as I have argued one should, according to his remarks in division (3). For there he expressly says that how Socrates’ supposition must be distinguished is not defined, and this is precisely the criticism that he then does give by showing what the results are if you do not do the necessary distinguishing.

Does Socrates, however, talk about unity to the greatest extent and if so does he fail to do the necessary distinguishing? In the passage of the Republic in question all he initially asks Glaucon is whether there is a greater good for the city than what makes it one. But later he asks whether the best governed city is nearest a single human being and Glaucon replies affirmatively that this is so, and this is the supposition that Socrates then takes. So Socrates does mean by unity for the city unity to the greatest extent, namely unity to the greatest extent like an individual. By ‘nearest’ (engutata), however, Socrates must mean ‘most like a single human being’ and not ‘most a single human being’, so we could say that what he means is that the city should be as like a single human being in

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11 Neither Proclus nor Bornemann are as precise as they should be on this point.
12 Cf. 1263b31-32.
13 Republic, 462a9-d7. The likening of the city to a single human being is thus some thing Aristotle picks up from Plato’s text; it is not something he invents himself. It is also interesting that he says that Socrates ‘takes’ (lambanei 1261a16) his supposition about oneness rather than that, for example, he lays it down. For Socrates does indeed ‘take’ it from Glaucon’s answer.
oneness as possible but not so like that it ceases to be a city. If this is so, then he would seem to have defined the necessary distinction and Aristotle’s criticism would be wrong.

But this is not enough. Since it is possible to be so like something that one actually becomes that thing, in order to prevent this result one has to be more specific and say how far the likeness is to go and why it is not to go further. Socrates could perhaps be said to have done that in saying, or implying, that the city has to be as one as it is possible for a city to be, and not as one as it is possible for a single human being to be. But that is too vague and general a response and only provokes the question: how one is it possible for a city to be? To answer that something needs to be said about what the difference is between a city and a single human being, why the oneness that fits a city is not the same as the oneness that fits an individual, and why, nevertheless, it makes sense to set up the oneness of the individual as the sort of oneness that the city should aim at. None of this Socrates does. Therefore his supposition is inadequate in the way Aristotle says it is.

However, Aristotle does not leave the matter there. He goes on to indicate how one should speak of oneness for the city. This is the purpose of the rest of Chapter 2. The first thing that Aristotle notes is that the city is not just made up of many human beings but of specifically different human beings, namely ruler and ruled. Socrates is of course aware of this fact, but it is false to suppose that Aristotle is accusing him of being ignorant of it. Rather he is drawing out the implications of this fact, implications that Socrates does not advert to nor discuss. A city, Aristotle says in effect, is governed or determined by a principle of difference. That is why a city is not the same as an alliance or a mere adding together of more of the same. This principle of difference applies even where all the citizens are free and equal, for they cannot all be rulers at once. They have to rule and be ruled by turns. But there must, in addition to a principle of difference in cities, be also a principle that makes them ‘one’ and ‘saves’ them. This is the principle of reciprocal equality. Here Aristotle introduces something that he does not find in Plato’s text. Reciprocal equality comes from Aristotle’s own Ethics, as he at once remarks. This principle, as Aristotle there explains, is the one that brings specifically different human beings into unity. That is why this has to be the principle of unity that one needs when talking about the city. For since the city is made up of specifically different parts, the principle of unity that preserves it has to preserve the differences in the unity. The principle of reciprocal equality does this. Far from reducing the city to a single individual it specifically requires the exact opposite, that the city be composed of many individuals and that these many individuals be of different kinds.

Aristotle’s Criticisms in Chapter 3
In this chapter Aristotle turns to a different criticism.

