

ARISTOTLE

Aristotle (384-322 BC) was born in Stagira, a town in the north of Greece, near the Aegean Sea
he was raised in the royal residence of Macedon, where his father was a physician
at 17 he was sent to Athens to study at Plato's Academy
he remained there for 20 years departing at Plato's death in 347
he spent some time in Asia Minor and in Lesbos in the eastern Aegean until
returning to Macedon in 343 where, according to ancient sources, he was tutor to Alexander
in 338 Alexander's father Philip II defeated Athens and Corinth at the battle of Chaeronea
leading to Macedon's rule over the Greek world
Alexander came to power after Philip's assassination in 336
in 335 Aristotle returned to Athens and established his own center of learning—the Lyceum
after Alexander's death in 323 Aristotle again left Athens
as Athens, along with other cities, tried unsuccessfully to escape from Macedonian rule
Aristotle died the following year
although he spent about half his life in Athens he was never an Athenian citizen
it is evident that his relationship with the city was at times strained

the works that come down to us as Aristotle's corpus were really lecture notes
ancient testimony indicates that he wrote other works intended for a broader audience
even dialogues like Plato
but all these "published" works of Aristotle were lost

Aristotle was founder of formal logic
developed a conception of knowledge that gives a larger role to perception, material composition, and
empirical research than allowed by Plato
[refer to Raphael's *School of Athens*]
he held that we must pursue knowledge by different methods
each appropriate to the subject matter

Aristotle does not follow Plato in regarding our mortal existence
as a preparation for a future life after death
or as a punishment for mistakes made in previous lives
he does think there is one aspect of the human soul that survives death (what aspect?)
but this does not lead him to think we have any past or future lives
the "soul" was just the various powers that an embodied thing has
like the processes of growth, perception, locomotion
all living things, animals and plants, thus have "soul"
humans are a kind of animal
but are distinguished from animals by the capacity
to make choices, experience emotions that are susceptible to rational control, learn a language, and find
reasons for what we believe
"man is the rational animal"

because Aristotle takes everything that exists (except for the prime mover) to be enmattered
human beings, too, are essentially embodied
and death brings our well-being to a close

the whole of his practical philosophy is thus devoted to the question of what it is for mortal beings like ourselves to fare well
the *Nichomachean Ethics* is the principle work devoted to this question
ethos means “character” and thus the *Nichomachean Ethics* is devoted to a study of character

but the starting point of Aristotle’s practical philosophy is not character but *eudaimonia*
often translated as “happiness”
might also be translated as human “well-being” or “flourishing”
this happiness or flourishing consists, for Aristotle, in the virtuous activity of the human soul

character is important because in order to excel in flourishing
we must become a certain sort of person
we must train our judgment and emotions so that we know which pleasures to pursue
and how to control fear and make effective decisions
how to spend money wisely and how to avoid either excessive disdain or attraction to wealth
how to make fair allocation of goods to others
in each of these areas of life, skill involves finding the mean between excess and deficiency

Aristotle holds that the life that most fully develops the practical virtues
is one of active engagement in the important deliberative matters of the city—a political life
although a political life is not as valued as the theoretical life of philosophy
he assumed the theoretical life would be of interest to only the very few
he assumes that most citizens—those to whom he addresses in his practical philosophy
plan to live a political life
thus his principle task as a practical philosopher is the examination of the various ways
that civic life can be improved
the *Nichomachean Ethics* was conceived as a political treatise

the *Politics* was written during his final period in Athens
in its details the *Politics* is a retrospective anachronism
for he had argued that a true state must be small enough for its citizens to know one another
for he made this argument as his pupil, Alexander, was embarked on creating the largest empire
the world had yet known

Book I: provides a preliminary discussion of the origin of the *polis*
and the elements out of which it is made
for Aristotle, the growth of a city out of smaller social units
is the sort of thing that exists by nature rather than convention
there is nothing arbitrary about living a political life

begins with the famous remark that man is by nature a ‘political animal’
he does not mean that all men are naturally politicians
but that it is only in a politically organized society that human beings realize their potential
the lesser groups of family and tribal villages are merely economic and productive associations
he held that the good life for mankind can only be secured within a state
he holds then that the *polis* is the inevitable outgrowth of our natural psychological dispositions

this is what he means when he says that human beings are political animals
but he also holds that some human beings
(women and inhabitants of the lands north and east of Greece)
do not possess the capacity to engage in political deliberation and must play subordinate roles

In Chapter 5 of Book I Aristotle argues that some people are by nature slaves
Aristotle shared with Plato the ancient world assumption of the natural inequality of people
our view that all men and women are equal by virtue of their being human
is clearly a product of the modern world view that is one of the legacies of the Enlightenment
this *egalitarianism* is a position that is not a “natural” state of affairs and not universally accepted
it is a position that must be argued for

as a result of this assumption of the natural inequality of peoples it should not be surprising
that in the *Politics* Aristotle gives an unabashed defense of slavery
on the grounds that slaves are efficient and good for society as a whole
and also because those who are slaves are “naturally” meant to be slaves
and would be unhappy and unable to cope with freedom
this is, of course, an argument we’ve heard in more recent times

just as with Plato, Aristotle holds that different people have different roles
to treat unequals as equals would be just as unjust
as treating equals unequally

Despite these views which seem so objectionable to our modern sensibilities
Plato and Aristotle laid the foundation for our conception of justice
the idea that equals should be treated as equals is the foundation of our sense of justice
the difference is simply that we have come to believe that everybody is an equal

the rest of the *Politics* serves a double purpose:

- 1) it investigates the question: “What is the best constitution we can achieve?”
- 2) examines the ways in which any regime—even tyranny—can be improved

Aristotle undertook an empirical study of the constitutions of 158 cities
(only the study of the city of Athens survives—discovered in late 19th century)

Aristotle’s ideal city is one in which all citizens are educated to be virtuous
unlike Plato’s utopian scheme in the *Republic*
Aristotle ideal city is one in which all citizens participate as equals
each receiving from the city the same education
all sharing a single conception of human well-being
against Plato’s plan for the guardian class
Aristotle holds in Book II of the *Politics* that young children are best cared for by their parents
and that property will best serve the common good
if each citizen has control over his own resources

examine here in more detail Aristotle’s response to Plato
why does Aristotle think that private property is preferable?

