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ARISTOTLE (384-322 BCE)

Aristotle slept, according to an ancient biographer, with a bronze ball in his hand poised over a pan; when the ball dropped, the rattling of the pan would wake him. What he did with all of that time awake was to make fundamental contributions to many fields of study, and do more than anyone since to set the agenda for Western philosophy. For readers sixteen centuries later, there could be no doubt who was meant when Thomas Aquinas referred simply to “the Philosopher,” or Dante to “the master of those who know.” Ancient booklists make clear that the majority of Aristotle’s works, including most of his works on politics (including the books *On Justice*, *On the Statesman*, *On Kingship*, and a collection of 158 constitutions), have long been lost. Of the surviving works, the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Books I, V, VIII, and X) and the *Politics* (to which citations below refer unless specified) have been especially important for political theory.

At 17, Aristotle went to Athens and became a member of Plato’s Academy. He remained there for twenty years, until Plato’s death in 347. A few years later, Aristotle joined the court of the King of Macedon, Philip II, probably as tutor to his son, known to history as Alexander the Great. Aristotle went back to Athens in 335 and set up his own school of philosophy, the Lyceum. Both his long apprenticeship with Plato and his foundation of a school to rival that of his teacher resonate in his extensive engagement with Plato’s arguments.

When we turn from Plato’s dialogues to Aristotle’s texts it is easy to overlook their dialectical character and to be impatient with their difficulty. “Learning is painful,” Aristotle says (VIII.5 1339a28-9), and he sometimes writes as if to assure his students that they are learning. Ancient readers, however, were as exorbitant in their praise of Aristotle’s style (Cicero refers to his “golden river of speech”) as

modern readers have been stinting (a nonetheless admiring Thomas Gray wrote in 1746 that “he has a dry conciseness, that makes one imagine one is perusing a table of contents rather than a book: it tastes for all the world like chopped hay”). This is because Aristotle was best known in antiquity for his polished public works, often dialogues, whereas the works now extant were akin to programmatic drafts or lecture notes and were subsequently edited by others. There is something compelling about the elliptical manner Aristotle reserved for his philosophical intimates, but it is an acquired taste and requires a complex stomach.

It will help, though, to recognize that the tensions and the doubling-back that we see in Aristotle’s work often emerge as he first tries to discover what is worthwhile in one opinion that is held by the many or the wise, and then moves on to another on the same subject as a way of homing in on the truth. Together with a recognition that our text occasionally papers over a gap or preserves two attempts at the same topic, this helps to account for the “on the one hand...on the other hand” character of the work. Because “more or less everything has been discovered” (II.5 1264a3-4), he believes that we should proceed by considering the practices and positions that we have inherited. These, together with Aristotle’s own reflections on them, refer to and relate to one another in complex ways, and the organization of his political theory is accordingly more like a fractal than a linear series of points.

The nature of the city-state

At the outset of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*), Aristotle suggests that the science (*epistêmê*, a broader term than our “science”) proper to grasping the best good is political science. For the other sciences are subordinate to the control of political

science, and although the good of individual and city-state (*polis*) are the same, that of the city-state is greater because it includes the good of individuals. Ethics itself, Aristotle says, is a kind of political science (*NE* I.2; or political philosophy: VII.11 1152b1-2). Only mature students are suited to study political science, because its premises are based on experience. Many of these premises hold good usually rather than universally, and in such cases the political scientist will fulfil his role if he can indicate the approximate truth. The end of such study, however, is not truth or knowledge, but action (*NE* I.3). An activity like the systematic analysis of contemporary constitutions (*politeiai*, political systems or regimes) is meant to have a role in bringing about not just knowledge, but betterment. For when such knowledge is assimilated by a human being with characteristically human ends, that person's actions will then be different and more accurately inclined to the good. In this sense, the conclusions of political science are political actions.

Aristotle opens the *Politics* with the claim that every community, including every city-state, is established for the sake of some good (for we do everything for the sake of what we hold to be good). The city-state is the community with the greatest authority, and so aims at the most authoritative and highest good. To demonstrate his claims about the specialness of politics and its orientation toward the good, Aristotle makes the surprising move of looking backward at how the city-state naturally develops from its component parts. Individuals are brought together by a natural urge, and those who cannot live without one another form a dyad; a conjugal pair arises, for example, from the urge to reproduce.