14 Republic, 463alff
15 1261a29-31; Nicomachean Ethics, 1132b31-34; 1133a10-18. One might say that Socrates does have this principle since it is the same as the definitions of justice and moderation he gives earlier, each doing their own thing and agreeing that the rulers should rule (the principle of ‘one man, one job’ is first introduced in the city of pigs, Republic, 369e2-70b6; the definition of justice is given at 433a1-e2, and of moderation at 431e10-2a9). But even if the principle of reciprocal equality is somehow implied in these definitions (and that is not clear), it is one thing to imply a principle and another to state it explicitly and give a proper account of it. But the lack of a proper account is precisely what Aristotle is complaining about.
But yet not even if this is best, that the community be to the greatest extent one, not even so does this appear to be proved according to the argument: “if all say mine and not mine together”. For Socrates thinks this is a sign of the city’s being completely one.\textsuperscript{16}

We must ask, first of all, whether it is accurate to say that Socrates thinks all saying mine and not mine together is a ‘sign’ of the city’s being completely one. Having got Glaucon to agree that the greatest good for the city is what binds it together and makes it one, Socrates then asks whether the community of pleasure and pain, when all the citizens rejoice and are pained at the same things, is what binds the city together. Glaucon agrees and agrees also to the following suggestion that this bond is dissolved when the citizens do not say mine and not mine together. Socrates then asks, as drawing a conclusion, whether that city is best governed in which most people say mine and not mine of the same things, and Glaucon also agrees to that. As the argument proceeds, what Socrates does to get Glaucon to agree that their communist city is the most united and therefore the best is the fact that in that city everyone will say mine and not mine together.\textsuperscript{17}

Clearly all saying mine and not mine together is not identical with what binds the city together for this is expressly said to be the community of pleasure and pain. All saying mine and not mine together will rather be how one can tell whether such community exists or not. This is indeed how Socrates proceeds in the arguments that follow. In other words Socrates uses all saying mine and not mine together as the sign of the city’s being one, just as Aristotle says he does.

What is striking about this result is not so much that Aristotle is shown to be accurate about Plato’s text (though that is significant), as that most of those who criticise Aristotle are, by contrast, very inaccurate. Virtually all of them say that Aristotle’s criticism of all saying mine and not mine together is a criticism of one of Socrates’ means to the end of unity. But a sign is not a means; it is precisely that, a sign. Aristotle’s critics are thus not just getting Aristotle wrong, they are getting Socrates wrong as well. But all this is preparatory to the criticism that Aristotle gives.

For “all” is double. If it means “each individually” perhaps this would be more what Socrates wishes to do ... As it is this is not how those will speak who use wives and children as something common but “all” will so speak but not as “each of them individually” ... So, that there is a paralogism in saying “all” is clear ... Wherefore “all saying the same” is in this way fine but not possible while in this other way it is not indicative of concord.\textsuperscript{18}

The main objection to this is that Aristotle’s criticism is mere carping. What matters to Socrates is not the words the citizens use in referring to each other, whether ‘mine’ or ‘our’ or something else, but whether each receives from each the same sympathy and the same interest.\textsuperscript{19} But this objection misses both Aristotle’s and Socrates’ argument. The phrase ‘all saying mine and not mine together’ matters very much to Socrates because it

\textsuperscript{16} 1261b16-20.
\textsuperscript{17} Republic, 462a9ff., especially 464a1-2.
\textsuperscript{18} 1261b20-32.
\textsuperscript{19} So Bornemann, 132-5; Proclus, 365 line 9-p. 367 line 11.
is the premise he uses to convince Glaucon that their communist city will be most united and so best. If that premise involves a fallacy, as Aristotle says it does, then the argument will not go through. The fallacy is said to turn on an equivocation in the word ‘all’. To see how this might be so Socrates’ argument needs first to be set out. It can be formalised thus:

i) Where all say mine and not mine together, there unity most exists.

ii) The communist city is where all say mine and not mine together.

iii) Therefore the communist city is where unity most exists (and so it is the best city).

Aristotle’s criticism is that in the phrase ‘all say mine and not mine together’ the word ‘all’ has two senses. The two senses are the collective sense, all together, and the distributive sense, each individually. Aristotle says that the distributive sense is ‘perhaps more’ what Socrates wants but that with communism he gets only the collective sense. Aristotle would therefore be saying that in premise (i) ‘all’ has the distributive sense while in premise (ii) ‘all’ has the collective sense. Consequently there is no single middle term and the argument is a paralogism.

