

“The elder lord spoke aloud before them:
 ‘My fate is angry if I disobey these,
 but angry if I slaughter
 this child, the beauty of my house,
 with maiden bloodshed staining
 these father’s hands beside the altar.
 What of these things goes now without disaster?
 How shall I fail my ships
 and lose my faith of battle?
 To urge the wind-changing sacrifice of maiden’s blood
 angrily, for the wrath is great – it is right. May all be well yet.’”

- Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, 205-226¹

Father of Iphigenia and Argive King: An Examination Aristotle’s Account of the Household and City with the Help of Aeschylus

The verses above recount a terrible decision faced by Agamemnon, as father and king. According to a Chorus of elderly Argive men, Agamemnon and his brother, Menelaus, called a fleet of ships to Aulis to set sail for Troy, but they could not leave once the ships arrived because of poor wind conditions. As time passed, the crews started to burn through their resources and became increasingly eager to leave. Agamemnon consulted his seer, Chalcis, about what he might do to change the winds, and Chalcis, after seeing an omen of two eagles killing a pregnant hare, concluded that Artemis’s anger was the cause of the bad winds. To appease her, Agamemnon would have to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia. These instructions deeply distressed Agamemnon and Menelaus – “the kings dashed their staves to the ground and could not hold their tears” (202-4). Although Agamemnon did not want to stain his hands with his daughter’s blood, he understood going to war as fulfilling his fate and did not want to “fail his ships” (212). He then ambiguously “put on necessity’s yoke” and proceeded with the sacrifice (217-218).

Kierkegaard, writing as Johannes de Silentio, argues that in this scene, Agamemnon has to choose between two ethical obligations that are crucially of a different order. Launching the ships and preventing a disaster on the shores of Aulis are more “universal” concerns than sparing Iphigenia’s life.² Because he cannot fulfill both obligations, Agamemnon “puts aside” preserving his daughter’s life – “the lower ethical obligation” – but it remains “totally present in him by the fact that he transforms it into a wish.”³ Kierkegaard deems Agamemnon a “tragic hero” because he cannot fulfill both of his obligations but rightly fulfills his more ‘universal’ obligation and feels the pain of not being able to fulfill his lower one, his wish.⁴ In other words, Agamemnon

¹ Trans. Mark Griffith, 2013. None of the translated quotes in this paper are my own. I cite from one translation for each text and list the translation in the Works Cited.

² Kierkegaard 1983, 54, 57-59.

³ Ibid, 78.

⁴ Quinn points out that Kierkegaard is considering Euripides’ *Agamemnon* instead of Aeschylus’ (1990, 185). It is easier to see Euripides’ *Agamemnon* as a hero, but the ethical obligations and decision of Agamemnon are similar enough in both plays. If preferring the more universal obligation is ethical in the one, as Kierkegaard suggests, it is in the other as well.

correctly understands that he should sacrifice his own good and that of his household to promote the good of the ships and the war.

The phrase ‘tragic hero’ is absent from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and he does not discuss the *Oresteia* at length, but some scholarly interpretations of his political and ethical writings suggest that he may have agreed with Kierkegaard that Agamemnon sorts through his obligations correctly when he gives up his wish to be a good father in order to be a good king.⁵ For example, Stephen Taylor Holmes argues that Aristotle depicts the political community as so authoritative that importing his framework into the contemporary context would mean adopting totalitarianism.⁶ Jonathan Barnes thinks Aristotle goes wrong when he compares the individual and city to a hand and a body.⁷ As Barnes sees it, this comparison indicates that Aristotle “ignores or suppresses” the essential truth that “I am an individual.”⁸ Richard Kraut, in contrast, focuses on the ‘priority argument’ which contains the hand-body analogy and begins with the claim that the “city is prior in nature to the household and to each of us individually” (*Pol.* I.2, 1253a19-21). Kraut thinks this line of reasoning leads Aristotle astray and provides a faulty foundation for his expectations about the sorts of obligations and sacrifices that individuals should be willing to undertake for the city.⁹ On the question of the household’s relationship to the city, Hannah Arendt asserts that the Greeks (presumably including Aristotle) saw a “direct opposition” between the public and private realms: the city was the sole site of freedom and *eudaimonia*, and the household was merely instrumental to the city.¹⁰ Political concerns and activities were substantially more important than family or home life since the Greeks could only pursue a name for themselves with great speeches and actions outside the household.¹¹ None of these scholars comment on how Aristotle would have hypothetically analyzed Agamemnon’s decision, but their remarks all point to the conclusion that he would have agreed with Kierkegaard that a man should prioritize his city over his daughter.

The purpose of this paper is to argue instead that Aristotle would not approve of Agamemnon’s decision. In the first part, I consider Aristotle’s claims that the household exists for the sake of the city and that the city is prior to the household. After presenting two different kinds of ‘for the sake of which’ relationships and two different kinds of priority, I contend that Aristotle says the city is the end of the household because the household is striving to attain or realize the city, not because the city is an independent beneficiary. Similarly, it is because the city is the household’s end in this sense that it is prior to the household. As a result, in the second part of the paper, I argue that the good of the household is not merely instrumental to the good of the city and that there are only conflicts between the merely apparent goods of the household and city. Finally, in the third part, I return to Agamemnon’s decision and make the case that Agamemnon cannot be facing a contradiction between his true duties as father and king since the true good of the

⁵ It is difficult to make progress on this question by looking at the *Poetics* without taking a stance on what Aristotle means by a *hamartia*. Doing so would require another paper.

⁶ Holmes, 1979 (March).

⁷ Barnes, 1990, 263 from Mayhew 1997, 326.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kraut, 2002, 271.

¹⁰ Arendt, 1958, 24.

