Faction Versus *Stasis*: Madison and Aristotle on the Management of Human Nature

Ben Serber

In his well-known work Federalist #10, James Madison gives an account of the social phenomenon of faction, arguing that the state must curb the citizens' innate tendency to split into different groups. Upon reading Aristotle's Politics, one is immediately struck by the similarities between Madison's vision and Aristotle's much older concept of *stasis*. Indeed, C. D. C. Reeve, the authoritative translator of Aristotle, gives the word *stasis* as 'faction,' further heightening the parallel between the type of internal dissension within the *polis* (city-state) denoted by *stasis* and the idea of faction, denoting a clash of interest groups, which the framers of the United States Constitution sought to control. A number of these parallels exist between the Aristotelian *polis*, particularly the sort of constitution termed a polity, and the early United States (which is a republic, to use the Framers' term). Indeed, Madison's project in Federalist #10 clearly seems to be an attempt at an application of Aristotle's thoughts on *stasis* to a new set of circumstances that preserves Aristotelian ideals about the purpose of the state. While Madison does not explicitly address *Politics* or the similarities between the republic and the *polis* in any of his work, he and many of the other Framers were quite familiar with the classical philosophers, including Aristotle. Knowing that Madison was exposed to Aristotle, that influence on his approach to the problem of faction can clearly be seen. However, Aristotle's proposed solutions to *stasis* are inadequate to deal with the problems of faction in a nation-state. As Patrick Coby accurately notes, the increased size of the United States, in terms of both space and population, causes the similarity to falter, if not break down entirely (898). Since Aristotle himself notes that many of his claims are only applicable to *poleis*, Aristotelian principles will need to be modified to be applicable to a different sort of state. Accordingly, Madison aims to find a method of resolving the new difficulties of faction while keeping the central Aristotelian aim of making the *polis* a

vehicle for the cultivation of personal virtue. While America's founders drew from a number of political traditions, Madison's seminal works such as Federalist #10 clearly consider the creation of virtue in the citizens the primary duty of the state in just the same way that Aristotle does. Ultimately, while Aristotle's political theory cannot quite stretch to cover all of the new characteristics of an 18th-century nation-state, Madison's alterations successfully preserve the central place of virtue in human society in a way that is largely consistent with the original Aristotelian principles he is implicitly drawing on.

The first task in addressing the evolution from *stasis* to faction and detailing Madison's updated solution is to further explain Aristotle's conception of *stasis*. Reeve's translation note provides a good starting point: *stasis* is "[i]nternal political conflict… which sometimes leads to the overthrow or modification of the constitution" (251), though much more needs to be said. Aristotle is not perfectly consistent in his description of *stasis*, but the most coherent outline of what he means follows this general line. Aristotle considers *stasis* in his discussion of how constitutions can be altered or destroyed; in his model of the *polis*, *stasis* is usually what drives these changes (135), although both Aristotle himself and Marcus Wheeler (in a still-helpful paper on the philological nature of *stasis*) mention situations in which the constitution might be altered without the influence of *stasis*, calling this *metabolei politeias* – change in the constitution – the two are usually but not always connected (Wheeler 148). *Stasis* comes about because some element of the *polis*' population – not necessarily the citizens, since the citizens are just those who can participate in governance in the first place, i.e. the commoners in an oligarchy would not be citizens (Aristotle 67) – views the distribution of political power or wealth within the current constitution as unequal (Aristotle 134). While Aristotle details a number of more proximate causes which lead to the specific incidents, ultimately any occurrence of *stasis* can be

traced back to some kind of inequality in honor (that is, political recognition) or profit (137). Democrats want equal power or wealth, since they see all citizens as fundamentally equal in merit, and are thus moved to overthrow oligarchies (and possibly aristocracies, though probably much less so) (Aristotle 134). Oligarchs are unsatisfied with their share of power in a democracy, since they believe themselves superior and deserving of more power than what they have (Aristotle 134); this belief can also lead to infighting among the leaders of an oligarchy (Aristotle 136). These perceived inequalities lead the group out of power, or some subset thereof – the commoners or the disaffected nobles in an oligarchy, the rich in a democracy – to agitate for some alteration in their circumstances, either to change the constitution, or to retain the current constitution while placing themselves in the position of power (Aristotle 135), or conceivably to overthrow the *polis* altogether (Wheeler 148). Aristotle seems to view *stasis* as primarily a binary relation – certainly all of his case studies appear to describe such a situation: one group or another becomes disaffected, and the *polis* divides into two conflicting camps; the one which emerges victorious has an opportunity to shape the constitution to suit their own priorities. Ultimately, *stasis* is thus quite a specific state, with specific causes (profit or honor), specific parties (democrats versus oligarchs or oligarchs versus oligarchs), and a specific effect (constitutional change or destruction).

