

Public and Private Ownership in Plato and Aristotle

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

The privatization of publicly owned and operated industries and services that has occurred in certain countries over the last forty or fifty years is routinely condemned on the political left, yet the grounds of that condemnation often remain unspecified. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the practical advantages of what Cass Sunstein has called “incompletely theorized agreements” in facilitating collective action.¹ But the advantage of distinguishing between different kinds of objections is that doing so allows us to assess their implications independently and therefore weigh and balance different factors in our practical reasoning. Sometimes we might want to object to privatization on straightforward economic grounds: when Chicago sold its parking meters on a seventy-five-year lease for just \$1.15 billion, giving up a long-term revenue stream in order to balance the budget for just one year, it seemed less like selling the family silver than selling the family silver mine.² Other times we might want to object on more abstract lines: we might wonder, for instance, whether prisons run by profit-seeking private corporations can ever be legitimate.³ Now we seem to be squarely in the realm of political philosophy, which from Hobbes onwards has often asked under what conditions, if any, coercion can be considered legitimate. In this chapter I want to outline an objection to privatization that occupies a middle-ground between practical concerns of the nickel-and-dime variety and abstract concerns that hold independently of consequences. Not coincidentally, my discussion will focus on the ancient Greek philosophers whose failure to distinguish between empirical and a priori considerations so horrified Kant, namely Plato and Aristotle.

In *The Republic*, Plato has Socrates ban private property for the guardians of his ideal state. This prohibition does not amount to a program of public ownership in anything

¹ Cass R. Sunstein, “Incompletely Theorized Agreements Commentary,” *Harvard Law Review* 108 (1994): 1733–1772.

² For a broader critique, see Ivan Kaplan, “Does the Privatization of Publicly Owned Infrastructure Implicate the Public Trust Doctrine – Illinois Central and the Chicago Parking Meter Concession Agreement,” *Northwestern Journal of Law and Social Policy* 7 (2012): 136–169.

³ See Avihay Dorfman and Alon Harel, “The Case Against Privatization,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 41 (2013): 67–102, and Chiara Cordelli, *The Privatized State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

like the modern sense: Socrates never argues that the property denied to guardians should be held by the polis as a whole, or that the polis should own the means of production. What I want to argue, however, is that the line of thought that underlies Socrates's prohibitions might offer *us* reasons for favouring public ownership in certain circumstances. The structure of this chapter is therefore as follows. I begin, in Section 3.2, by reconstructing Socrates's basic argument for preventing the guardians from owning property. Then, in Section 3.3, I show how that argument is grounded in Socrates's view of labour and in particular in his objections to what he calls "moneymaking." In Section 3.4, I argue that Socrates's position on personal property derives from a concern over whether citizens will reliably work for the common good in the absence of institutional restraints. In Section 3.5, I consider Aristotle's objections to Socrates's proposals, arguing that Aristotle's position is in some ways more utopian than Plato's, and then in the concluding Section 3.6, I suggest how all of this might bear on contemporary discussions regarding privatization.

3.2 THE LOGIC OF PLATO'S COMMUNISM

In Book III of *The Republic*, Socrates suggests that the rulers of an ideal city would be prohibited from owning any private property that is not "wholly necessary" (416d). They should receive a salary in the form of basic provisions fit for "temperate and courageous men, who are warrior-athletes," but beyond that they are to live and eat together like soldiers in a camp, their living quarters and storerooms are to be open for all to enter at will, and they will be forbidden to handle or touch gold and silver, to wear them as jewellery, to drink from cups made out of them, and even to enter buildings where they are present (416d–417a). These restrictions do not themselves amount to a program of public ownership, since there is no suggestion that the property denied to guardians on a personal basis is to be held in common by the polis as a whole. Some of it (such as the living quarters) will be held by the community of guardians, while the rest (such as the gold and silver) will remain with the ordinary citizens who are to be spared the predations of rapacious rulers. Still less is there any suggestion that ownership of the means of production should be transferred to the state. What I want to argue, however, is that the line of thought that underlies Socrates's prohibitions might offer *us* reasons for favouring public ownership in certain circumstances. To see why, we need to examine the logic of Plato's communism.

Socrates sets up a series of correlative binaries: depending on whether or not the rulers are allowed "private land, houses and money," they will become either wolves *or* sheepdogs toward their flock; savage, hostile masters *or* gentle allies; moneymakers *or* soldiers; farmers and household managers *or* guardians (415e–416b, 417a). This seems to imply a slippery-slope argument according to which there is no meaningful difference between different levels of private property to which guardians might have access, one drop of the polluting substance being enough to corrupt them entirely. This interpretation is corroborated in Book VIII, where we hear that Kallipolis will collapse when a few rotten apples find their way into the ruling class and "pull the constitution toward moneymaking and the acquisition of land, house, gold, and silver" (547b) with the result that soon the whole ruling class "will have an appetite for money just like those in oligarchies, passionately adoring gold and silver in secret, owning storehouses and private treasuries where they can deposit them and keep them hidden; and they will have walls around their houses, real private nests, where they can spend lavishly on their women or on anyone else they please" (548a). As in Book III, the result

is a change in their relationship to the ruled: rather than guarding the other citizens “as free friends and providers of upkeep,” they treat them as slaves, serfs and servants, and this means they need to be held down by force (547b-c).

Like any slippery-slope argument, this might be dismissed as melodramatic; we might think the challenge is just to find reliable safeguards and bulwarks to prevent things getting out of hand. We will come back to this thought at the end of the chapter, but for now the point is that if Socrates and his interlocutors reject – or at least fail to consider – such an approach, it is because in their view the stakes are simply too high: as Socrates puts it at the start of Book IV, “if the guardians of our laws and city are not really what they seem to be, you may be sure that they will destroy the city and, on the other hand, they alone have the opportunity to govern it well and make it happy” (421a). Here the binaries listed just now are resolved into a single one: either the rulers are genuine guardians (*phulakas hōs alēthōs*) or they are frauds who claim to be what they are not.