¹¹ Ibid, 22-37. Arendt writes, “Without mastering the necessities of life in the household, neither life nor the ‘good life’ is possible, but politics is never for the sake of life. As far as the members of the *polis* are concerned, household life exists for the sake of the ‘good life’ in the *polis*” (1958, 37).

household and city are aligned. Agamemnon rules both the Argives and his family poorly when he kills Iphigenia and sets sail for Troy.

Part One: The Relationship between the Household and the City

1a. Existing For the Sake of the City

Aristotle begins the second chapter of the *Politics* with an account of the formation of the city. This account in turn begins with a male-female couple and a master and slave. These relationships together form the household, multiple households form a village, and multiple villages form a city. After asserting that the city “comes to be for the sake of living, but [. . .] exists for the sake of living well,” Aristotle remarks,

“That is why every city exists by nature, since the first communities also do. For this one is their end, and nature is an end. For what each thing is when its coming to be has been completed, this we say is the nature of each – for example, of a human, of a horse, or of a household. Further, its for-the-sake-of-which [τὸ οὗ ἕνεκα] – namely, its end [τὸ τέλος] – is best, and self-sufficiency is both end and best” (I.2, 1252b28-1253a1).

The ‘first communities’ in this passage could refer to households or households and villages, but either way, Aristotle seems to state that the end of the household is the city. Or, to use the language that follows, the household exists for the sake of the city. Both statements seem to suggest that the household is somehow the means to the city, the way that bridle-making is the means to a bridle. Since living well only emerges once the city does, the household appears instrumental to a more important life outside of it. Arendt does not cite this passages in her discussion of the public and private realms, but it seems to support her view that the Greeks saw the private realm as instrumental to the glorious public one.

However, in multiple texts, Aristotle describes two kinds of ‘for the sake of which’ relationships which correspond to two kinds of ends.¹² In *De Anima*, he introduces the distinction while discussing how all living things reproduce in order to “partake in the eternal and divine” (II.4, 415a28-29). He remarks, “That is the goal towards which all things strive, that for the sake of which [καὶκεῖνον ἕνεκα] they do whatsoever their nature renders possible. The phrase ‘for the sake of which’ is ambiguous; it may mean either the end to achieve which, [τὸ μὲν οὗ] or the being in whose interest, the act is done [τὸ δὲ ᾧ]” (II.4, 415a29-b3). So there are two kinds of ends – an end to be attained or “realized” and an end who is, or that is, the interested party or beneficiary.¹³ For example, the end of cake ingredients could be the finished cake or the eaters of it. In the *De Anima* passage above, the end of the reproduction of living things is participation in immortality. Living things strive to attain or realize this end; immortality itself is presumably not interested in or benefitted by the activity.

In the case of the household and the city, it might seem intuitive to think that the city is a beneficiary. The household supplies future citizens and other resources for the city. In Arendt’s view, the household masters necessities so that individuals in the political sphere are able to do noble deeds.¹⁴ However, a closer look at the *Politics* passage cited above suggests the city is an

¹² Lear, 2004, 75-76.

¹³ Ibid, 76.

¹⁴ Arendt, 1958, 37.

end to be attained or realized. Immediately after he calls the city the end of the first communities, Aristotle describes the end as “what each thing is when its coming to be has been completed” (I.2, 1252b31-33). This phrase is another way of saying something attained or realized. Aristotle even provides examples of other ends of this sort – humans, horses, or households. The adult horse is not a beneficiary of the foal, but the full realization of the foal. Similarly, the full realization of all plants and animals involves reproducing and partaking in immortality. And the full realization of the household is the city. When Aristotle asserts that the city is the end of the household, he is not saying that the city is the beneficiary of the household’s labors but that somehow the household is the seed of the city, and the city is the fully grown household.

Someone might object that Aristotle is not describing the relationship between the city and the households within it but instead the relationship between the city and the households that precede it. He asserts that specifically the “first communities” have the city as their end (I.2, 1252b28-29). And it is hard to see how the city could be the end to be attained or realized by the households within it – they are not going to grow into separate cities. However, the households within a city are still working to attain or realize the city. Seeing this point requires turning to the priority argument that follows Aristotle’s account of the formation of the city.

1b. The Priority of the City

Before introducing the priority argument, Aristotle makes the claim that human beings are political animals and points to our capacity for speech as evidence that we are naturally suited for communities dedicated to not only avoiding pain and pursuing pleasure but also sharing in justice (I.2). He then remarks,

“Also the city is prior in nature to the household and to each of us individually. For it is necessary for the whole to be prior to the part. For if the whole body is put to death, there will no longer be a foot or a hand, except homonymously [ὁμώνυμος], as one might speak of a stone ‘hand’ (for, once dead, the hand will be like that). For everything is defined by its function and by its capacity, so that when they are no longer in that condition they should not be said to be the same things but homonymous ones” (I.2, 1253a19-24).

Before examining this passage myself, I want to consider why Kraut and Barnes think Aristotle wanders off the path in it and how Robert Mayhew responds to them and reasons about the priority argument. All three thinkers focus on the individual, but since the individual and household occupy the same position in this passage, whatever holds for one should hold for the other.

As previously mentioned, Barnes takes issue with the hand-body analogy, while Kraut faults the priority argument more broadly. Barnes thinks that it makes sense to see individuals as parts of nations in a loose sense. “But,” he asserts, “I am not a part in any ordinary sense: I do not stand to the Kingdom as my arm stands to my body or as a piece stands to a jigsaw puzzle or as a sparking-plug stands to a motor-car engine. For I am an independent individual.”¹⁵ Barnes seems frustrated that Aristotle does not see the individual as a whole. Kraut, on the other hand, thinks Aristotle goes wrong by maintaining that the city should be prioritized over individuals: he sees the priority argument as the implicit justification behind ostracism and the extreme sacrifices

¹⁵ Barnes, 1990, 263 from Mayhew 1997, 326.