Aristotle uses a number of examples to further flesh out what kinds of situations he will call *stasis*. Having done so, he moves on to discuss the effect which *stasis* has on his broader aim for the *polis*, namely the cultivation of virtue in the citizens. The immediate effect of *stasis* is obvious and damaging: most of the examples Aristotle cites of *stasis* leading to a change in constitution only did so after protracted political struggle at best and civil war at worst. Needless to say, little room exists in such a situation for the average citizens and other inhabitants of a

polis to be cultivating their individual virtues. *Stasis* therefore ought to be minimized, or more precisely, prevented from occurring whenever possible by arranging the constitution in a good way (Aristotle 157). When unavoidable, it should be defused as quickly as possible to prevent the situation from worsening (Aristotle 141). His approach to this question is both perfectly in character and somewhat paradoxical: continuing in his pragmatism, he focuses largely on how a given constitution may be protected from *stasis*, without devoting much space to whether that constitution ought to be preserved. This would seem to clash with Aristotle's aim of finding those constitutions which are best for living the virtuous life, but makes sense in light of his earlier conclusion that the worth of a particular constitution is bound up in the sort of citizens that compose it (69-70), and that multiple constitutions can promote living well among the citizens (76-7). In this light, if the *polis*' constitution is one of the beneficial sort (that is, set up to "look to the common benefit" (Aristotle 77)), and the population of the *polis* is suited to live under that sort of constitution, then the preservation of that constitution is correctly placed as the highest priority – briefly, having attained virtue (or at least an approximation) in government, of course the logical thing to concentrate on is preserving that virtue. Aristotle's higher aim in concentrating on keeping the regime stable is thus made clear, and made even clearer by his recommendations on how deviant regimes can address *stasis*. Aristotle recommends that oligarchs "treat well both those outside the constitution and those in the governing class" (153). In a democracy, "the rich should be treated with restraint" (Aristotle 156), avoiding redistribution of property or excessive taxation to placate the mob. A tyrant may attempt continuous repression to keep his subjects in line (Aristotle 166-8), but this strategy is unsustainable (Aristotle 171-2). The only way for a tyrant to effectively perpetuate his rule is to become more like a monarch – "that he not exalt himself, bully his subjects, or indulge his

appetites" (Coby 905). In short, the only way for a deviant regime to avoid *stasis*, which easily and naturally arises from the inequalities of oligarchy, democracy, or tyranny left unchecked, is by engaging in *metabolei politeias* instead: to change the constitution by small degrees, as Aristotle has already stressed is possible and quite common (140). This additional point crystallizes Aristotle's twin answers to the problem of *stasis*: one resides in the constitution, the other in the citizenry.

Aristotle's suggested solutions to the *stasis* problems of unitary constitutions (i.e. those with a single governing class) hint at the constitutional remedy for *stasis*: the polity. A polity is just "a mixture of oligarchy and democracy" (Aristotle 115), with the overall balance of power lying somewhat more with the multitude than with the rich. The idea is to take the beneficial elements of democratic and oligarchic thinking and blend them together, so that some institutions of government are under popular control, while others are restricted to the wealthier or more educated classes (Aristotle 116-7). A well-constructed polity also leverages the strength of the middle class to address both political and economic inequality: the middle class will prevent either oligarchic or democratic abuses of political power with numerical superiority in voting, and the middle class is largely immune from both the arrogance of the rich and the envy of the poor and thus less susceptible to acting only in its own narrow economic interest (Aristotle 118-20). A functioning polity thus contains inherent insulation against *stasis*, since by giving the rich few, the predominant middle class, and the numerous poor each a stake in the constitution (along with the virtuous from all classes, if there are enough of them to be a factor and a way of distinguishing them can be found) the principle cause of *stasis*, perceived inequality of wealth or power, can be largely eliminated. The creation of a polity is Aristotle's constitutional cure for *stasis*; while dissension can still arise, it should be largely over smaller factors, without serious

cause for large-scale infighting, and the *polis* ought to remain fairly stable while providing a beneficial government to all concerned. Aristotle's other remedy for faction is considered somewhat more briefly, and lies in the *polis*' responsibility to its citizens: education, which he considers to be even more important than the correct constitution. Ultimately, the laws that are made "are of no use if people are not habituated and educated in accord with the constitution" (Aristotle 158). The population should want to live under the constitution they have, and more crucially, should know how to act in ways that preserve that constitution. With the addition of effective education in the value of the civic enterprise, any beneficial constitution can be strengthened as the citizens realize the value of their political engagement and willingly act in ways that will keep the *polis* running smoothly. These twin elements comprise Aristotle's best practices for reducing the occurrence of *stasis* and minimizing its harmful effects.