In what follows, Socrates presents three considerations that link this binary to the question of private property. The first is that a city in which the powerful are allowed to accumulate wealth will be one in which class conflict emerges, such that it is no longer really *one* city but rather contains two cities at war with one another, “the city of the poor and that of the rich,” each of which in turn contains further cities (422e–423a, 547b–c, 551d). Given that there is no greater good for a city “than what binds it together and makes it one” (462b), it follows that the ruling class should not be allowed to accumulate wealth.⁴ The second consideration derives from the one man, one job principle (370b–c, 423d). Like all craftsmen, guardians must devote themselves exclusively to their own profession if they are to do it well. If property turns guardians into “farmers” and “household managers,” it is presumably because ownership brings with it the task of stewardship – those who own land have to cultivate it and those who own houses have to manage them – and therefore tears them away from the task for which the city most needs them (417a, 421b).⁵ The third consideration is closely related. Wealth, Socrates says, makes craftsmen degenerate qua craftsmen: they are no longer willing to devote themselves to their crafts and therefore become idler and more careless than before (421d). Since guardianship is a craft (421c, 500d), it follows that wealth will make guardians degenerate qua guardians.⁶

The argument concerning social unity and the arguments concerning craftsmanship are more closely related than they might seem. What it means for a city to be *one* city is for its citizens to be pulling in the same direction. When a chasm opens up between rich and poor, the notion of a common good comes to seem quixotic since neither side of the divide can view its own flourishing as bound up with that of the other. Meanwhile, Socrates specifies what it means for citizens to aim at the common good in terms of performing their allotted roles in

⁴ This argument can be fleshed out by pairing Socrates’ Book V remark that there is no “greater evil for a city than what tears it apart and makes it many instead of one” with his Book VIII observation that oligarchical regimes permit “the greatest of all evils,” namely “allowing someone to sell all his possessions and someone else to buy them, and then allowing the seller to continue living in the city while not being any one of its parts – neither moneymaker nor craftsman, nor cavalryman, nor hoplite, but a poor person without means” (552a).

⁵ In this vein, consider Socrates’ remarks on the evils that the guardians would escape thanks to his proposed living arrangements: “the flatteries of the rich by the poor; the perplexities and sufferings involved in bringing up children; the need to make the money necessary to feed the household – the borrowings, the defaults, and all the things people have to do to provide an income to hand over to their wives and slaves to spend on housekeeping” (465b–c).

⁶ Poverty would also cause such a degeneration, according to Socrates, but only insofar as it denies craftsmen the things they need for their craft; since the guardians are to be provided with just enough to enable them to carry out their tasks, this need not concern us (416d–e).

the division of labour to the best of their abilities. A city comes to exist, Socrates says, “because none of us is individually self-sufficient, but each has many needs he cannot satisfy” (369b). Mutual advantage is therefore the principle (*archē*) of the city, its guiding purpose, and this is what grounds the principle of specialization (370b–c). The thought that a city is well-ordered when united (462b) and the thought that it is well-ordered when its citizens are “the best possible craftsmen at their own work” (421c) are therefore one and the same, since the only unity that a city can aspire to is the complex harmony of a fully functional cooperative scheme for mutual advantage.⁷ As Socrates puts it in Book IV, each citizen must be “assigned to what naturally suits him, with one person assigned to one job so that, practicing his own pursuit, each of them will become not many but one, and *the entire city thereby naturally grow to be one, not many*” (423d, my italics). And on Socrates’s account, a city that is united by means of each citizen practicing his own pursuit is a just city.

Justice is a property that strictly speaking applies to the whole city or the whole soul, and not to their parts. But because justice is the property of being well organized or constituted, such that each part is doing the work appropriate to it, Socrates seems to allow that we can speak of justice in a derivative or secondary sense as applying to individual citizens insofar as they “do their own work in the city” (433a–434a, 443c–d). We could call this justice in the political sense. Another way of putting Socrates’s argument regarding communism among the guardians is therefore to say that a ban on private property is required in order to ensure that guardians remain just in the political sense, playing their allotted parts in a division of labour aimed at the common good. The prohibition is therefore downstream from Socrates’s reflections on labour, and it is these reflections that I take to be most relevant to contemporary debates regarding public and private ownership.

3.3 CRAFTSMEN AND MONEymAKERS

In a passage from Book One whose connections to the theme of justice have not often been noticed, Socrates asks Thrasymachus whether “a doctor in the precise sense” is “a moneymaker or someone who treats the sick” (341c).⁸ The context is Socrates’s attempt to refute Thrasymachus’s claim that “justice is nothing other than what is advantageous for the stronger” (338c). Thrasymachus has just claimed that a ruler, insofar as he is acting as a genuine ruler, decrees only what is best for himself (340e–341a) and Socrates is attempting to persuade him that genuine rulers enjoin what is advantageous for their subjects rather than themselves (342e). In response to Socrates’s question, Thrasymachus immediately concedes that a true doctor is someone who treats the sick, rather than being a moneymaker. This ought to surprise us. Surely it is possible for a doctor both to heal people and to make money?

To grasp Socrates’s point here is to understand his vision of craftsmanship and hence, ultimately, his hostility to the ruling class – understood as a class of craftsmen – owning private property. He is asking after the property in virtue of which we can appropriately call someone one kind of craftsman rather than another (341c–d). His assumption is that crafts are distinguished by the goods they aim to provide. Each genuine craft aims to provide a distinct

⁷ Aristotle is therefore wrong to imagine that Socrates is assuming such a degree of unity that homogeneity replaces harmony. See *Politics*, 1263b30–36.

⁸ This section is largely drawn from two previous pieces of work – Jonny Thakkar, “Moneymakers and Craftsmen: A Platonic Approach to Privatization,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 24 (2016): 735–759, and ch. 7 of Jonny Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018) – but it arrives at a different conclusion concerning the exact nature of the distinction between craftsmanship and moneymaking.

good; the craft of navigation aims at making us safe while sailing, for example, whereas the craft of medicine aims to produce health (346a). Living as a navigator may be good for one's health, but this does not mean that navigators are practicing medicine; health is merely a by-product of navigation, utterly irrelevant to its constitutive aim (346b). If the notion of a constitutive aim seems vague, we can make it more precise by thinking in terms of standards of success and failure. If a navigator fails to become healthy through her voyages, she has not thereby failed qua navigator; if her boat runs aground, she has. A true craftsman – the craftsman in the precise sense, the craftsman qua craftsman – is therefore a worker who deliberates in light of standards of success constitutive of her craft, and hence with an eye to the function of that craft within a division of labour aimed at the common good. Socrates's argument regarding doctors and moneymaking is that wages stand to medicine as health stands to navigation: just as promoting health plays no role in making navigation what it is, and hence plays no role in the deliberations of the navigator qua navigator, so earning wages plays no role in making medicine what it is, and hence plays no role in the deliberations of the doctor qua doctor.

This might seem like an abstract concern with acting on the right reasons in order to manifest virtue or a goodwill. If that were the case, then it would have no practical importance for the consumer. As Aristotle observes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the quality of a craft object is in principle independent of the quality of the craftsman in a way that the virtue of an action is not independent of the virtue of the agent.

