Bernard Yack, _The Problems of a Political Animal: Community, Justice, and Conflict in Aristotle's Political Thought_ (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). ix + 309 pp. $45.00, ISBN 0-520-08166-8 (hardcover); $14.00, ISBN 0-520-08167-6 (paperback).

In _The Problems of a Political Animal_, Bernard Yack presents an original interpretation of central themes in Aristotle's _Politics_. Yack's main focus is Aristotle's conception of community, how this is bound together by friendship and torn by conflict, with special emphasis on how political and moral conflict are inescapable aspects of the human condition. In Yack's words, for Aristotle, "political community signifies a conflict-ridden reality rather than a vision of lost or future harmony. It is the scene of political conflict rather than its remedy." (p. 2) Yack explores the great importance of such imperfect communities for Aristotle's analysis of moral and political life. Unlike contemporary philosophers, whom he describes as concerned with abstract questions of evaluation and justification, generally in remove from practical politics, the Aristotle Yack presents draws his moral conclusions from detailed analysis of social and political conditions, which permeate all aspects of moral and political life. (pp. 281-3) The themes Yack develops make the _Politics_ far more relevant to contemporary concerns than is widely believed.

One of Yack's main starting points is an incongruity in Aristotle's analysis. Aristotle of course argues that man is a political animal, intended by nature to participate in the communal life of the _polis_, which is necessary to develop his moral and

intellectual faculties. But because Aristotle recognizes the corrupt character of all existing poleis, how can human beings develop properly? No other entity depends for its realization on so imperfect an instrument. Yack responds by narrowing the gap between actual and ideal cities. If an ideal city is necessary for the inculcation of complete virtue, then both Aristotle's Ethics and Politics would be of little relevance to existing affairs. Accordingly, Yack argues that the polis achieves its natural end when it makes the good life possible for particular individuals rather than the populace as a whole. (p. 90) Inquiring into exactly how the polis provides virtue for some inhabitants, Yack explores Aristotle's analyses of community, friendship, justice, the rule of law, political conflict, and the good life.

Perhaps the clearest example of what is gained by Yack's approach is his account of the good life and the imperfect political and social contexts in which it is ordinarily led (in Chapter 8). Yack calls attention to the role of factors beyond people's control in shaping not only dispositions central to their moral characters but the circumstances in which they must act. As Yack argues--and readers of Aristotle have often felt--Aristotle's account of habituation's essential contribution to virtue is an important corrective to the one-sided, Kantian emphasis on the free will that dominates much contemporary moral thought. In addition, though Aristotle argues for the possibility of the unity of the virtues, at least in theory, in practice the need to make choices under less than desirable

circumstances often forces people to act upon one virtue rather than another. This observation leads Yack to discuss problems of unpalatable choices and how Aristotle's virtuous man will respond. As Yack says: "Returning the Aristotelian good life to the political context in which it must be led helps open our eyes to the everyday, if painful, character of moral conflict as we actually experience it." (p. 267) In regard to these and numerous other problems, Yack shows how deeply Aristotle is concerned with actual political life, as opposed to only the best regime.

If, for instance, R. D. Mulgan's Aristotle's Political Theory (Oxford, 1977) is valued as a reliable exposition of Aristotle's thought, Yack's book is valuable for different reasons. His aim is not a "comprehensive reinterpretation" of Aristotle's political philosophy, but "a series of explorations of related issues" (p.5). These, however, are frequently original and highly stimulating. Yack casts important new light on a side of Aristotle's thought that has not received the attention it deserves. Much of his work is sufficiently original to be disconcerting--in part for reasons I will discuss below. But in forcing the reader to rethink central aspects of Aristotle's political thought, Yack's work performs a valuable service, even if, as I suspect, the reader will eventually retain views along the lines of those discussed by Mulgan, though enlivened and deepened. But Yack's originality is not without costs. In order to provide some idea of the book's strengths and weaknesses, I will briefly examine a provocative claim Yack makes in his

discussion of political conflict, before closing with some comments on his interpretive strategy.