Aristotle expects citizens to make for the city.¹⁶ Both scholars seem to fault Aristotle for treating the individual as merely a means to the city's good, which they see as separate from the individual's good.

Robert Mayhew responds explicitly to Barnes (and he could be responding to Kraut) by arguing that there is a difference between the part-whole relationship of the individual and the city on the one hand and the hand and body on the other. Mayhew cites a passage in the *Metaphysics* in which Aristotle says the primary kind of unity is a substance while the other kind is “called one (ἓν) from doing or possessing or being affected by or being related to some other thing that is one (1016b6-9).”¹⁷ Since a body is a substance, Mayhew concludes that it is a unity in the primary sense. But a city is not a substance, since substances cannot contain substances and since human individuals are substances.¹⁸ Mayhew then notes that since hands are merely parts of a substance, they do not “in any real sense exist independently or in their own right.”¹⁹ In contrast, a free individual exists “‘for the sake of himself (αὐτοῦ ἕνεκα) and not for the sake of another’ ([*Meta.*] 982b25-26).”²⁰ In short, Mayhew reasons that Aristotle's priority argument cannot be denying the wholeness of human individuals or saying that individuals are enslaved to the city because Aristotle indicates in other passages that he thinks human beings are wholes, or substances, and that citizens exist for themselves.

Even if Mayhew effectively shows that Barnes and Kraut's concerns are ill-placed, readers might still wonder about the purpose or meaning of the priority argument. Mayhew maintains that, “All that Aristotle means is that the city is prior to the individual in that the city can exist without any particular individual, but every individual human requires a city in order to exist (as a human).”²¹ In other words, Athens could continue to be Athens without Socrates, but without Athens, or presumably another city, Socrates could not continue living a fully human life, i.e. one that involves philosophizing and doing virtuous deeds instead of merely living. Mayhew grounds his reading in another passage from the *Metaphysics* in which Aristotle states that “things are called ‘prior according to nature and substance when it is possible for them to be without other things but not [these other things] without them’ (*Metaphysics*, 1019a2-4).”²² Since Aristotle uses this exact language – he says “the city is *prior in nature* to the household and to each of us individually” – Mayhew is straightforwardly making sense out of the priority argument by using a definition for a technical phrase that Aristotle himself provides (I.2, 1253a19-20).²³ If ‘priority in nature’ plainly denotes an asymmetrical dependence, then Aristotle is plainly saying that the city can exist without a given individual but that a given individual cannot live a fully human life without a city.

Mayhew cites one passage from the *Metaphysics* in which Aristotle discusses priority in nature or substance, but Aristotle uses the phrase multiple times across different works. Hikmet Unlu argues that there are two kinds of priority in nature or substance: “priority in separation and

¹⁶ Kraut, 2002, 271-272.

¹⁷ Ibid, 327.

¹⁸ Ibid, 331, 328.

¹⁹ Mayhew, 1997, 330.

²⁰ Ibid, 333.

²¹ Ibid, 336.

²² Ibid, 335.

²³ Emphasis added.

priority in perfection.”²⁴ He writes, “a thing is prior in separation to another insofar as it can be without the other but not conversely.”²⁵ In contrast, something is prior in perfection or teleologically prior to something else, if “the former is the perfection and completion of the latter.”²⁶ Unlu says that Aristotle has priority in perfection in mind when he asserts that “the house is prior to its matter, the man is prior to the boy, and bodies are prior to lines and planes.”²⁷ And, as evidence that the two kinds of priority are distinct, Unlu points readers to a passage in the *Generation of Animals* where Aristotle describes the end of something as prior to “that which exists for the sake of it.”²⁸ Aristotle is not concerned here with whether one thing can exist without another but rather with the ‘direction’ of the teleology.

At first glance, it might seem as if the priority of the body and city are cases of priority in separation, as Mayhew argues. Aristotle’s remark about the arm not being able to function if it is part of a dead body seems similar to saying that the arm cannot exist separated from the body while the body can exist separated from the arm. However, heart is a body part too, but the body cannot exist separated from it. It seems that not every whole is prior to every part on the grounds that the whole can exist without the part. Moreover, it is true that a city can do without one given individual, but an individual can also presumably function without one given city by joining another city just as a transplanted heart can pump blood in another person’s body.²⁹ It is not clear that asymmetrical dependence is what makes a whole prior to a part.

Aristotle’s discussion of priority in the *Parts of Animals* suggests instead that the priority of the whole over the part is a case of priority in perfection. He writes, “For that which is posterior in the order of development is antecedent in the order of nature, and that is genetically last which is in nature is first [. . .] for a house does not exist for the sake of bricks and stones, but these materials for the sake of the house [. . .]” (II.1, 646a25-36).³⁰ As Unlu notes, Aristotle’s concern here is not to establish that a house can exist without one of its bricks, while its bricks cannot exist without the house.³¹ Instead, he is emphasizing that no one builds a house in order to use bricks; instead people acquire bricks so that they can build a house. There is not an asymmetry in what can exist *without* what, but instead an asymmetry in what exists *for* what. And as before in Part 1a., the teleological relationship is not about a separate beneficiary but about realizing a state of perfection or completion.

In the *Politics* passage, Aristotle asserts that “if the whole body is put to death, there will no longer be a foot or a hand,” in any real sense (I.2, 1253a21-22). It might seem as if the same is not true of houses and bricks: if someone bulldozes a house, it might be possible to find an intact brick afterwards. However, Aristotle’s point seems to be that even if there is an intact brick in the rubble, it is not functioning as a brick, since the house has been torn down. A proper brick forms a wall or a sidewalk – it plays a role in a larger structure. Similarly, the hand of the dead body is not a true hand, not because it is separated from the body, but because it is no longer able

²⁴ Unlu, 2020, 137.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 138.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 149.