Aristotle argues that a similarly primitive and natural pairing is that of master and slave. This is not natural because it is a forceful domination (compare 1255b15 with 1255b37-8 and 1256b25-6), but because the survival of the slave is furthered by

the intelligent foresight of the master, and that of the master is furthered by the physical labor of the slave. In contrast to Socrates' claim that all rule is for the benefit of the ruled, however, Aristotle argues that while a natural slave benefits from rule, masterly rule is essentially exercised for the master's own benefit (1278b31-36). Aristotle maintains that mastery over natural slaves is just. It apparently follows from what he says that those who are slaves by law and not by nature are unjustly enslaved. It is worth remark that this means that if there are no slaves by nature (though Aristotle never doubts there are), then all slavery is unjust: such domination is only justified if there are people who are by nature as different from others as body is from soul or beast from human, and incapable of anything higher than physical labor (I.5 1254b16-19).

These pairings for everyday needs are combined in the household. The grouping of relatives from a number of extended households is a village. When several villages find it expedient to come together in a wider community, that community, the city-state, proves to be self-sufficient, and there is no longer a natural spur to growth. Thus, the city-state is the end of the smaller communities: their nature is fulfilled when they develop into the political community. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that the political community both comes into being and endures for the sake of advantage, and adds that legislators too aim at a common advantage, which is said to be just; in the *Politics*, he says that the city-state comes into being for the sake of living, but endures for the sake of living well, understood in terms of virtue (*NE* VIII.9, 1160a10-14; *Politics* 1252b29-30). There is a considerable difference of emphasis here, but Aristotle saw no incompatibility between the advantage and the virtue of an individual, and believed that the virtue of the legislator consisted in pursuing the common advantage. The city-state is akin to a human being:

fulfillment of desire and the concerns of the body come first, but they nonetheless properly subserve reason and the concerns of the soul (VII.15 1334b12-28). And the advantage that can be pursued in the political community is not for any particular advantages, but for advantage for the whole of life; it thus encompasses the range of ethical ends in addition to more material ends (*NE* VIII.9 1160a21-3).

We may begin to see why Aristotle makes two of his most perplexing claims, that every city-state exists by nature and that the human being is by nature a political animal (I.2 1252b30, 1253a2-3). Human beings have a natural impulse to form a political community, but this is not to say that political communities spring up necessarily and without being deliberately established. Despite the natural political impulse, a city state is constructed rather than merely emerging (I.2 1253a30). Art (*technē*) does not only imitate nature, it can also complete what nature cannot; and the practitioner of the political art must complete the trajectory that nature of its own impulse cannot (cf. VII.17 1337a1-3, *Physics* II.8 199a15-17, *Protrepticus* B 13). Alternatively, it may be best to understand the politician as constructing the city-state not as the product of an art, but as the by-product of good activity (*eupraxis*) in accordance with practical wisdom, or prudence (*NE* VI.7-8 1141b23-4). The end of this political wisdom is happiness (*eudaimonia*), or activity in accordance with virtue (*NE* I.2 1094a21-1094b11, I.7 1098a16-17).

The nature of a thing can be understood by referring to the matter out of which it is made, and one sense in which the city-state exists by nature is that the communities out of which it is composed are natural (I.2 1252b30-1, *Physics* II.1-2). Aristotle insists that we will study the city-state in the best way by seeing how it develops, and he identifies another sense of the nature of a thing with its process of development (I.2 1252a24-6, *Metaphysics* V.4 1014b15). But the nature of a thing

should also be understood by referring to its form or essence and by its end or purpose (*Physics* II.2 194a12-15, a28-9, b10-12), and the process whereby humans form communities has as its end point the city-state. Aristotle often opposes the natural not to the artificial but to the pathological or deviant. The city-state serves as a model because it is the natural result of proper development, just as a fully grown healthy plant is the natural result of a seed. That the city-state is the end of human association is an observation of a natural process, but one that can go wrong. Aristotle does think that the formation of the city-state requires conscious human intervention, but he thinks this is consistent with the idea that it is the end of a natural process of growth, just as a seed that requires careful tending to grow nonetheless has the flourishing plant as its natural end.