James Madison's idea of faction is not dissimilar to Aristotle's *stasis*, but a discussion of the ways in which faction differs from *stasis* will do better to illustrate Madison's Aristotelian influence than a list of similarities. Examination of those differences will clearly show how close the two ideas are in other respects. Madison makes two departures from the idea of *stasis*, one fairly small and one quite large. The small departure is in rejecting the neutrality of *stasis*; while Aristotle is clearly aware of the harmful effects that *stasis* has, he argues that it frequently results in *metabolei politeias*, and if this process brings the *polis* to a constitution that is more in accord with its population, then the *polis* is better off as a consequence. Madison, by contrast, considers a faction to be "a number of citizens… who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, *adversed* to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community" (emphasis mine). *Stasis*, at least under some conditions, could both avoid impugning the rights of other citizens and aim at the common good – for

instance, a democratic faction in an oligarchy that is abusing the commoners. Such a group would fit the definition of *stasis* but not that of a faction. The possibility that a faction might aim at the good or have any beneficial effect is explicitly removed from Madison's definition. Certainly, Madison's seeming unwillingness to concede that groups of citizens might band together to do something which is for the state's benefit rather than its harm appears quite egregious by comparison with Aristotle's more nuanced view. Following from this view, Madison forcefully argues that faction, being necessarily harmful, must be controlled to the maximum possible extent in all situations. Unlike *stasis*, the aim is not to control faction or address it proactively, but to eliminate it wherever possible. But this difference of conception is the smaller of the two ways in which Madison departs from Aristotle. The primary difference ultimately arises from two factors: size and education. These are the main reasons a traditional Aristotelian solution breaks down in dealing with the early United States. Though Madison does not call out these issues directly, they are implicit in his discussion of the hydra-like nature of faction. Because the early United States was vastly larger than any Aristotelian *polis*, and because many more citizens had enough education to understand their own self-interest, understand how public policy can affect those interests, and participate in the political process, such a nation-state faced the prospect of having many different factions in play at once. As has already been stated, Aristotle considers *stasis* to be mostly binary; it is a competition between the group that maintains the current constitution and a group that wants to change or coopt the constitution to suit its purposes. Faction is much more multifarious. While opinions on any particular issue might still divide into only two camps (Madison offers the example of farmers and merchants taking sides on a tariff question), the ability of citizens to better understand how public policy can affect private profit means that sides will be taken about every conceivable

question of legislation, jurisprudence, election, administration, taxation, expenditure, foreign policy, et cetera (as seen in public affairs to this day). This attitude is not a massive departure from Aristotle, who agrees with Madison that people will form factions over almost anything (141), but the sheer number of factions that can proliferate with a larger and more educated populace exceeds the definition of *stasis*. Even if each division is binary, the number of divisions that a variegated and educated population makes possible ensures that there will be far more than two factions trying to push their agendas at any given time (Madison). It is this particular concern which truly distinguishes faction from *stasis*: if the two things worked the same way, differing only in the way political theorists perceived their normative value, Aristotle's measures for handling *stasis* would almost certainly suffice.

However, the vast size differential between *polis* and nation-state ultimately means that although they remain conceptually similar (faction is basically *stasis* with a larger and more literate citizenry), the difference between faction and *stasis* is sufficiently large to require different solutions for the two problems. Aristotle's two solutions for *stasis* both aim to address its causes, by reducing the structural opportunity for its creation and decreasing the willingness of the citizens to divide themselves into parties, but Madison forcefully argues that there is only one path to eradicate faction. The only two ways to entirely prevent the formation of factions is by entirely disrupting the freedom of association that permits factions to form, or by "giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests" (Madison). Aristotle and Madison agree in rejecting the former option as tyranny. Aristotle, with his emphasis on educating the citizens to fit the constitution, clearly favors the latter option in his ideal *polis*, or more pragmatically, as close an approach as is possible and healthy for an actual *polis*. The difficulty with the educational solution is, again, size: a community the size of a nation-state

cannot effectively instill such unity of purpose among its citizens (Aristotle 199). Thus, while Aristotle might be content with simply reducing the population's inclination to *stasis* in practice, or with making it less damaging when it arises, Madison's higher standard that calls for the elimination of faction makes education an insufficient choice as well. No real group of people will ever reach the uniformity which Madison would demand to prevent any faction from ever forming. Having thus dismissed cause-focused solutions as insufficient for dealing with the problem of faction, Madison makes his seminal turn in the other direction and instead endorses attacking the effect of faction. Ultimately, there are only two ways to mitigate the effects of faction: prevent any faction from ever attaining a majority, or prevent a majority from holding sufficient power to abuse the political process (Madison). The republican constitution is intended to take on both methods at once. By permitting (which is essentially encouraging) the populace to form factions of their own accord, the vast number of such groups that will form can become an asset rather than a hindrance. Precisely because of the human propensity to form factions over nearly everything, the many factions that exist will be much smaller, and thus less able to attain power, those who share a common purpose will find it harder to unite into a single faction, and should one faction grow dangerously powerful, the others will do their utmost to keep it in check (Madison).