For the things that come about by means of the crafts have their goodness internal to them, and thus it is enough if they come about in such a way as to be in a certain state. The things that come about in accord with the virtues, by contrast, are done justly or temperately not simply if they are in a certain state but if the one who does them is also in a certain state.⁹

From the user's point of view, it makes no difference whether a hammer has been produced by a craftsman who deliberates with an eye to the function of their craft or by one who has something else on their mind. The question is just whether it performs its function. But there is no need to interpret Socrates's concern with moneymaking as merely abstract. Given his vision of society as a division of labour aimed at the good life, the relevant unit of assessment is not one particular craft product but rather a whole life spent producing certain kinds of goods and services. And here the consumer – understood now to be society at large – does have reason to care about the reasoning of a given craftsmen. For over time the only way to reliably produce the goods for the sake of which a craft exists is to deliberate with the relevant standards in mind.

Imagine two dentists, a moneymaker and a craftsman. In deciding on a course of treatment, the craftsman is going to orient themselves toward the goal of relieving their patients' pain and restoring them to health. They will assess competing courses of action, to the best of their ability, with reference to their efficiency in promoting these goals. The moneymaker, by contrast, is going to view their patients' pain as an opportunity to profit. This means that they will assess competing courses of action with reference to their efficiency in bringing them profit. As political economists have pointed out, in an ideal market economy a rationally self-interested dentist of this sort will often decide that the best way to make money over the long run is to acquire a reputation for providing good service, and that the best way to do that is to actually provide such service. But generalizations of this sort are not robust. For one thing, moneymakers will not always act rationally over the long term. Cognitive failures may lead them to prioritize

⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 2014).

short-term over long-term profit, but so might political insecurity and epistemic humility: a bird in the hand is better than two in the bush. For another, it is perfectly possible to acquire a reputation for providing good service without actually providing it. This is especially true in cases where there are important asymmetries of information between a provider and a customer, as with dentistry. How is the patient to know whether extracting a tooth is truly necessary? Patients' trust in dentists might track whether they appear caring and friendly and authoritative rather than the quality of their work, in which case a moneymaker ought to focus on the former rather than the latter. The likelihood that the monetary incentives align perfectly with the needs of the patient, such that moneymaking dentists consistently provide optimal service, is therefore low. If offered the choice between being treated by a moneymaker or a craftsman, patients would have reason to choose the latter.

An obvious response to this line of argument is that we ought to distinguish between the reasons that lead somebody to engage in a given activity in the first place and the reasons that they allow into their deliberations during the course of that activity. You might choose to become a dentist, or to continue being one, because you think it is the most efficient way to make money given your talents and the state of the market, and yet be determined to leave all moneymaking considerations at the door of the clinic, so to speak, acting only on reasons that are strictly medical. We might think that this is just what professionalism *is* – the ability to zone out considerations that are irrelevant to a given role while acting in that role, while nevertheless remaining sensitive to them when stepping outside that role.¹⁰

Socrates does accept that people will require wages to motivate them to engage in a given craft in the first place, suggesting that each craftsman of a particular kind also engages in a distinct craft of “wage-earning” (*misthōtikos*; 346a–d). It might therefore seem that he thinks that all craftsmen are moneymakers when it comes to choosing an occupation, with differences of professionalism emerging only within the activity itself. This is not the case, however. Strictly speaking Socrates concedes only that craftsmen are all wage-earners, not that they are all moneymakers when it comes to choosing an occupation. He goes on to observe that money is not the only kind of compensation for work. A second kind of wage is honour and a third is the avoidance of a penalty or punishment, as when the best people are motivated to rule by the fact that not doing so would lead to the disaster of being ruled by someone worse (347a–c). Socrates makes clear that the first and second wage are inferior to the third. Whereas “those who love honour and those who love money are despised, and rightly so,” the “wage of the best people” (*ton tōn beltistōn misthon*) is the third (347b).

Socrates stops here because his dispute with Thrasymachus has centred on ruling. But in principle his argument might extend to other crafts as well. Every doctor is a wage-earner before he or she is a doctor, yet different kinds of people seek different kinds of wage. Some pursue medicine for money; others pursue it for honour; but the best pursue it because they don't want lesser people to carry out the task. This might seem like a strange motivation at first, but on reflection it makes perfect sense. The scheme of social labour will work better – and our needs will be better satisfied – to the degree that each performs the task for which he or she is best suited. The best kind of people are therefore motivated to engage in a particular craft by the desire to see citizens deploy their talents appropriately within a division of labour constituted for the sake of the common good. This reflects a combination of justice and wisdom.

¹⁰ See Joseph Raz's discussion of “exclusionary reasons” in *Practical Reason and Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), ch. 1.

We concluded earlier that dental patients have reason to prefer being treated by a craftsman rather than a moneymaker, where those terms have to do with the standards that guide decision-making within the workplace. Do they also have reason to care whether their dentist is a moneymaker at the higher level? Our answer will depend on whether we believe that the Chinese wall between levels of reasoning can be maintained. If it can, then the ultimate motivation of workers will be irrelevant to the consumer and, by extension, to the proper functioning of the cooperative scheme.

By the logic of Socrates's argument, however, it seems that ultimate motivations should make a difference. For he thinks of wage-earning as a craft, and if one craft is engaged in for the sake of another, deliberation within the subsidiary activity will be governed by standards of success derived from the master activity.¹¹ What a craftsman counts as successful lace-cutting, for instance, will depend on what they count as successful shoemaking, and what they count as successful shoemaking will depend on their purposes. A true craftsman will measure success by the condition of the customer's feet, given the function of shoemaking within a division of labour aimed at the good life, but those who enter into the craft for the sake of money or honour will measure success differently. Where moneymaking or honour-seeking is the master activity, in other words, the subsidiary activity is likely to be distorted. To return to Socrates's own example, the goal of medicine is to restore patients to health. But what if an opportunity arises for a doctor to enrich themselves at the expense of the patient by prescribing needless and dangerous surgery? Qua doctor, they should resist; qua moneymaker or honour-seeker, they should weigh the prospective profit (and resulting prestige) against the chances of getting caught. We might imagine a disciplined moneymaker or honour-seeker who rejects this slide by committing in advance to a rule according to which they must always act as a genuine craftsman at the lower level – but if a case materializes in which there really were a great profit to be made with no chance of getting caught, they would either have to break the rule on pain of practical irrationality or revise their conception of their ultimate ends. In the end, then, the moneymaker and the honour-seeker can only ever masquerade as, or imitate, genuine craftsmen: producing a social good will only ever be an incidental goal for them, pursued just insofar as the incentives line up.¹²