One context in which Yack's account of the conflicts inherent in political life appears to bear fruit is in his discussion of class conflict. Yack concentrates on the web of expectations that grow up in a political community. He believes that political friendship develops through the joint pursuit of self-interested goals. As this happens, however, people develop expectations that eventuate in conflict or _stasis_. Aristotle's account of the genesis of conflict places great weight on differing conceptions of distributive justice. Oligarchs unfairly claim that, because of their superior wealth, they are superior in all respects; democrats claim that, because of shared free birth, all citizens are equal in all respects. Though Aristotle believes there is an element of justice in each of these claims, they are lacking from the perspective of absolute justice and lead people who feel they are unfairly treated to form factions.

What interests Yack is how competing conceptions of justice give rise to political conflict. Roughly, he believes that political friendship causes people to believe they are _entitled_ to have their own conceptions of justice acted upon by their fellow citizens. When their claims are resisted, they feel betrayed--rejected not by strangers but by friends: "The harshness and ugliness of civil conflict owes much to this sense of betrayal, a sense that we cannot appreciate unless we first identify the bonds of friendship shared

by its participants." (p. 231)

Yack's analysis here, as frequently, is strikingly original with implications for wider political concerns. But one must wonder how faithfully it reflects Aristotle's intentions, in particular, how accurate Yack is in concentrating on disagreements about justice to the exclusion of other causal factors. In the text of the Politics, there are passages in which Aristotle says that conflicting conceptions of justice are the primary sources of conflict. However, there are numerous other passages in which he says quite different things. In concentrating on passages of the former kind while neglecting the latter, Yack falls into selective quotation. He declares that "perceived injustice, rather than competing interests, is the 'general cause'... of stasis," offering for support Pol. 1302a23 and 1301a25-40 (pp. 219-20). What I object to here is the phrase "rather than." Aristotle no doubt believes that perceived injustice is an important cause of conflict. But it is far from clear that it takes precedence over all other sources of conflict, especially material interests. The precise relationships between the many different--often interrelated--sources of conflict Aristotle presents would be difficult to sort out in the jumbled text of the Politics. But examination of the question would surely suggest that some combination of different factors is at fault. For instance, in addition to the points that Yack cites, in Book V of the Politics Aristotle also says, among other things, that the chief cause of faction in democracies is the insolence of demagogues

(1304b20-1), while in oligarchies, it is that the rulers deal unjustly with others (1305a37-8). To my mind, a great virtue of Aristotle's deeply empirical analysis is that he does not present a single cause of faction, but demonstrates the role of different factors in different circumstances. In a familiar passage in Book V (not cited by Yack), Aristotle says:

> We know how in warfare the crossing of water-courses, even of quite small ones, tends to cause troops to split up. So it seems that every distinction leads to division (pasa diaphora poiein diastasin) (1303b12-14; Sinclair/Saunders trans.)

With every difference leading to conflict, it would appear to be important to specify the precise role of conflicting standards of justice. This task Yack does not undertake, as he focuses on this specific causal factor, citing in its support specific passages.

This is not an isolated instance. In the same chapter, Yack discusses the superior stability of the best possible state, focussing once again on agreements about standards of justice (see pp. 231, 232, 238). In Yack's seven and one half page discussion, only two paragraphs are given over to the middle class, the advantage of which is said to be its openness to both democratic and oligarchic principles of justice (pp. 238-9). What is missing here is what Aristotle says about the middle class in Pol. IV, Chap. 11, where he concentrates on the fact that its citizens are alike and equal, and that they do not covet the property of the rich, while the poor

do not covet theirs. Agreement or disagreement over principles of justice is not mentioned in this chapter. An additional example is Yack's attempt to lessen the distance between the political units Aristotle examines and modern regimes. The most obvious difference is of course size. But Yack argues that small size and strictly limited franchise are not necessary characteristics of political communities in general but only of the best regime (p. 72). He quotes a passage from Book VII in which Aristotle says that it is "not easy" for a larger unit "to be ruled in a political way." (Pol. 1326a25-b6; p. 73) As Yack correctly notes, the text does not describe this as impossible. However, here too there is additional evidence Yack does not consider. For instance, in Book III, in a context in which he is concerned with poleis in general as opposed to the best city, Aristotle says that Babylon is a "nation" rather than a polis, because when it was captured many inhabitants were not aware of this for three days (1276a27-30). In all these cases, and others one could name, there is strong evidence against Yack's interpretations.