²⁹ I am grateful to Gabriel Lear for pointing out this thought to me in paper feedback, April 6, 2024.

³⁰ Unlu cites this passage, 2020, 149.

³¹ Unlu, 2020, 149.

to perform its role as part of a body. Aristotle's point is not that the body could survive amputation, while the hand could not. In his thought experiment, the whole body is dead. His point is that the hand, like other parts of animals, is not merely a material composition with various features. What it means to be a hand is to be something that plays a role in a larger composition, just as what it means to be a brick is to be a piece of a construction. The hand can play this role when it is part of the body. And that is why the body is prior to the hand – it is the perfected or completed whole in which the part can perform its role.

Turning back to the household and the city, the city is prior to the household because the city is the composition, the ordered whole, and the end to be realized of the households that are part of it. The households, like bricks and arms, can only truly function as households when they are part of a city. A quick glance at the functions of the household support this thought. Although Aristotle suggests households are capable of procreation and production before the emergence of the city, at the end of Book I, he suggests that the most important role of the household manager is educating his wife and children in virtue (I.13, 1259b17-22). Because education requires leisure, which only the city can provide, the household manager can only attend to his most important task if his household is part of a city (VI.4, VIII.3). Becoming part of a city presumably alters the productive and procreative activities of households too: since cities are sites of exchange and intermarriage, they presumably make it easier to provide for one's needs and to meet a husband or wife (III.9). In short, the priority argument does not establish that the city's concerns are more important than the individual's or the household's. Instead, it contends that the city enables the perfection or completion of the individual and the household.

Part Two: The Good of the Household and the City

In this next section, I argue that the household pursues ends that are good for the city but also inherently good for it, and I contend that the household and city only come into conflict when at least one is not pursuing its true good.

2a. Inherent, not Merely Instrumental Goods

At first glance, it might seem possible to adopt the readings of the two passages that I defended above and to think that citizens and households still end up being merely instrumental to the city. Since the city is the arrangement to be realized, it might seem as if individuals or households are only good in proportion to how useful they are to the city. One way to express this concern is to say that citizens and households are slaves of the city, and there are places in the text that seem to suggest this view. Aristotle says that slaves are pieces of property that, like a part, “is not just a part of another thing, but is *wholly* that thing's” (I.4, 1254a9-11). Since citizens and households are parts of the city, they seem to be *wholly* the city's, in the same way that slaves are *wholly* their master's. Aristotle also notes that a slave “is by nature not his own but someone else's” (I.4, 1254a13-16). He later comments, as Mayhew points out, that citizens belong not to themselves alone, but to the city (VIII.1, 13337a27-29).³² Finally, Aristotle remarks that the “same thing is advantageous for part and whole, body and soul, and a slave is a part of his master” (I.6, 1255b8-12). Aristotle elsewhere states that “the soul rules the body with the rule of a master” (I.5, 1254b3-4). Perhaps all wholes, including the city, rule their parts as masters rule slaves.

³² Mayhew, 1997, 338.

However, this reading ignores the distinctions Aristotle makes between how the good of the slave and master relate on the one hand and how the good of the free citizen, household, and city relate, on the other. Aristotle asserts that the good of the master and the slave are one and the same, but by coincidence (III.6, 1278b34-36). The slave is ruled for the master's advantage which turns out to be his advantage because the master sustains him in order that he can continue to work as his slave (III.6, 1278b35-37). In this sense, the slave exists for the sake of the master, and the master is an independent beneficiary. A slave is part of his master, but a separate part (I.6, 1255b11). In contrast, the individual and household exist for the sake of the city, but the city, as I argued in Part One, is not a separate or independent beneficiary. The city contains the households, and the good of the city is not something separate from the citizens and households but instead consists of each of these living well.³³ And unlike slaves, households pursue ends that are good for the city but also inherently good. In the next few paragraphs, I will consider some of these ends – namely, procreation, education, and familial friendship – in greater detail to draw out this point.

At first glance, some of Aristotle's political proposals for marriage and education seem to control the household to such a degree that it appears to be a slave or merely instrumental to the city's designs. In the best regime, the laws will dictate when men and women can marry and have children (VII.16). In addition, regardless of what parents want or think, disabled babies are to be exposed and unborn babies conceived outside of the legal time frame are to be aborted (VII.16, 1335b19-26). Aristotle even refers to having children in the best regime as “render[ing] public service [λειτουργέω],” a phrase (in English and term in Greek) that usually refers to measures like funding a chorus, trireme, or feast (VII.16, 1135b27-29).³⁴ Because procreation seems akin to other public works projects in the best regime, it seems as if the household is merely a factory of healthy children for the city's sake. Similarly, in the case of education, the city seems to dictate what the household should do. Aristotle says that household managers should teach their children and wives virtue in a way that corresponds to the regime (I.13, 1259b19-22, 1260b14-16). Because the political community dictates the shape of family and household life in so many ways, it seems fair to think that the household is merely a tool of the city.