3.4 INSTITUTIONALIZING CRAFTSMANSHIP

Given Socrates's view that a city is well-ordered when its citizens are “the best possible craftsmen at their own work” (421c), the question that naturally arises for his project of designing a “city in speech” is how a lawgiver might ensure that citizens become craftsmen rather than moneymakers. Yet there is no prospect of everyone magically becoming the “best

¹¹ It is unclear that wage-earning can in fact count as a craft, given Socrates' apparent understanding of crafts: it does not seem to be “set over” some object that is deficient, unless that object is one's wallet; and if its goal is to benefit the craftsman then it serves as a counter-example to Socrates' argument against Thrasymachus. See Rachel Barney, “Socrates' Refutation of Thrasymachus,” in Gerasimos Santas (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 52.

¹² One might plausibly object that the subordination of medicine to wage-earning is destructive of the craft even when the wages in question are “the best people's kinds of wages” – after all, Socrates holds that in Kallipolis some people will be denied medical treatment (405c–408b). In my view, this merely illustrates a distinctive feature of crafts on Plato's account, namely that their proper bounds can be determined only by those with an understanding of the good of the city (and its citizens). So, on Plato's view a doctor who attempted to heal “naturally sick and intemperate people” would in fact be departing from, and corrupting, the craft of medicine properly understood. Asclepius “invented the craft of medicine for people whose bodies are healthy in nature and habit, but have some specific disease in them” (407c–d).

kind of people,” those who engage in crafts out of a sense of justice and wisdom. The vast majority of people are motivated to engage in a given craft by the prospect of money or honour. This is true even within Kallipolis, where the entire productive class is characterized as moneymaking or acquisitive (*chrēmatistikon*; 441a).¹³ This is primarily a psychological characterization: the productive class count as moneymakers because they are inclined to organize their lives around securing appetitive satisfaction and hence securing the all-purpose means to appetitive satisfaction, namely money (580e–581a).¹⁴ But, as we have seen, the Chinese wall between second-order motivation and first-order decision-making is not robust; at some point moneymakers at the second level will become moneymakers at the first. The puzzle, then, is how Kallipolis can be the model of a well-ordered, united city, in which citizens are “the best possible craftsmen at their own work,” while the majority of those citizens remain moneymakers. And the answer can only be institutions.

For the proposition that moneymakers in the psychological sense will tend to become moneymakers in their labours if left to their own devices inevitably leads us to the conclusion that they should not be left to their own devices. Socrates clearly envisages the institutions of Kallipolis generating a salutary culture whose myths, images and prizes generate honour- and shame-structures that regulate behaviour from within so as to promote just motivation. But such reorientation can only go so far, given the natural distribution of psychological propensities among humans. There will always be some who remain appetitive (or honour-loving); the key is for such people to be shepherded by the law, which both enjoins and enforces justice in behaviour, making citizens act *as if* they were ruled by reason (590c–591a).¹⁵ This shows us the way out of our puzzle. For even if a large portion of citizens in Kallipolis remain moneymakers in the psychological sense, they might still organize their labours as craftsmen insofar as the logic of their institutions pushes them to orient their workplace deliberations toward social needs. Hence the reason that Plato believes Kallipolis can be a genuine society despite containing a majority of moneymakers is that he thinks institutions can make craftsmen of moneymakers.

How exactly Plato envisages this functioning is not entirely clear, since the discussion of Kallipolis is mostly centred on the rulers. The general picture is of an economy whose nerve centre is the ruling class, who assign each citizen to the craft or pursuit that naturally suits them (423d; 453e–457c) and supervise their work in order to ensure that they produce a healthy environment (401a–d).¹⁶ This supervision would presumably have the effect of ensuring that workers deliberate with respect to the correct standards of success: as a general matter it is the user who informs the craftsman what makes a given object good or bad

¹³ In this regard, it is worth noting that Socrates uses the term “craftsmen” (*dēmiourgoi*) not only in the sense that we have been considering so far, i.e. to denote all those engaged in structured activities aimed at satisfying particular social needs, but also in a different sense, to denote the particular subset of the lower class within Kallipolis that is engaged in the artisanal activities usually thought of as crafts (*technai*). And he makes clear that craftsmen in the latter sense are *all* moneymakers, speaking, for instance, of someone “who is by nature a craftsman or some other kind of moneymaker” trying to force his way into the class of soldiers (434a–b).

¹⁴ Note that Socrates describes the appetitive element within the soul as “insatiable for money” (442a). For a useful discussion of moneymaking as a psychological term, see “Souls, Soul-Parts, and Persons” in C. D. C. Reeve, *Blindness and Reorientation: Problems in Plato’s Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 79–109. For a comprehensive account of appetitiveness, see Hendrik Lorenz, *The Brute Within: Appetitive Desire in Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford Philosophical Monographs) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ For an interpretation that sees this notion of “quasi-reasoning” as central to the whole structure of the *Republic*, and in particular to the Cephalus episode at the start and the myth of Er at the end, see Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist*, pp. 125–128, 179–194.

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, at pp. 97–98, 157–162.

(601d–e); in the case of Kallipolis, the city as a whole might be seen as the user of craft products, with the rulers reasoning on its behalf; and so in Kallipolis the user might have coercive power over the craftsman.¹⁷

Apart from these general considerations, which are hardly fleshed out, there are also some specific remarks regarding the need to insulate producers (and so moneymakers in the psychological sense) from financial incentives. In Book VIII, Socrates attributes the decline of oligarchy to the failure of the ruling class to take appropriate action against moneymakers who “inject their poison of money” into the rest of the population (555e). He suggests two possible recourses against such poison: the second-best approach would be to pass a law that “compels the citizens to care about virtue” by prescribing that voluntary contracts are entered into at the lender’s risk rather than the borrower’s (556a–b); better still would be a law “preventing a person from doing whatever he likes with his own property.” It seems reasonable to conclude that such a law would be in force in Kallipolis.¹⁸ In Book IV, meanwhile, Socrates argues that craftsmen should not be allowed to become either too poor or too rich, since those who become too poor will not be able to buy tools and raw materials while those who become too rich will no longer devote themselves to their crafts, becoming idle and careless (421d–422a). The worry is that the presence or absence of money can corrupt (*diaphtheirō*) craftsmen – destroy them in their very being, render them no longer what they are.¹⁹ This applies to all craftsmen in the sense of all those whose work aims to produce a specific good within the social division of labour, and therefore also to guardians and auxiliaries.