That Socrates’ argument is fallacious in this way is regarded by Aristotle as not requiring further discussion. He does add, however, that in the first sense of ‘all’, the distributive sense, ‘all saying mine and not mine together’ is fine but impossible, while in the second sense, the collective sense, it is not indicative of concord. Aristotle cannot be saying here that this phrase is altogether impossible in the distributive sense so that premise (i) would not only be false but impossible. For he admits that the distributive sense might perhaps give Socrates what he wants, that is I presume, that if Socrates could get a distributive sense for premise (ii) the argument would go through. So it would be paradoxical for Aristotle then to go on and say, as he would be saying if premise (i) were impossible, that the argument fails whatever sense one gives to premise (ii). Besides the phrase ‘all saying mine and not mine together’ can be perfectly correct taken in the distributive sense. We only have to look at Socrates’ own example of the family. For five children of the same father can all say of him in the distributive sense, ‘this is my father’. Aristotle’s comment that ‘all saying mine and not mine together’ is fine but impossible should rather be construed as an attack on the use of the phrase in the context of communism. The comment will then be directed at premise (ii), not premise (i), and Aristotle will be saying that if, in premise (ii), the ‘all’ is understood in the distributive sense it will be fine but impossible, while if it is understood in the collective sense it might be true but it will not be indicative of concord (i.e. it will not be the sense that premise (i) has). What this means can be clarified by considering how the citizens under Socrates’ communism can say about all the children and women, ‘this is my son’ or ‘this is my wife’. As far as wives are concerned, one woman could, according to the arrangements Socrates lays down, be married to several men so that several men could

20 These premises and conclusion cannot be found verbatim in the Republic but something close to them can be. For premise i), 462a9-c8; for premise ii), 463a5-5; for the conclusion, 464a1-7.

21 As Newman thinks, 236 ad 31, and Aquinas, liber 2, lectio 2, §185.
say of her, ‘this is my wife’. But even then they could only do this serially because the marriages are not contemporaneous. On the other hand there are many other men who could not say of her even in this sense, ‘this is my wife’, because they were never married to her. So all those men never married to this woman could only say of her, ‘this is my wife’, in the sense that she is, or was, the wife of one of their community. But that is to say these ‘all’ could only speak collectively, as a group, not distributively, as each individually (because she never was married to them each individually). The same would hold of children too. One child can only naturally be the son of one father. This one man could say of this child, ‘this is my son’, but all the men as a whole could not say this. For even if, as Socrates wishes, no one ever knows who their real son is, every man still knows that this one child cannot be the son of all of them. So they can only say of any particular child, ‘this is my son’, in the sense that he is the son of one of their community (whoever that one happens to be). So again these ‘all’ could only speak collectively and not distributively.22

It is in this rather plain and obvious way that Aristotle must be speaking when he says that under communism a distributive sense of ‘all’ is impossible. Of course if communism could secure such a sense this might be fine, because then perhaps it would be a sign of the concord that Socrates is after. But communism can only secure a collective sense and that, as Aristotle stresses, is not a sign of concord. It does not get the personal or individual tie between each of the men and each of the women and children and so does nothing to show that the men will all think and feel the same about them.

Aristotle’s criticisms of this argument are, however, not yet finished. Others follow that are also said to be directed at ‘the thing said’,23 that is at the phrase ‘all saying mine and not mine together’. First, the most common is least cared for so the fathers, who have a thousand sons only collectively and not distributively, will all slight them in the same way. Second, the communist way they say ‘mine’ is worse than the way they say ‘mine’ in cities now, so that it is better to be a cousin in the latter way than a son in the former. Third, because of physical likenesses, it would be impossible entirely to prevent some people from making likely conjectures as to who was really their son, brother, father or mother.