However, despite the influences of the city on procreation and household education, these activities are not purely instrumental to the city; they are intrinsically good as well. Comparing Aristotle's remarks on procreation with the proposals in Plato's *Laws* supports this thought. The interlocutors of the *Laws* also regulate procreation and even propose a custom identical to one that Aristotle mentions, namely encouraging or requiring pregnant women to go for daily walks (*Laws* 789e, *Pol.* VII.16, 1335b13-14). However, the *Laws*' interlocutors also decide to penalize people for not marrying on the grounds that it is impious because it constitutes a refusal to participate in the immortality of the species and results in not leaving behind offspring to make sacrifices to gods (721c-d, 774a). Bachelors above a certain age are fined and deprived of honors (721d, 774a-c). Later on, the Athenian Stranger encourages marriages between people of different classes to foster homogeneity within the city and says citizens must believe that “in marriage what must be wooed is not what is most pleasant for oneself, but what is in the interest of the city” (773a-c). In contrast, Aristotle does not describe procreation as pious but as natural

³³ Aristotle defines the city as the “community in living well for both households and families” (III.9, 1280b32-45).

³⁴ Reeve, 2017, fn. 371.

(I.2, 1252a28-30). It is not about leaving someone behind to sacrifice to the gods, since animals and plants share the drive to procreate but do not worship gods. Procreating is about approximating the divine (*DA* II.4, 41529-30).³⁵ Contemplation is a closer form of approximation, but because we are animals, we can also engage in this lower form by procreating (*Meta.* 1072b14-26).³⁶ Aristotle suggests human beings have a drive to do so, and the best city has no fine for bachelors. The goodness of procreation contributes to cities, but it does not depend on or come from the city.

In the case of household education, Aristotle unfortunately does not describe what it would look like in great detail or how it would differ depending on the constitution. However, at one point he criticizes typical, oligarchic homes, noting that those “superior in the goods of luck” start resisting political rule “right from the start at home while they are still children” because of the luxuries they have (*Pol.* IV.11, 1295b12-17). On the one hand, Aristotle is concerned about how this bad upbringing will affect a city. It is not good for an oligarchy if the future rulers never learn how to be ruled. On the other hand, though, Aristotle is noting that this upbringing is bad for the children themselves. Before making this remark, he argues that it is easier to obey one’s reason if one has a moderate amount of wealth and the other “goods of luck” (IV.11, 1295b6-8). An oligarchic father who does not spoil his child is not merely preserving the regime but also laying the foundation for his child’s future happiness and for a pleasant family life. Aristotle is not arguing for propaganda or enslaved households, but instead contending that household managers should be aware of the particular ways that their wives and children might be dragged away from virtue because of the circumstances in which they are living. No matter what the constitution is, Aristotle says that household managers should be teaching their wives and children virtues, and learning virtue is inherently good for the student (I.13, 1259b19-22, 1260b14-16). In short, ethical education within the household is beneficial for the city but also inherently good for the members of the household.

Finally, familial friendships, like education and procreation, benefit the city but do not exist solely for it. Aristotle argues that familial relationships provide uniquely intense care to the very young and very old and supply the able-bodied and median aged with uniquely rich opportunities to exercise the virtue of friendship. He notes the exceptional nature of family relationships when he argues against Socrates’ proposal for the communism of women and children in the *Republic*. He writes, “there are two things above all that make human beings care and feel friendship, what is special [to them] and what is beloved – neither of which can exist among people under such a constitution [i.e., one without families]” (*Pol.* II.4, 1262b21-25). In other words, there are no relationships that elicit love and care more than familial ones. These friendships are politically useful, since more people will be neglected in a city without families than in a city with families, but they are undoubtedly good for the families and individuals themselves too.

Families also give individuals unique opportunities to exercise the virtue of friendship. Aristotle calls friendship one the “external goods” (*NE* IX.9, 1169b8-10). Perhaps surprisingly, the good in friendship does not consist of having friends, but rather of having people to love as friends.

³⁵ I am grateful to Lear for pointing me to this passage (2004, 81).

³⁶ Lear suggests that someone trying to approximate the Prime Mover will contemplate but also think about other ways to “approximate the divine activity so that his whole life may be as godlike as possible” (2004, 91). She is thinking of virtuous pursuits, but procreation could also be part of this extension (2004, 91-92).

Aristotle asserts, “friendship seems to consist more in loving than in being loved,” and he cites the love of a mother experiencing hard times who gives up her child to be raised by another person as an illustration of this principle (*NE* VIII.8, 1159a26-27). The mother loves the child even though she will not be loved by the child in return. And, although Aristotle does not explicitly say so, the child seems to be an external good for the mother by being someone to love, similar to the way that wealth is an external good to a generous person who gives it away. Aristotle extends this general line of thinking later on when he asserts that mothers seem to love their children even more than fathers do because they have suffered more pains for them (*NE* IX.7, 1168a20-25). Part of what makes life good, Aristotle seems to suggest, is loving others and even suffering for them. It is good for a city if its citizens are loved and cared for and have opportunities to love and care for others, but it would be a mistake to regard these goods as purely instrumental to political ends. Familial friendships are very clearly inherently good for the household too.

2b. Conflicts between Merely Apparent Goods

Nevertheless, family members do not always get along with each other or with their city. Aristotle quotes a line in the *Politics* that “wars among brothers are harsh,” and in his discussion of regime preservation, he cites numerous examples of political upheaval related to marriage connections (*Pol.* VII.7, 1328a13-14; V.4, 6, 7). Certain households seem to work against the city’s good.

Aristotle does not discuss ostracizing households, but he partially endorses ostracizing individuals. Readers might be inclined to think, with Kraut, that Aristotle sides with the city in a conflict between it and a household or individual. Kraut writes that in the case of ostracism, “One person’s good is sacrificed for the good of the city – just as a body might be saved by the amputation of one of its limbs. The justification of ostracism evidently presupposes that the good of the whole is prior to the good of any single part.”³⁷ Aristotle’s own words on ostracism might seem to support this view that the practice is an instance in which the city’s good rightfully trumps the individual’s or household’s. He asserts that the principle behind ostracism is present even in crafts, for no artist would paint an animal with a foot that is out of proportion with its body, no matter how beautiful it is (III.13, 1284b6-9). With this comparison, Aristotle seems to be asserting that even someone who is exceedingly virtuous – the counterpart of a beautiful foot – deserves to be ostracized for being out of proportion with the other citizens and the whole.