Books III through VI examine a wide variety of political systems and the factual details of political life

he begins Book III by examining the concept of the ‘citizen’ for Aristotle a citizen is someone with a constitutional right to office and a constitution is a set of rules for the allocation of offices citizenship requires leisure and the opportunity to think thus manual laborers (and, of course, slaves) cannot aspire to it

also in Chapter 6 of Book III he turns to examine the nature of different constitutions need to determine two things:

- 1) the nature of the end for which a city exists
- 2) the various kinds of rule to which mankind and its associations are subject

as to the first Aristotle central practical philosophy comes to the fore:

The good life is the chief end, both for the community as a whole and for each of us individually. (1278b15)

next considers various kinds of rule:

rule of master over slave
rule over wife and children

when the constitution of a city is constructed on the principle that its members are equals and peers, the citizen thinks it proper that they should hold office by turns. (1279a8)

this leads Aristotle to this significant conclusion:

The conclusion which follows is clear: those constitutions which consider the common interest are right constitutions, judged by the standard of absolute justice. Those constitutions which consider only the personal interest of the rulers are all wrong constitutions, or perversions of the right forms. (1279a8)

in Chapter 7 and 8 of Book III he examines three main forms of constitutions rule by the one, the few, or the many

each can be right if aimed at the *common good*—monarchy, aristocracy, and *politeia* (a kind of constitutional, limited democracy)

or perverted, pursuing the self-interest of the rulers—tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy (mob rule)

in the last few chapters of Book III Aristotle considers the question of justice and here we see the distinction between **distributive** and **retributive** justice which owes much to Aristotle

the notion of **retributive justice**,

justice that rights certain wrongs--the idea of “getting even”

“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”

making the criminal pay for his crime

is distinguished from the notion of **distributive justice**

the concern for a well-balanced and reasonable society

the question of the fair distribution of wealth and goods in society

the idea that individuals are due certain rewards for their labor can also be traced to Aristotle despite his aristocratic opinions and harsh elitism
Aristotle saw that the members who depended most on an adequate theory of justice were the poorer and less powerful members

like Plato, Aristotle is concerned with the problem of stability and avoiding revolution for him, education is not the imparting of theoretical expertise but a training in good habits
city-states owe their instability to the endemic conflict of rich and poor
striving to establish either oligarchy (plutocracy) or mob rule
the rule of law can serve to keep these class divisions in check

since the main cause of revolution is class conflict
a stable state needs a middle class to bridge the gap between rich and poor
allocation of some power to the citizenry will reduce the danger of sedition
Aristotle generally argues that the best constitution for a state must depend on its size its style of economy and its physical character
Aristotle idea that property should be used and not made the object of accumulation had a profound impact on the European Middle Ages in the condemnation of usury
Aristotle thought that the state should be self-sufficient and rely as little as possible on trade perhaps forgetting that it was trade in wine and olive oil that enabled the city states of Greece to support a large number of citizens to rise above mere subsistence
leading to an unprecedented level of culture

Aristotle has a deep awareness of the ways in which the mutual hatred of rich and poor undermines public life
his assumption that democracy is inherently corrupt rests on his allegation that the poor, in cities like Athens, develop a class consciousness that undermines their ability to treat the wealthy in a fair way
the rich also are prone to class bias
he argues that the poor can achieve a wisdom of sorts when they act collectively provided they have a minimum degree of decency

in general, a constitution, whether of the one, the few, or the many can be good or perverted depending upon whether or not it serves the “common good”
this also is his conception of justice
in Chapter 12 of Book III:

The good in the sphere of politics is justice; and justice consists in what tends to promote the common interest. (1282b14)

in contrast to Plato’s aim in the *Republic*
Aristotle is not concerned so much to lay out what the ideal city would be but with determining what the best practically achievable constitution would be

the best sort of political system that requires only an ordinary level of character development

is one in which most citizens have a middling level of wealth
this would not be as desirable as a kingship or aristocracy governed by outstanding individuals
but he is pessimistic about the chances of achieving any of the three correct political systems
political leaders must learn how to make the best of what they have
they must learn how to make oligarchies and democracies—the rule of the rich or the poor
less uniformly oligarchic or democratic
elites and masses must learn how to work together
must learn how to keep the injustices that are so common to political life at a minimum
Aristotle is fully aware that politics must usually settle for modest accomplishments
but that does not undermine his conviction
that for most of us, a life devoted to the public good is the best we can achieve

in politics as well as elsewhere Aristotle's views tend to be
commonsensical dilutions of Plato's theoretical extravagances
just as he derives his argument against Plato's theory of forms from Plato's *Parmenides*
so his critique of the *Republic* seems derived from Plato's *Laws*
he holds that there is no guarantee that Plato's philosopher-kings can be found
for self-interested passions are impossible to extirpate
the best practical state is one based on law
which he describes as 'passionless reason'

It may perhaps be urged that it is a poor sort of policy to vest sovereignty in a human being, rather than in law; for human beings are subject to the passions that beset their souls. (1281a11)

Plato's conception of an ideal ruling class is incompatible with actual human nature
if it was put into effect it would install rule by the miserable
who would make their subjects miserable