Human beings are by nature political animals because they have within them a natural impulse to live with one another. And the natural end of this impulse to associate is the city-state. Human beings by nature form couples and households, but there is a different sense in which they naturally form city-states. The last of these is understood in terms of the good life, which for a human being is a life in common with other human beings that is self-sufficient and enables pursuits that are not possible in other human groupings or on one's own. One who is naturally inclined to solitude rather than the common life of the city-state is a bellicose creature. There are other animals, like the bee, who may be called political, but human beings are *more* political, for they have speech (*logos*, which is not mere voice). Speech is essential for a community to be properly political, for the city-state is a community in which people share discussion of what is just and unjust, with the end of making them just.

This is distinctive of the city-state, according to Aristotle, who complains that in Plato's *Republic* Socrates elides the essential differences between an individual, a

household, and a city-state. Socrates there (V 462ae) argues that the best city-state is one that most nearly approaches a unity, comparing the well-ordered constitution to that of an individual. A city-state is by its nature composed of a multitude of people of different kinds, Aristotle maintains, and is thus destroyed the more it becomes a unity. (It is unclear how Aristotle might respond to the objections that the best city-state in *Republic* is composed of parts that are dissimilar, and that Aristotle himself thinks that the parts of the human being and of the household are dissimilar from one another despite their greater unity.) Any community must have things in common, but Aristotle levels a few forceful criticisms at the constitution of the *Republic* in which spouses, children, and property are had in common. His primary objection remains that this would “reduce harmony to a unison,” whereas what should be held in common in a city-state are the habits, laws, and education that coordinate the differences without destroying them (1263b35-40).

Constitutions

One way of understanding the composite whole that is the city-state is by considering the communities out of which it grows. But to analyze a city-state adequately we must consider its two defining characteristics: its citizens and its constitution. These must be treated in tandem, because neither can make up a city-state without the other, and because the constitution determines who counts as a citizen in the first place. If a city-state receives a new constitution it is thereby a different city-state even if its citizens remain the same, for the constitution is the form of the city-state (just as rearranging the same notes into a new form would make a different melody: 1276b1-11). A citizen is someone who is eligible for the

deliberative or judicial roles in the city-state. Aristotle says that a city-state is a number of such people large enough to be self-sufficient (1275b16-20). In the genetic account in Book I, we learned that the self-sufficient community of the city-state depends on women and slaves; the analytical approach of Book III reveals that slaves, at least, are nonetheless not of that community's essence (cf. 1278a1-12). The criterion of citizenship is demanding: if only a few people in a city-state are entitled to participate in offices of judgment and deliberation, then (even if we do not count women and slaves) the vast majority in that city-state are non-citizens. For the good citizen must be able to govern free people and to be governed by them (III.4 1277b7-16).

A constitution is the organization of the citizen body into offices, and in particular the ruling office (1278b8-13; cf. 1289a15-18, which makes explicit that the offices are organized according to the end of each of the city-states, so the end is also constitutive of any constitution). For the other offices are determined by whomever has overall authority, and the constitution is to be identified with that authority: when the people rule, for example, the constitution is a democratic one. All rule over free people is properly exercised for the benefit of the ruled; those constitutions which are instead designed for the benefit of the rulers are incorrect or deviant, as they treat free people as if they were slaves (1279a20-21). The proper constitutions are kingship, aristocracy, and polity (rule by one, the few, or the many for the common benefit). The deviant constitutions are tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy (rule by one for his own benefit, rule by and for the rich, and rule by and for the poor). In theory, there could be a democracy where the few ruled, or an oligarchy where the many ruled, were the powerful few ever poor or the ruling many rich. Aristotle recognizes that his

six-fold division is only a starting point, and considers a number of different axes along which important distinctions may be made, leading to many subdivisions.

These constitutions that aim at the good of a faction demonstrate a partial grasp of justice. The oligarchs wrongly conclude from their superior wealth that they are simply superior; the democrats wrongly conclude from the fact that they are equally free-born that they are entitled to equality in every respect. A true city-state is just, so each receives his due therein, and this ought to be proportionate to a citizen's virtue, not to birth or wealth. Wealth and liberty should not be pursued as ultimate ends, but only insofar as they bring about the good life. Aristotle rejects a contractual model of political association according to which law functions as a kind of treaty requiring just behavior, for it should aim instead at making the citizens good and just (1280a34-1280b12). We maintain city-states in order to live well, and, as Aristotle explains in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, to live well is above all to live as the virtuous person would live. In a city-state, the citizens live in a common territory, agree not to wrong one another, and exchange goods with one another; but only when the bonds among fellow citizens are those of friendship is the community a political one (1280b29-38; on the kind of friendship involved, see *EN* VIII and IX, especially VIII.9-11).