However, Aristotle ends this first discussion of ostracism by noting that cities have often made mistakes by ostracizing people, and he asserts that the exceedingly virtuous person would be crowned king in the best city, not kicked out (III.13, 1284b18-34).³⁸ In other words, Aristotle does not support ostracism on the grounds that the city’s good is greater than the individual’s. The relevant question when it comes to ostracism is whether or not the city and the individual are pursuing their true good. If an individual is perceived as a threat because he is exceedingly virtuous, then ostracism is wrong. The best city would not do such a thing. In contrast, if an individual has amassed so much wealth and power that he is above the law, then he is not pursuing his true good, he is threatening his city’s good, and he may rightfully be ostracized,

³⁷ Kraut, 2002, 272.

³⁸ The analog in the painting example would be to make the most beautiful part the face or the eyes.

though Aristotle thinks in practice that ostracism often creates more faction (V.3, V.8).³⁹ Just as amputation is only sensible if the limb is threatening the health of the body, ostracism is only sensible if the individual has set himself up against the city's good.

Readers still might wonder whether ostracism, like amputation, is only possible or sensible because the city and body can exist without the individual and limb. In other words, it might seem as if ostracism and amputation depend on the city and body being prior in separation. However, as noted earlier, not every body part can be amputated, which suggests the body is not prior in separation to all its parts. And the individual can exist without a given city. Ostracized citizens of Athens were allowed to return after ten years.⁴⁰ Moreover, Aristotle himself left Athens without being ostracized, famously remarking that he did not wish to see the city "sin against philosophy twice."⁴¹ Kraut would likely not characterize Aristotle's exit as evidence that the individual is prior to the city, and the case is not the complete mirror image to ostracism because Aristotle was not an Athenian citizen. But his exit indicates that he did not think individuals were not tied to a given city and bound to sacrifice their good for it.

At the same time, in a comical way, the quote attributed to Aristotle suggests that he saw himself as pursuing the good of Athens by leaving it – he was saving it from sin. A closer look at the relationship between the city, household, and individual suggests there is some truth in this thought. Because the city is the end that the household and individual are trying to realize and because they are its parts, the goods of all three naturally align. Something cannot be at odds with its *telos*, and an end which supplies the criteria of success for something cannot benefit from that thing failing.⁴² A house is not bettered by bad bricks, nor are bricks improved if the house they are part of starts to slant or collapse. Similarly, a hand is not healthier if the body it is part of develops diabetes, and the body is not healthier if its hand becomes infected. Pain in the hand is not a local experience, and exhaustion or a fever makes it harder to knit or write in cursive.

The interlocutors of the *Republic* aspire to make Kallipolis into just this kind of community of pleasure and pain by eliminating the households and families of the Guardians, which they see as an obstacle to unity (462c-464b). Aristotle, in contrast, asserts that the city is already such a community precisely because its households promote friendship and connections and provide small enough groups in which people can truly empathize with each other's pleasures and pains.⁴³ He asserts that "there will be less friendship where women and children are held communally" (II.4, 1262a41-b3). And shortly thereafter remarks, "we think friendship to be the

³⁹ Aristotle does not state how the individuals have gained power in V.3, but he cites their "superiority" as a cause of faction (1302b14). Since virtuous people do not tend to cause factions, the individuals in the V.3 passage are likely not superior in virtue but in connections or wealth (V.4, 1304b3-5). Such individuals are not pursuing their own goods since excessive wealth and connections are not conducive to living virtuously (IV.11, 1295b4-7). Finally, these individuals cannot share in political justice because they are so powerful that "there is no law [for them], since they are the law themselves" (*Pol.* III.13, 1284a10-14; see also *NE* V.6, 113425-30).

⁴⁰ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "ostracism," T. Britannica, editors of Encyclopaedia, April 19, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ostracism>.

⁴¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Aristotle at 2,400." B. Duignan, April 19, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/story/aristotle-at-2400>.

⁴² Something's *telos* provides its "criteria of success" (Lear, 2004, 17).

⁴³ Aristotle says we can only weep and rejoice with so many people (*NE* IX.10, 1171a5-13).

greatest of goods for cities, since in this way people are least likely to engage in faction” (II.4, 1262b6-9). Against the backdrop of the *Republic*, it might seem counterintuitive to see families as sources of friendship that decrease faction. But Aristotle asserts a second time that Socrates’ family-less city will have much less friendship, not total friendship: relationships in Kallipolis will be like watered-down wine (II.4, 1262b14-18).⁴⁴ Households, families, and the marriages in between them help bind cities into communities of friendship and make cities like bodies whose goods align with their parts (III.10).

In sum, if cities, households, and individuals come into conflict, it must be because one party is pursuing a merely apparent good. In addition, if any party pursues its true good, it must be promoting the true good of the other. Household education in corrupt cities illustrates this principle. Towards the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle asserts that public education is best, but in the absence of good formation from cities, fathers and friends should try to educate their sons and one another (X.9, 1180a28-35). David Keyt cites this passage as evidence that Aristotle thinks the good man and good citizen might behave differently in deviant regimes: the good man will educate his children to be virtuous unconditionally, while the good citizen will educate or allow his children to be educated in a virtue that reflects the regime’s incorrect ranking of life’s goods.⁴⁵ However, while the father who educates his children in real virtue might come into conflict with the city’s merely apparent good – perhaps he will seem to undermine the democratic spirit by insisting on obedience – he will be pursuing its true good.⁴⁶ A city with citizens who exercise real courage, real temperance, and the like has a better ability to realize its constitution than one with citizens who lack these virtues. And the father who educates his children in real virtue will be pursuing his household’s good, his children’s, and his city’s.