On the whole, I believe a careful examination of many of Yack's claims would show them to be provocative, often striking, but also exaggerated. This is not surprising in view of the principles of interpretation he professes to follow. In particular, he openly claims interpretive license by employing the following two principles. He will develop new interpretations, first, "by juxtaposing Aristotelian passages that have not previously been brought together," and second, by developing implications of

Aristotle's ideas in directions Aristotle himself might not have foreseen. (p. 21) In addition, because Yack's primary interest in Aristotle's writings "lies in the recovery and reconsideration of unfamiliar insights into the nature of ordinary political life" rather than Aristotle's own understanding of his words, "when there is more than one plausible interpretation of an Aristotelian passage or argument," he will often choose "the most original and theoretically provocative interpretation." (p. 22) Yack is more concerned with "the intrinsic value" of the understanding of community that Aristotle develops than "in proving <u>conclusively</u> that Aristotle advocates it." (p. 21; his emphasis)

It does not require great insight to see that Yack's principles invite misinterpretation. It is in fact difficult to say how much of his account is <u>Aristotle's</u> political thought rather than his own. In pursuing the implications of certain passages according to his own lights, Yack obviously leaves Aristotle far behind. Similarly, I am troubled by the notion of more than one equally plausible reading of a particular passage. Yack surely does not confine possible instances to passages in which the text is in doubt and so there are different plausible reconstructions of Aristotle's language. Rather, what he has in mind are passages in which the overall sense is in doubt. Equal plausibility is troubling because specific passages do not stand on their own. They must be construed in the context of overall interpretations of Aristotle's text, while it is unlikely that Yack believes that different overall interpretations

of the *Politics* are equally plausible. Yack's principles appear to license the juxtaposition of different passages--perhaps loosely construed--to provide new insights which fall beyond Aristotle's thought, as this notion is ordinarily understood.

Yack's procedures are also objectionable for what they leave out. Ordinarily, the task of interpreting Aristotle's views of the causes of political conflict would rely on more than artful juxtapositions. The commentator would first gather the evidence--*all* passages in which Aristotle discusses the subject--and then attempt to make the best possible sense of it. The best interpretation is the one that covers the most evidence most effectively, with this interpretation in turn fitting into a similarly justified overall account of the *Politics*. There is of course room for disagreement as to which interpretation most successfully covers the evidence in a particular case. But a systematic approach to the text--along the lines of the method Aristotle himself advocates in *NE* VII, Chap. 1--is obviously best suited for accurate interpretation.

Because Yack does not systematically sift through the evidence on the themes he develops, the reader will often doubt the accuracy of his accounts. A few instances are noted above, and it would take little effort to provide a list of others. Particularly striking is the fact that Yack nowhere discusses the relationships between the different parts of the *Politics* and the fact that Aristotle appears to be addressing rather different questions in different

Books. Pol. IV, Chap. 1 and NE 1181b12-23, the two contexts in which Aristotle most clearly discusses his different questions, are not discussed by Yack. As a result, passages Yack juxtaposes in interesting ways are often from different portions of the Politics, addressed to different subjects.

These lines of criticism might be somewhat unfair to Yack, because he does not really claim to be explicating Aristotle. Or, puzzlingly, he claims to be doing so only up to a point:

> Like the great majority of Aristotle's commentators, I do try to justify most of my interpretations by citing explicit statements from his texts. (p. 21)

But then Yack continues with the two additional interpretive procedures noted above.

Leaving aside the questionable implication that interpretations are justified by (isolated) explicit statements from the text, rather than statements understood in the light of the text as a whole, we might perhaps rescue Yack by construing his endeavor on somewhat different lines. He undoubtedly does succeed in raising a host of interesting questions. Perhaps it is his intention to use something like Aristotle's view of politics as a vehicle to cast interesting light on these. But this will not do. Though the questions Yack's raises are obviously important, it is difficult to assess what he says about them, because the main support he offers for his claims is the authority of Aristotle's texts.

In order not to end on a negative note, I should repeat that

much of Yack's discussion is strikingly original and insightful. He succeeds in calling attention to neglected aspects of Aristotle's *Politics*, which also shed interesting light on political issues beyond the confines of the text. But Yack's overall interpretation is, as he perhaps realizes, oftentimes far removed from Aristotle's own.