This brings us back to the topic with which we began, namely Socrates’s prohibition on private property among the guardians and their auxiliaries. If the interpretation offered so far is correct, then among the things that the guardians are supposed to guard will be the institutions that make producers accountable to the city and therefore ensure that moneymakers at the motivational level deliberate as craftsmen. But who will guard the guardians? There is nobody with the power to prevent them from becoming moneymakers, even if their subjects would resentfully think of them as “hirelings” or “thieves” (347b). This is why, rather than simply being prevented from becoming too rich or too poor, like the other craftsmen, they must be subject to stronger “safeguards,” including the ban on private property (416b–d). Socrates makes clear that the most important safeguard is the education system, which is supposed to both select for and cultivate the capacity of guardians to guard themselves, that is, to maintain their motivation of furthering the common good.²⁰ The ban on private property should therefore be seen partly as a failsafe, a tripwire that ought to alert the rulers to

¹⁷ There is a sense in which the power of rulers over the division of labour is itself a form of public ownership. If we follow J. G. Fichte in thinking of “the right to property as a right to *acts*, not to *things*,” then we might think of the economic organization within Kallipolis as transferring certain property rights from individuals to the polis. Something similar would follow on Lockean self-ownership views such as that of Robert Nozick. See J. G. Fichte, *The Closed Commercial State* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2012), p. 92 and Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), ch. 7.

¹⁸ It is possible that such legislation would not be necessary in a well-ordered society. Socrates says that a true lawgiver should not legislate about “all that marketplace business, the contracts people make with one another in the marketplace, for example, and contracts with handicraftsmen, and slanders, injuries, indictments, establishing juries, paying or collecting whatever dues are necessary in marketplace and harbors, and, in a word, the entire regulation of marketplace, city, harbor, or what have you” (425c–d). A fuller piece on this subject would have to take into account a text that I do not consider here, namely Plato’s *Laws*.

¹⁹ What wealth and poverty have in common, Socrates tells us, is that they engender social instability; they introduce *neōterismos*, the desire for novelty or revolution (422a; cp. 555d). I take it that this happens at least in part because they destroy genuine craftsmanship and hence the cooperative scheme that is society.

²⁰ On the notion of guarding oneself, see Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist*, at pp. 92–97.

impending danger. Genuine rulers would not want to accrue property through their position, Socrates is saying – so as soon as a ruler advocates for removing the prohibition, their colleagues will know that something has gone wrong. By that point it may be too late, of course. But the ban also functions as part of the education system, in that, like all institutions, it habituates people and therefore shapes their beliefs and desires. For, as Socrates puts it in Book IV, “fine practices lead to the possession of virtue” (444e).

So although Plato’s ban on private property for the guardians is often regarded as utopian, it in fact represents his solution to a feasibility objection. It is precisely because the vagaries of human psychology make it a standing possibility for citizens to be tempted away from craftsmanship and toward moneymaking that a society needs restrictions on property. And these restrictions will have to be most stringent for those with the most important jobs – for even if a combination of nature and nurture means that, left to their own devices, guardians would most likely be inclined to act virtuously, the risk of testing that proposition is simply too great to bear.

3.5 ARISTOTLE’S COUNTERARGUMENT

Before considering how Plato’s arguments might apply to our own world, it is worth pausing to consider Aristotle’s famous critique of those arguments in his *Politics*. Aristotle charges public ownership with generating inefficiency and impeding virtuous activity, but at the same time he is himself sensitive to the destabilizing effects of inequality and contemptuous of moneymaking. He therefore serves as an interesting counterpoint to Plato, since he shares some of Plato’s premises while rejecting his conclusions. Although Aristotle’s own proposals regarding property depend on a certain kind of utopianism regarding the power of education, his arguments nevertheless suggest the possibility of modifying Plato’s view while retaining his core insights.

Like Plato, Aristotle combines aristocratic contempt for moneymaking – the citizens of the ideal state should have their own *agora* free of all commercial activity and they should not “live the life of a vulgar craftsman or tradesman,” since “lives of these sorts are ignorable and inimical to virtue” – with reasoned objections that do not depend on such contempt.²¹ His fundamental point is that property acquisition (*ktētikē*) is by nature – and hence, given his teleology, should only ever be – a subordinate component of the wider activity of securing the good life for individuals and communities, namely household or political management. In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he explains that if humans are to flourish fully they require “external goods” such as money, good looks and fortune – for although these are less important than virtuous rational activity, they are sometimes a condition of it.²² Property acquisition therefore helps to secure such goods (*chrēmata* – useful things) as are necessary for leading the good life. Properly understood, then, riches (*ploutos*) are merely tools (*organa*) for the use of household and political managers, and should be pursued only to the degree that they contribute to human flourishing.²³ Out of this natural practice of property acquisition there can arise a perversion, Aristotle thinks: the idea of accumulation as an end in itself, as a distinct craft (*chrēmatistikē*).²⁴ What makes this perversion possible is the nature of

²¹ 1331a31–1331b3 and 1328b39–41.

²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.8 (1099a31–4), VII.13 (1153b14–19) and X.8 (1178a23–31). For similar passages in the *Politics*, see VII.1 (1323b20–1324a1) and VII.13 (1331b41–1332a1).

²³ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1256b27–40 and *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV.1–2.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1256b40–1257b40.

exchange. Exchange, however healthy, will always require the use of a given good not as the good that it itself is but as an equivalent. For example, although the primary or proper (*oikeios*) use of a shoe – that for the sake of which it comes into being – is to protect the feet, in barter a pair of shoes might be used as equivalent to, say, half a pillow. In order to make exchange more convenient, Aristotle hazards, humans begin to use one particular commodity, such as silver or gold, as a general measure of the exchange-value of other goods. This commodity becomes the currency (*nomisma*).²⁵ At this point the possibility of a perversion arises: it becomes possible to think of currency as wealth itself. This is mistaken, conceptually speaking, because even the richest man can still die of hunger; properly understood, riches constitute wealth just to the extent that they help us achieve the good life.²⁶ But apart from being a mistake, it also perverts exchange itself. For if property acquisition becomes decoupled from the requirements of household and political management, it becomes a craft unto itself. Even if it makes use of the same articles as natural property acquisition, it disciplines them toward a new *telos*: accumulation. The means has become the end. And as an end in itself, the acquisition of money becomes a boundless task.²⁷