Part Three: Agamemnon’s Decision

These considerations allow me to return to Agamemnon’s decision. Unlike Kierkegaard, Aristotle would not think that a citizen must always prioritize the city over his own good or his household’s good. In fact, a citizen should never have to choose between his own good, his household’s, or his city’s. Seen through Aristotle’s eyes, Agamemnon’s decision appears to be an ethical dilemma only because one of the goods in front of him is merely an apparent good.

In the case of the household, it is clear that Agamemnon would be pursuing its true good if he did not take Iphigenia’s life. Aristotle describes fathers as being greater benefactors to their children than kings are to their subjects by giving them “existence (which seems to be the greatest service) as well as [. . .], nurture, and education” (*NE* VIII.11, 1161a10-18). There is no room for child sacrifice in an Aristotelian portrait of virtuous fatherhood. It is true that Aristotle argues that babies should be aborted or exposed in the best regime if they are conceived outside of the proper window or disabled, but presumably his justification for these practices is that these children will not have the bodies they would need to enjoy *eudaimonia* (*Pol.* VII.15-16).⁴⁷ This

⁴⁴ I am grateful to Paul Ludwig for helping me to see the importance of this passage (2020, 169-170).

⁴⁵ Keyt, 2007, 239.

⁴⁶ See *Pol.* VI.4 1318b37-1319a2.

⁴⁷ Aristotle considers procreation as part of his broader investigation into education and how citizens can be formed to achieve their end as human individuals.

justification does not apply in Iphigenia's case. She is not killed on the grounds that she could not be happy but on the grounds that her blood is needed for the war. Similarly, Iphigenia's case is not analogous to ostracism – she is not amassing a disproportionate amount of power or wealth. In short, there is nothing about Iphigenia herself or Agamemnon's relationship with her that is a threat to the city's true good.

If this interpretation of Aristotle and Agamemnon's relationship with Iphigenia is sound, then Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia is similar to amputating a perfectly healthy limb. And the conflict between Agamemnon's duties as father and king must result from the political community not being ordered to its true end. In other words, while Agamemnon may think that he is pursuing the good of the Argives and its allies by going to war, his dilemma and the obvious evil that he does in killing Iphigenia suggest that the war is not actually in service to the true good of the city. The city's pursuit of *eudaimonia* should not require spilling innocent blood.

As it turns out, there is even evidence in the *Oresteia* that the war is bad for the Argives. Before Agamemnon returns, the Chorus sings of Menelaus' sadness after the abduction of his wife, but then notes how the war to retrieve Helen has essentially brought this same sadness to every household in Greece that sent a young man to the war (427-431). The pain that instigated the war pales in comparison to the pain it has caused, even among the families of the victors. The Chorus also suggests that there may be civil unrest or anger at Agamemnon and his brother for calling for the war. They sing of how citizens praise the bravery of their men but also cannot help but see that these men died for "someone else's woman" (448). "Thus they mutter in secrecy,/ and the slow anger creeps below their grief/ at Atreus' sons and their quarrels" (449-451). The war has brewed division and resentment at political authorities, and, at least in hindsight, it strikes the Argives as a private affair disguised as a public one. The Chorus even tells Agamemnon, "when you marshaled this armament/ for Helen's sake, I will not hide it,/ in ugly style you were written in my heart/ for steering aslant the mind's course/ to bring home by blood/ sacrifice and dead men that wild spirit [Helen]" (799-804).⁴⁸ In short, Agamemnon does not prioritize the city over his household; instead he harms his family in the process of leading the political community poorly.

Despite Kierkegaard's sense that Agamemnon's dilemma is about his more universal, public obligations coming into conflict with his private, familial ones, there is another reason to think that the war is really about "Atreus' sons and their quarrels," as the Argives put it (451). The Chorus quietly presents the thought that Agamemnon is not deciding between Iphigenia and the Argive cause but between his daughter and Helen.⁴⁹ Describing Agamemnon's decision, they remark, "He endured then/ to sacrifice his daughter/ in support of war waged for a woman,/ first offering for the ships' sake" (223-226). The history of the House of Atreus also seems to support the conclusion that Iphigenia is plainly killed for Helen. Agamemnon and Menelaus' father, Atreus, had a brother named Thyestes. In the first play of the trilogy, the priestess Cassandra relates how Thyestes slept with Atreus' wife, and how Atreus killed Thyestes' children and fed them to him in revenge (1214-1245). This event haunts Atreus' household, and Agamemnon seems to fall into mirroring both his uncle and his father: he is so concerned for his brother's wife (Helen) – and perhaps for the glory and wealth that will come from sacking Troy as well as

⁴⁸ John Peradotto pointed out this passage to me (1969, 255).

⁴⁹ I am also grateful to Peradotto for helping me to see this point (1969, 255).

the decree of Zeus – that he metaphorically devours his own child in order to pursue Helen. His decision to sacrifice Iphigenia is not about prioritizing the city but about destroying one part of his family in the name of saving another and committing revenge on himself in the process. The *Agamemnon* is not about a conflict between the city and the household or political and familial obligations, but a cursed family destroying itself and the patriarch shedding the first blood because of a precise alignment of his own proclivities, strengths, and weaknesses with the circumstances in which he finds himself.⁵⁰

Readers of the *Oresteia* might object that Agamemnon is not merely trying to retrieve Helen but also trying to act as an agent of Zeus' justice. The war could be seen as a meta-political cause: even if the Argives do not want to fight, someone needs to defend the laws of Zeus, protector-of-strangers.⁵¹ Paris clearly violates these laws in taking Helen, and it is not so much Helen, but the principle of the abduction that the Argives are fighting for.