If one person or family emerges who is manifestly superior in virtue, then that person should rule as king, though Aristotle seems to think that the days of kingship have passed (1284b25-34, 1288a14-29, V.10 1313a2-9). It may be even less likely that there will arise a number of people who are outstandingly virtuous, but if it should happen, then an aristocracy would be even better than a virtuous king, because less corruptible (though ever vulnerable to degenerating into an oligarchy: 1286a38-1286b15). Although he does not countenance the idea of a multitude of people who

are outstandingly virtuous, he does take seriously arguments for why the many should be in authority rather than the few. Even if the many are inferior individually, collectively they can be superior: when pooled, their virtue and practical wisdom can be greater than anyone else's. Taken together, the many are even superior on traditional grounds like wealth and strength (1281a39-1282a41; cf. 1287b26-30 and Plato's *Gorgias* 488ce). Aristotle does not decisively side with one, few, or many, making clear that the proper criterion for rule should not be number, but superiority in virtue.

Aristotle and his students gave careful accounts of 158 actual constitutions – one of which, *The Constitution of the Athenians*, was rediscovered in the late nineteenth century – so it is not surprising that he does not limit himself to a schema of three constitutions and the three deviant forms thereof (and criticizes Plato for doing so in V.12 1316b25-6). His discussion of the constitution is simultaneously a normative theory of ideal types and an empirically informed account of comparative institutions. Aristotle delineates several different kinds of democracy and oligarchy, polity (a mixture of democracy and oligarchy), and tyranny; he also gives an account of how these different constitutions come into being. The theoretically best constitution, a virtuous kingship or an aristocracy of the virtuous, is often unattainable, and one reason that he enumerates the different kinds of each of the other constitutions is to enable a judgment about which of these kinds is best given the circumstances.

Aristotle also provides his answer to what the best constitution is for most city-states, given what is within the reach of ordinary people. Rather than depending on the attainment of virtue by the citizens as individuals, the character of this constitution depends on applying the idea that virtue is a mean to the citizens as a

body (IV.11 1295a25-1296b11: this runs into problems similar to those that undermine his attempt to transfer the idea of virtue as a mean, which works better when it is understood as the mean passion or action of an individual, to the systemic justice of a constitution at *EN V.1-6*). He accordingly maintains that the best constitution in most city-states is that in which the dominant political role is played by the middle class. The rich incline to arrogance and incapacity to be ruled, the poor to resentment and incapacity to rule. Those in the middle are between these extremes, and are more equal and better prepared for friendship; they therefore keep the city-state from division into factions of rich and poor, and from lapsing into extreme democracy or extreme oligarchy. As a constitution is mixed, it will lead to the predominance of the middle; that predominance will therefore produce greater stability (see IV.12 1297a6). There is thus a close connection between this ‘practically best’ regime where the middle class dominates and polity, the constitution that includes elements of both democratic and oligarchic mechanisms for public deliberation, the judiciary, and the selection and remit of officials. Aristotle may even have persuaded Philip II to establish this kind of constitution (IV.11 1296a32-b2).

Just as the constitution has an ethical end of enabling the good life, so what leads to faction is a misunderstanding of what justice requires. The ones who ought to participate more in the system are those of outstanding virtue, under whose leadership the good life would be most attainable; but the proponents of democracy insist instead on equal participation because of their equal liberty and the proponents of oligarchy insist on their own greater participation as equal to their greater property. These respective understandings of equality will further the democratic or oligarchic lean of the city-state, but this partisanship will lead to political discord and instability. Indeed, a democracy is likely to destroy itself if it pursues overly democratic

measures – the best democracy is the most limited one – and too many oligarchic features will ruin an oligarchy. Democracy is more stable than oligarchy, not least because it is closer to a constitution based on the middle class, but it is still prone to faction.