This discussion of wealth acquisition (*chrēmatistikē*) forms part of a wider discussion of property acquisition (*ktētikē*) that itself occurs as part of a wider discussion of household management (*oikonomia*).²⁸ This might lead us – and indeed I believe that it leads Aristotle – to pass over its political implications. As we have seen, Aristotle explicitly states that the question of the proper nature and limits of property acquisition pertains directly to statesmen (*politikoi*) as well as to household managers (*oikonomoi*).²⁹ Yet the closest we come to any direct discussion of this is in Book VII of the *Politics*, where Aristotle criticizes the Spartan constitution as promoting only those virtues “held to be more useful and more conducive to acquisition (*pleonektikos*),” namely the military ones.³⁰ As Aristotle’s discussion of wealth has already made clear, however, acquisition can happen through peaceful as well as military means. We could therefore imagine an Aristotelian critique of a society organized around the goal of accumulation. Just as unlimited property acquisition can be seen as perverse relative to a natural, bounded form of acquisition, so a society organized around accumulation would appear as perverse relative to the natural order hinted at by Aristotle at the start of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he implicitly draws a picture of a whole economy tied together by reflection on what it is for individuals and collectives to flourish. Every human activity seeks some good, and some activities control the ends of other activities. Bridlemaking falls under horsemanship; horsemanship falls under generalship; and generalship falls under the political craft, which is the expertise “that sets out which of the expertises there needs to be in cities, and what sorts of expertises each group of people should learn, and up to what point,” with its guiding end being “the human good” (*tanthrōpinon agathon*).³¹ A healthy society of

²⁵ Ibid., 1257a6–14, 1257a32–41.

²⁶ Ibid., 1257b8–31; Aristotle uses the Midas legend as a figure for this thought.

²⁷ To the objection that Aristotle has ignored the possibility of pursuing the craft of accumulation in moderation, only up to a point, the answer seems to be that if the art of accumulation (*chrēmatistikē*) were pursued in moderation it would no longer be what it is but rather the art of property acquisition tethered to an understanding of the good life (*ktētikē*). The complication is that Aristotle believes that although some who engage in accumulation do so out of a failure to direct their efforts towards the good life, as opposed to mere life, others do so out of a misguided understanding of the good life as consisted in bodily pleasure. For these people, it seems that *chrēmatistikē* and *ktētikē* must amount to the same thing. See 1257b41–1258a11.

²⁸ See the openings of *Politics* I.4, I.8 and I.9 for these divisions.

²⁹ 1256b38.

³⁰ 1333b10–11; see also 1271a41–b10, 1324b5–11 and 1334a2–b5.

³¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.1–I.2.

this kind would presumably require individual bridlemakers to deliberate as craftsmen rather than as moneymakers, both for the reasons mentioned in our discussion of *The Republic* and also because (according to Aristotle, at least) moneymaking is zero-sum in the sense that one person's profit entails another's loss.³² Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle does not seem to draw the moral: he treats moneymaking as an individual phenomenon rather than a social one.³³

Aristotle does advocate imposing some restrictions on the moneymaking freedoms of rulers. Strikingly, he agrees with Plato that "*the most important thing* in every constitution is for it to have the laws and the management of other matters organized in such a way that it is impossible to make a profit (*kerdainein*) from holding office."³⁴ This statement seems to be grounded in a concern for stability, since he goes on to stress how important it is for oligarchs to abide by the principle in order to avoid generating resentment among the masses. Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle's preferred mechanism for ensuring that it is impossible to profit from office is a gentle combination of carrot and stick:

To prevent public funds from being stolen, the transfer of the money [from officials leaving office to their successors] should take place in the presence of all citizens, and copies of the accounts should be deposited with each clan, company and tribe. And to ensure that people will hold office without seeking profit, there should be a law that assigns honours to reputable officials. (1309a10–14)

In this passage Aristotle seems to assume a fairly flat-footed understanding of what it might mean to profit from office: it has to involve the kind of activity that a thorough audit would catch, such as embezzlement.³⁵ But this amounts to a petty form of corruption in the grand scheme of things. After all, rulers could behave transparently and honestly while nevertheless acting to feather their own nests at the expense of the city as a whole: indeed, such behaviour is literally constitutive of oligarchy on Aristotle's account, and he recognizes that it threatens to divide the city into two warring classes.³⁶

It was precisely in order to stop the degeneration of a united city led by an aristocracy into "two cities" under moneymaking oligarchs that Socrates instituted his ban on rulers holding private property. Aristotle is willing to countenance restrictions on private property that go some way toward meeting Socrates's objectives. He argues that some land ought to be communally owned in order to provide for public religious rituals and to support the common dining messes so that no citizen wants for sustenance;³⁷ that in the ideal society each citizen would have one lot near the border and another near the city, since such a distribution "accords with justice and equality" and "ensures greater unanimity (*homonioia*)";³⁸ that, in democracies, surplus revenues should be "distributed in lump sums to the poor" so that the latter can achieve long-term prosperity by acquiring land or starting a trade; that the rich should be taxed to sponsor the poor to attend the assembly;³⁹ and that in the ideal democracy there would be prohibitions on owning more than a certain amount of land, lending against more than

³² For the (vaguely expressed) idea that moneymaking is zero-sum, see 1258b1–2.

³³ In response to very different social conditions, Marx does draw the moral in Volume One of *Capital*, drawing on Aristotle in order to diagnose capitalism as a malfunctioning social form that is organized around accumulation. See Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist*, at pp. 293–306.

³⁴ 1308b32–34, my italics.

³⁵ On the theory and practice of accountability in classical Athens, see Matthew Landauer, *Dangerous Counsel: Accountability and Advice in Ancient Greece* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

³⁶ 1279a26–b10 and 1295b14–24.

³⁷ 1330a9–14, 1263a38–39.

³⁸ 1330a14–18; cf. Plato, *Laws*, 745c–d.