I don't want to suggest by any means that I can tie up every thread of the *Oresteia*. The trilogy is remarkably rich, and its treatment of Zeus is something that could be pondered for some time. However, there are reasons to think that the trilogy calls into question just how just Zeus' justice really is. The Chorus describes Zeus indiscriminately killing the Trojans – young and old – by sweeping a net of “gigantic toils/ of enslavement and final disaster” over all of them (355-361).⁵² Clytemnestra will later brag about how she has killed Agamemnon, agent of Zeus, with a net (1380-1383). The two net images suggest that Zeus' justice is no different from a treacherous wife's revenge. Moreover, Zeus appears to be an agent of violence against the innocent. The two eagles that devour a pregnant hare in Chalcis' omen unambiguously represent Zeus. Since Artemis takes offence at the eagles' feasting, the play suggests that even other divinities are disturbed by Zeus' actions.⁵³ Finally, when they are describing Iphigenia's death, the Chorus interrupts their narrative to sing a Hymn to Zeus. Their song reveals, as David Cohen puts it, that “the divine order is also founded upon violence, crimes against kin, and the law of superior force.”⁵⁴ In short, the fact that Agamemnon is serving as an agent of Zeus' justice does not mean that his conduct is that of a just king; in fact, it seems to guarantee that like the divine king, he will be a devourer of the young.⁵⁵

Conclusion

In this essay, I've made the case that Aristotle's assertions that the household exists for the sake of the city and that the city is prior to the household do not mean that the household is merely instrumental to the city or that citizens must prioritize the city over their own households. I've

⁵⁰ This assertion has roots in Sophie-Grace Chappell and Alan Sommerstein's readings, which both see Agamemnon not as a victim of a dilemma but as an agent of destruction (Chappell, 2023; Sommerstein, 2021).

⁵¹ Peradotto also mentions this possibility that the reason for the sacrifice is the “law of hospitality” (1969, 255). See also Cohen, 1986, 132.

⁵² Cohen points out this passage (1986, 133).

⁵³ Cohen does not make this exact assertion, but he writes that “Zeus is identified with the devouring of the hare with its unborn offspring” (1986, 133). And shortly thereafter he quotes the line that Artemis “loathes the feast of the eagles' (138)” (1986, 133).

⁵⁴ Cohen, 1986, 133.

⁵⁵ Sommerstein writes, “To be an agent of the will of Zeus is not a guarantee of moral rectitude or divine favor. Clytemnestra, after all, was also an agent of the will of Zeus” (2021, 37).

also argued that household pursues ends that are inherently good for it and for the city and that the true good of the household and city align. I opened with Agamemnon's dilemma and Kierkegaard's reading of it with the intention of inviting readers into questions about the relationship between the household and the city in an imaginative way. And it is my hope that returning to Agamemnon's decision with Aristotle's analysis helps in some way to draw out some of the nuances of Aristotle's thought without doing an injustice to the complexity of Aeschylus's tragedy.

Returning briefly to the *Oresteia*, it was once popular to read the trilogy as a progression from justice-as-vengeance in the *Agamemnon* to a peaceful justice obtained through political courts in the *Eumenides* (the final play).⁵⁶ To briefly summarize the events in between, when Agamemnon returns home from Troy, Clytemnestra (his wife) and Aegisthus (her lover) kill him. In the next play, Orestes (Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's son) avenges his father by killing his mother and her lover, only to be haunted by the Furies, spirits who demand justice when kindred blood is shed. In the final play Orestes and the Furies come to Athens where Orestes faces a trial for killing his mother. Athena famously intervenes in the trial, arguing that the father is the sole parent, and her vote allows the previously evenly split jury to acquit Orestes. The Furies are still somewhat furious, and Athena placates them by giving them a role within Athens as goddesses of "maidens, wives, [and] elder women" (1027).

There is a way of reading this ending as the triumph of the political court over familial vengeance and the city over the family more generally.⁵⁷ However, as Simon Goldhill points out, the evenly split vote, the need for Athena to placate the Furies, and Athena's flawed argument that the father is the sole parent call into question the thought that the trial has brought about a stable political order and not merely swept a complex problem about the relationship between the family and city under the rug.⁵⁸ Seen in this lighting, the trilogy depicts powerful families as politically disastrous, but it has no hopes that the political order that replaces them rests on more solid ground.

Aristotle's political and ethical writings offer a much more hopeful vision of cooperation between the household and the political community. His narrative at the start of the *Politics* suggests that the city grows out of families and villages, and that there is a harmony between the natural purposes of the individual, household, and city. Aristotle's discussions of fatherhood, kingship, and political rule suggest that there is a correspondence between being a father and being a king, not a contradiction, since both roles essentially entail ruling for the good of the ruled. And instead of becoming like Zeus, human parents join plants and animals in approximating the Prime Mover's immortality when they leave behind beings like themselves and make the species immortal. However, since the end of a human being is not living but living well, the effort to leave behind another like oneself would seem to involve not only procreating but also nurturing and educating children. Such tasks require leisure which only cities can provide. And so the effort to imitate the Prime Mover through procreating in the fullest sense for human beings can only be realized within a city. The city is not opposed to the household, and the household does not exist solely for its sake. Instead, "The end of the city is living well [. . .]

⁵⁶ Goldhill, 2004, 29-30. See for instance, Meier 1993, 102-137. Goldhill gave me this reference.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 29-30.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 30-31.

And “the city is the community of families and villages in complete and self-sufficient living, which we say is living happily and nobly” (*Pol.* III.9, 1279b36-41).

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