Aristotle has just been discussing the word ‘all’ and the fact that, under communism, it has to be taken collectively. In these next criticisms he turns to the word ‘mine’ and shows that, given this collective sense of ‘all’, it too cannot be indicative of oneness among the citizens. In fact what it is indicative of is harmful and worse than what now exists. Besides even this collective ‘mine’ will not prevail with everyone. Some will manage to find out of whom they can really say ‘mine’, and, as a consequence, of everyone else they will say ‘not mine’. So the way Socrates speaks of unity in the phrase ‘all saying mine and not mine together’ is impossible on all the following counts. The ‘all’ is collective when it needs to be distributive; the ‘mine’ will not signify what he wants but something bad and worse than what exists now; not everyone will say mine and not mine together since some will find out their real ‘mine’ and say mine and not mine separately. These criticisms are not mere quibbles. Nor do they distort what Socrates says. They are major and serious challenges to a crucial argument.

22 Socrates’ account of the arrangements about marriage and children is given in Republic, 457c10-461e4.
23 1261b32-3.
Aristotle’s Criticisms in Chapter 4

In this chapter Aristotle criticises the several arguments of Socrates that common wives and children will produce unity and common feeling. His remarks, though various and manifold, are nevertheless clear and there is no need to list or summarise them. Objectors, however, while acknowledging the sure experience of life and practical common sense they display, complain that they are all irrelevant. Aristotle, they say, in arguing that common wives and children will corrupt and divide the guardians is assuming that the guardians are like existing ordinary people. But this is false. The guardians are specially brought up to be superior and will not be affected by communism in the way Aristotle says.

But this is in fact another case where the objectors have misunderstood Socrates as much as Aristotle. It is false to Socrates’ argument to suppose that one can appeal to the guardians’ superior education to show that they would use communism well. To do this would be to suppose that the communism is something that follows the education whereas in fact Socrates intends it to be part of that education and argues thus expressly with Glaucon. But if Socrates’ communism is a means to making the guardians good and not a result of it, then the guardians on whom it is to be imposed must be taken to have, before this imposition, all the passions and weaknesses of ordinary human beings. So Aristotle is quite right to fix on the question of what damage these passions and weaknesses are likely to cause when subjected to the peculiar pressures of communism. One might, of course, say that his views on this question are unduly pessimistic. But one cannot say that his asking it is unfair or irrelevant.

Conclusion

If my arguments are right we must conclude that Aristotle’s criticisms of Socrates’ communism of wives and children are not at all perverse in the way so many commentators have said. They are, on the contrary, fair, penetrating and very largely successful. Some, nevertheless, will complain that at best they get only the letter of the Republic right; its spirit they completely miss. Whether this complaint is just, however, raises a host of complex questions. Two brief comments are all I can offer here.

First, that Aristotle got the letter right already tells us a lot. It shows that he is, or could be, fair, accurate and penetrating in reading the works of others (and far more so, be it noted, than most of his detractors). This must surely go no little way towards preserving his reputation and reliability as a critic. Admittedly more needs to be done. There are other criticisms later on of the Republic and Laws that look very strange. But a good beginning is a good beginning. Second, we must not ignore Aristotle’s intention. In chapter 1 he makes it plain that all he intends to examine is what Socrates says in the Republic about the desirability of common wives and children. He is not interested in undertaking a wholesale critique of the Republic. So he is not, for instance, interested in the dramatic setting of the dialogue or in the fact that Socrates says what he says in discussion with eager young men. But if this was Aristotle’s intention, he could hardly have carried it out more perfectly. The lines in the Republic where Socrates argues to the

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24 Bornemaim, 136-41; Saunders, 106-7, 109-10; Susemthl and Hicks, 222.
25 So Republic, 464a8-b7, c5-e2.
26 1261a2-9.
27 Though he is far from ignorant of such facts, cf. 1265a10-12 and note 13 above.
goodness of common wives and children are precisely those that Aristotle seizes on and pursues in such detail. This is further proof of the care with which he read Plato’s text. Of course one might complain that this intention was too narrow. But whether this complaint is fair could hardly be assessed without also asking whether Aristotle should have intended to write the *Politics* at all.