³⁹ 1320a36–1320b4.

a certain portion of each person's land, and even buying and selling certain allocations of land.⁴⁰

What Aristotle is not willing to countenance, however, are Socrates's prohibitions on private property. He raises three distinct objections. First, he offers a tragedy-of-the-commons-style argument, observing that "what is held in common by the largest number of people receives the least care . . . [since] the thought that someone else is attending to it makes them neglect it the more."⁴¹ Second, he argues that if the goal is to engender unity among the guardians, it might be counterproductive, given that "those who own and share communal property have far more disagreements than those whose property is separate."⁴² Although these two objections are the most famous, they seem beside the point in obvious ways. Socrates does not argue that his prohibition on private property will lead guardians to take better care of their lodgings and other collective property. If anything, his point is that they shouldn't concern themselves much with this collective property but, rather, attend to the needs of their subjects, whom they think of as "as free friends" (547b–c). And if the guardians do not care much about the property that they hold in common as a class, viewing themselves as wealthy in a more important sense (521a) and despising ordinary pleasures relative to those deriving from contemplation (581d–e), it seems unlikely that they will spend much time disagreeing over its use. Finally, Aristotle nowhere addresses Socrates's underlying argument for his prohibitions, namely that they are necessary in order to prevent the guardians becoming moneymakers (and hence oligarchs rather than aristocrats, in Aristotle's terms).

Ultimately, Aristotle's opposition to Platonic communism is best grounded in the third objection that he raises, which is that personal possessions are necessary for the good life. "It is evident that nature itself gives such property [as is necessary for self-reproduction] to all living things," writes Aristotle in Book I.⁴³ Nature sees to it that newborn animals come into the world with access to what they need to survive, and likewise "we must suppose in the case of fully developed things too that plants are for the sake of animals, and that the other animals are for the sake of human beings, domestic ones both for using and eating, and most but not all wild ones for food and other kinds of support, so that clothes and all the other tools may be got from them."⁴⁴ The art of property acquisition (*ktētikē*) is therefore the art of taking possession of what nature has already earmarked for our use: examples include hunting for wild animals and, shockingly, making war – "just war," as Aristotle calls it – against those naturally suited for slavery.⁴⁵ Aristotle's notion of natural property therefore encompasses whatever goods (*chrēmata*) are either necessary or useful to the city-state or

⁴⁰ 1319a6–19. It is unclear how exactly these provisions relate to Aristotle's praise in IV.11 for the "middle constitution" in which there is a strong middle class, since there he seems to view the distribution of property as exogenous to lawgiving and statesmanship: "[I]t is the height of *good luck*," he says, "if those who are governing own a middle or adequate amount of property" (1295b39–1296a, my italics).

⁴¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve, 1261b34–37; cf. 1263a27–29.

⁴² 1263b24–26. At 1263a9–20 Aristotle appears to say that conflict arises both from questions of how to distribute the benefits and burdens associated with common ownership and from excessive dependence on others more generally.

⁴³ 1256b8–9.

⁴⁴ 1256b15–20.

⁴⁵ 1256b20–26. As Fred D. Miller Jr. points out, Book I's account of slavery is therefore premised on an argument, partly implicit, justifying the existence of property as a collection of tools that are necessary parts of the household, where the household exists by nature. See Fred D. Miller Jr., "Property Rights in Aristotle," in Richard Kraut and Steven Skultety (ed.), *Aristotle's Politics: Critical Essays* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 126–128. This argument depends on combining passages in I.2, I.4 and I.8.

household – where “necessary” seems to mean “necessary for self-reproduction” and “useful” seems to mean “useful for human flourishing.”⁴⁶

Clearly, Socrates has no interest in denying the guardians whatever goods are necessary for daily self-reproduction: even if they are not allowed to own anything, they do receive payment in the form of sustenance and shelter (465d-e). Aristotle’s claim against Plato has to be that Socrates denies the guardians the goods that are useful for human flourishing. This isn’t obvious: once again, even if they are not allowed to own anything, the guardians are clearly supposed to have untrammelled access to whatever is required for leading the philosophical life that Socrates regards as blessed. The key claim is therefore that in the case of some goods, mere access is not sufficient for the good life. And this is in fact what Aristotle suggests in the third of his objections to Socrates’s proposals in Book II of the *Politics*. He makes two separate arguments in this connection. The first is that personal property makes possible the pleasure that comes when one is able to “regard a thing as one’s own” and the pleasure that comes from being able to help out “one’s friends, guests, or companions” and to do them favours. The second is that personal property makes it possible to exercise the virtue of generosity, which consists precisely in “the use made of property.”⁴⁷ This second argument is then pursued further in Book VII, where Aristotle argues that in an ideal society every citizen would have private property. His reasoning can be reconstructed as follows: the lawgiver should promote the happiness of the polis; a polis can only be happy if all of its citizens are happy; virtuous activity is constitutive of happiness (whether partly or fully); and personal possessions are necessary for virtuous activity.⁴⁸

In the end, then, the debate between Plato and Aristotle on private property comes down to two questions. The first is whether private property is necessary for the good life. From a narrowly textual point of view, the Platonic position seems stronger on this question. Even if Aristotle is right that owning something “makes an enormous difference” to the pleasure that we get from it, it is not clear that human flourishing is impossible in the absence of such pleasures. Likewise, even if Aristotle is right that private ownership makes possible certain exercises of the virtue of generosity, it is not clear that generosity requires private ownership.⁴⁹ The second question is whether it is possible to allow the ruling class to own private property without thereby permitting them to use their power to feather their own nests. Here again Aristotle’s position seems weak. He claims that the best arrangement would be “for property to be private and its use communal” throughout society.⁵⁰ In response to the obvious question concerning how the city can ensure that individuals make their private property available for common use, Aristotle merely states that it is “the legislator’s special task to see that people are so disposed.”⁵¹ Institutional solutions such as mandating forfeiture for anyone who fails to permit their property to be used by others would presumably be rejected

⁴⁶ 1256b26–30.

⁴⁷ 1263a40–b14.

⁴⁸ Adapting the reconstruction in Miller, pp. 135–136. See 1329a17–26 and 1323b40–1324a21.

⁴⁹ It seems to me (a) that one can be generous with the provisions one receives from the common stock, e.g. by sharing one’s meal with someone who is hungrier, and (b) that one’s actions can be generous independently of any use of property, such as when we spend time with someone we know to be lonely. To the response that this is not what Aristotle means by generosity, the obvious question is, why not? See Terence Irwin, “Aristotle’s Defense of Private Property,” in David Keyt and Fred Miller, eds., *A Companion to Aristotle’s Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 222–224.

⁵⁰ 1330a1–2.