The constitution can be changed in a number of ways, but faction is the one that most concerns Aristotle. Faction may be caused by arrogance, profit, fear, honor, contempt, ethnic differences, disproportionate growth of one group, or a reaction to any of these. In Book V of the *Politics*, Aristotle systematically discusses how these and other factors affect each kind of constitution, drawing on historical instances of constitutional failure or overthrow. He thus provides a kind of catalogue of political pathologies for each system.

Knowledge of what destroys constitutions entails knowledge of what preserves them, Aristotle maintains, and so he goes on to analyze how best to maintain each kind. The assimilation of ethical and political outlooks here comes under some pressure, as Aristotle contemplates the utility of stirring up an exaggerated fear of danger to rally people behind the constitution, for example, or the preservation of a tyranny by murdering the outstanding citizens, abolishing schools, employing spies, impoverishing the people, and setting them against one another by slander (V.8 1308a24-30; V.11 1313a34-1314a28). In part, Aristotle is confined by his own definitions: because tyranny is unaccountable rule over unwilling subjects, if the tyrant moderates his rule to the point that the subjects become willing, he will then have destroyed his tyranny rather than having preserved it. Aristotle nonetheless holds to the idea that the preservation or stability of a regime is best guaranteed by moderating that regime – which will mean that the least moderate regimes will require the greatest changes if they are to survive (IV.14 1297b34-1298b34, V.11 1314a29-

1315b10). He ends up arguing, therefore, that the only way for a tyranny to endure beyond its characteristically short span is for it to be essentially kingly (the tyrant still counting as a tyrant presumably because he is acting in this way for his own interests). As with preservation and the good life being the two ends for which people form and maintain a city-state, so the preservation of the city-state itself ultimately converges with its proper ethical role.

The politics of virtue

At the beginning of the seventh book of the *Politics*, Aristotle turns again to the question of the best and happiest life, and determines that for both an individual and a city-state this is a life of virtue together with the external goods needed to undertake virtuous actions. As in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the two prime candidates are the political life and the philosophical life. The tutor of Alexander recognizes that some city-states are oriented to conquest, but he forcefully condemns the idea that the best city-state is the one that rules over others like a master or tyrant. Military activity is not noble in itself, but only if it is ultimately undertaken in pursuit of the highest end.

It is in light of the good life that the city-state is supposed to enable that we can determine the best constitution's characteristics. The population must be large enough for self-sufficiency, but small enough that everyone knows one another sufficiently to judge them properly when it comes to elections and verdicts; and its territory should be of a size and situation so as to allow for ready defence and a life that is neither luxurious nor poor. But while the city-state needs territory, a city-state is not defined in terms of property, but as a community of people aiming at

eudaimonia or happiness (VII.8 1328a33-6). What is more, even the laborers, while necessary for the city-state, are not properly part of it. And Aristotle reveals how exclusive is his concern for the well-being of the ruling class when he says that even in the best city-state the farmers should be “spiritless slaves” since they would then be more useful as workers and less likely to foment change (VII.10, 1330a25-7). By contrast, all citizens participate in the constitution, which should be geared toward making them excellent and happy by focussing on their education. And this education is Aristotle’s focus until the *Politics* breaks off in Book VIII. Aristotle’s account of the ideal city-state in the final books turns out to be beyond our grasp precisely because he aims to describe in some detail a political community that would be feasible for his contemporaries to establish. But it remains intriguing in no small part because what eludes us now are not the guiding values but the social and material conditions of such a political community’s possibility.

While his account in the *Politics* is deeply ambivalent on the question, the final book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* clearly defends the superiority of the life of contemplation over the political life. Pursuit of the best life does not culminate with such a conclusion, for it only begins there. Aristotle insists that achieving knowledge about virtue is not enough, and that it is not the ultimate aim of ethical enquiry. We must then endeavor to be virtuous and to bring others to act in accordance with virtue so far as they can. To do this, however, we need a proper system of education and a judicious code of laws, so that argument, aspirations, and compulsion all encourage people in the direction of an ethical life in common. The essential aim of political science is virtuous action, but this is why ethics proves but a preface to political science.

Kinch Hoekstra

See also Ancient Democracy, Aquinas, Aristocracy, Aristotelianism, Averroism, City-State, Community, Friendship, Happiness, Household, Justice, Naturalism, Plato, Scholasticism, Slavery, Tyranny, Virtue

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