But this rationale sounds suspiciously like the account Aristotle has given in Book Four of how a polity can mitigate the *effects* of *stasis* (120). This would seem to be an instance where Aristotle "confuses symptom with cause" (Wheeler 148), since he does not address the capacity of the polity to suppress the effect of *stasis* in his more detailed treatment of the subject in Book Five. Madison – or rather, the prevailing opinion on why this move toward expanding the size of the republic and encouraging the proliferation of faction is so revolutionary (cf. Matson 340-2

for one such view), seem to place Aristotle's solutions for *stasis* entirely within the realm of addressing its causes and not its effects. However, what is seen here is that Aristotle's notion of a polity actually aims at addressing both the causes and the effects of *stasis*. The polity prevents *stasis* from arising, as has already been described, by dramatically reducing the incentives of the populace to form groups which aim at political power. But it also reduces the effects of *stasis* in just the way Madison intends his solution to do: by creating a mechanism which can prevent a political faction from gaining damaging levels of power. Thus the striking feature of Madison's effect-centered remedy for faction is actually that it retains – and not accidentally – the crucial elements of Aristotle's solutions to *stasis* even as it rejects the adequacy of those solutions. As much as Aristotle insists that an increase in size takes the discussion of communal organization beyond the scope of the *polis* (cf. 198-9, Coby 898-9 and Matson 340), the republican constitution is clearly intended to be an Aristotelian aristocratic polity writ large. The purpose of a representative government is just to address Aristotle's concern for balance between the need to place the most virtuous people in power and the need for the populace to have a hand in the government; such a constitution, "when utilized by the citizenry in the proper spirit, will install in office the wisest and most virtuous representatives, who will then pursue the common good" (Gardner 669). The increased size of the republic, coupled with technological advances, creates the middle class which Aristotle finds lacking in his own time (121) to sustain the polity and defend its political stability against internal dissension, and the better education of that middle class enables them to better understand their own civic duty to choose virtuous representatives.

If the discussion of *stasis* and faction has illustrated anything, it is the old refrain that the more things change, the more they remain the same. While Aristotle could hardly have conceived of a true constitution spanning the size of the early United States, his ideas on what

creates division within the *polis* and how to head off both its primary causes and its principal effects leave a clear legacy in Madison's thoughts on faction. While Aristotelian *stasis* is not Madison's faction, the former clearly influences the latter, both in conception and in solution. Though Madison does not explicitly mention Aristotle, the connections become visible simply having read both works. Madison's solution to the problem of faction succeeds not because it is a radical departure from Aristotle but because it hews so closely to his ideas, departing only where needed and retaining the same ultimate purpose. Madison successfully accounts for the differences in population and resources between ancient Greece and the early United States – factors whose influence Aristotle repeatedly acknowledges – which leave Aristotle's concept of *stasis* somewhat lacking and takes advantage of those differences to create and justify a constitution which comes far closer to an aristocratic polity than Aristotle would likely have considered possible in such circumstances. If enabling the populace to cultivate personal virtue is, as Aristotle and Madison agree, the central aim of the political community, then it is undoubtedly difficult to top the republic.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *Politics*. Trans. C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998. Print.

Coby, Patrick. "Aristotle's Three Cities and the Problem of Faction." *The Journal of Politics* 50.4 (1988): 896-919. *JSTOR*. Web. 9 May 2012.

Gardner, James A. "Can Party Politics Be Virtuous?" *Columbia Law Review* 100.3 (2000): 667-701. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 May 2012.

Madison, James. "The Same Subject Continued: The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection." *The Avalon Project*. Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library, original date of publication 23 Nov. 1787. Web. 10 May 2012.

Matson, Floyd W. "Party and Faction: The Principles of Politics vs. The Politics of Principle." *The Antioch Review* 18.3 (1958): 331-42. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 May 2012.

Wheeler, Marcus. "Aristotle's Analysis of the Nature of Political Struggle." *The American Journal of Philology* 72.2 (1951): 145-61. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 May 2012.