⁵¹ 1263a39–41. Presumably he would give the same answer in response to the question of whether the common use element of his system would not generate disagreements that parallel those he expects to occur among those who own things in common.

by Aristotle on the grounds that the virtue of generosity requires that actions be voluntary.⁵² Something similar goes for Aristotle's response to the possibility of material inequality destabilizing the polis. Although he recognizes that "equalizing the property of citizens is among the things that helps prevent faction," he rejects Phaleas of Chalcedon's proposal to do just that in favour of asking legislators to focus on education so that "naturally decent people are disposed not to want to be acquisitive (*pleonektein*), and that base ones cannot be."⁵³ This hands-off approach would enable noble individuals to voluntarily imitate the Tarentines, "who retain the goodwill of the multitude by giving communal use of their property to the poor."⁵⁴ Given that he criticizes moneymaking as a way of life, recognizes the need to ensure that rulers look out for the common good, and acknowledges the destabilizing effects of material inequality, Aristotle's emphasis on enabling elites to exercise voluntary generosity seems either naïve or ideological. After all, it was precisely as a safeguard against the failure of education that Plato's Socrates suggested his ban on private property for the rulers. In a certain sense, then, it seems that Aristotle was actually more utopian than Plato.

3.6 CONCLUSION

Transposing this discussion to the contemporary context is no simple matter. Socrates's proposals regarding private property do not seem to amount to a program of public ownership in anything like the modern sense of the "nationalization" of certain industries and services, in that they are focused on communal living arrangements for the rulers rather than economic and social functions more generally. And although Socrates does seem to call for some kind of centralized control of economic life, with philosopher-rulers assigning people to jobs and supervising their work, such control would surely look very different in the context of the ancient Greek polis than in today's nation states with their professionalized civil services. That said, the debate between Plato and Aristotle over private ownership does seem to offer important resources for thinking through contemporary proposals concerning public ownership.

Socrates's prohibition on private property for the guardians of Kallipolis is grounded in three fundamental propositions: that it is vital for each citizen to work toward the common good rather than aiming at personal profit; that institutions can shape individuals' choices in order to make this more likely; and that the most important work in the city is that of the guardians. Abstracting from the particular context of Kallipolis, and hence from the distinctive role given to guardians, we can see that from a Platonic perspective it is vital to create institutions that insulate workplace deliberations from the logic of moneymaking. Even in the case where individuals have entered into a given profession for the purpose of making money, the decisions they make within the profession should be governed by professional objectives alone. In our own world, we might think about this in terms of the importance of generating a certain kind of culture or ethos within an institution, and in the end that might lead us to think about ownership structures. In brief, the thought process might run as follows.⁵⁵

⁵² See Mayhew, "Aristotle on Property," at pp. 819–820.

⁵³ 1267b7–9.

⁵⁴ 1320b9–11. Aristotle also says that it is unjust for the poor to redistribute the property of the rich. His argument is not that the rich have rights that would thereby be violated, but rather that such actions would destroy the polis (by causing civil strife) and justice cannot be something capable of destroying the polis. It follows that if redistribution did not destroy the polis, e.g. because the rich agreed to it, it would not be unjust. See 1281a15–22.

⁵⁵ For a fuller treatment, see "Moneymakers and Craftsmen: A Platonic Approach to Privatization" (*supra* note 8), at pp. 748–750.

Workplace deliberations do not take place in a vacuum; they typically spring from a workplace culture that makes certain assumptions and practices seem natural. But the culture of a workplace does not arise in a vacuum either. It is the product, at least in part, of institutional architecture that shapes patterns of behaviour. A crucial element of this architecture consists in the mechanisms by which individuals are assessed and held accountable for their work. If these mechanisms incentivize craftsmanship as opposed to moneymaking, then ultimately that will feed down into individual deliberations. But, the argument would go, accountability mechanisms themselves do not exist in a vacuum. They are typically the product, at least in part, of ownership structures. In a private company, for example, standards of success tend to centre on contribution to financial profit. In a public service, by contrast, standards of success tend to be centred on contribution to the common good. If this is right, then it would follow that one reason for favouring public ownership would be to ensure that workers in a given sector deliberate as craftsman rather than moneymakers, that is, with the common good rather than financial profit in mind.

Following Aristotle, we can see that this reason is by no means definitive. First, private ownership might bring benefits of its own. Aristotle speaks of distinctive pleasures and opportunities for virtuous action, but we might also think of Hegelian recognition and republican freedom. Second, public ownership can itself lead to suboptimal results. Aristotle alerts us to perverse incentives that can arise through diffusion of responsibility, but we might also point to managerial inefficiency and bureaucratic rent-seeking. Third, private corporations can in principle organize themselves around the goal of public service. As we have seen, Aristotle thinks this can be achieved through education so that private actors are virtuous enough to use their resources for the common good – the modern analogue might be an emphasis on teaching business ethics in MBA programs. But Aristotle also recommends some institutional safeguards – such as accountability audits, redistribution from rich to poor, and restrictions on property transfers – whose tameness seems contingent. In our own world, we might think that the nonprofit corporate structure can generate fairly stringent accountability audits whereby officers have to demonstrate that they have not been acting in their private interest; that fiduciary law can likewise mandate officers to respect certain duties of loyalty and care towards their institutions; and that an aggressive framework of progressive taxation of income and wealth would dramatically reduce incentives for moneymaking behaviour in any case.⁵⁶ Insofar as these measures are in place, it might be that the goal of facilitating craftsmanship rather than moneymaking can be achieved without incurring the costs that can come with public ownership.⁵⁷

The great merit of Plato's discussion is his recognition that it is more important to ensure craftsmanship in some cases than in others: those who are in charge of regulating, governing and educating society as a whole must be especially insulated from the logic of moneymaking. For even if we grant that an ethos of craftsmanship can be generated in the private sector, the institutional mechanisms that might support such an ethos – such as accountability audits, fiduciary law and highly progressive taxation – are themselves dependent on the existence of a state whose officials act for the common good rather than their own private interest. This suggests that privatization must stop somewhere: if the tax inspectors were privatized, for instance, who would hold them accountable? But this focus on the special

⁵⁶ With regard to this last suggestion, see Joseph Carens, *Equality, Moral Incentives, and the Market: An Essay in Utopian Politico-Economic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁵⁷ This is not to say, of course, that there are no additional benefits of public ownership – such as democratic control and legitimation – that might tip the balance in the other direction.

responsibilities of the state also opens up a line of reasoning that points beyond Plato and Aristotle. For if we assume a liberal framework for managing the tensions inherent in a modern pluralistic society, we might question whether an ethos of craftsmanship is sufficient to guarantee deliberation in terms of the common good, at least where matters of justice are concerned. After all, nonprofits are constitutionally permitted to rely on sectarian reasoning rather than being forced, as a condition of their legitimacy, to justify their actions in terms of “public reasons.” However objectionable it might be for prisons, credit agencies and paramilitary groups to be run by profit-seeking corporations, it might be even worse for them to be run by the Catholic Church.