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Aristotle's Political Theory

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Aristotle (b. 384–d. 322 BCE), was a Greek philosopher, logician, and scientist. Along with his teacher Plato, Aristotle is generally regarded as one of the most influential ancient thinkers in a number of philosophical fields, including political theory. Aristotle was born in Stagira in northern Greece, and his father was a court physician to the king of Macedon. As a young man he studied in Plato's Academy in Athens. After Plato's death he left Athens to conduct philosophical and biological research in Asia Minor and Lesbos, and he was then invited by King Philip II of Macedon to tutor his young son, Alexander the Great. Soon after Alexander succeeded his father, consolidated the conquest of the Greek city-states, and launched the invasion of the Persian Empire. Aristotle returned as a resident alien to Athens, and was a close friend of Antipater, the Macedonian viceroy. At this time (335–323 BCE) he wrote, or at least worked on, some of his major treatises, including the *Politics*. When Alexander died suddenly, Aristotle had to flee from Athens because of his Macedonian connections, and he died soon after. Aristotle's life seems to have influenced his political thought in various ways: his interest in biology seems to be reflected in the naturalism of his politics; his interest in comparative politics and his qualified sympathies for democracy as well as monarchy may have been encouraged by his travels and experience of diverse political systems; he reacts critically to his teacher Plato, while borrowing extensively, from Plato's *Republic*, *Statesman*, and *Laws*; and his own *Politics* is intended to guide rulers and statesmen, reflecting the high political circles in which he moved.

1. Political Science in General

The modern word 'political' derives from the Greek *politikos*, 'of, or pertaining to, the polis'. (The Greek term *polis* will be translated here as 'city-state'. It is also commonly translated as 'city' or simply anglicized as 'polis'. City-states like Athens and Sparta were relatively small and cohesive units, in which political, religious, and cultural concerns were intertwined. The extent of their similarity to modern nation-states is controversial.) Aristotle's word for 'politics' is *politikê*, which is short for *politikê epistêmê* or 'political science'. It belongs to one of the three main branches of science, which Aristotle distinguishes by their ends or objects. Contemplative science (including physics and metaphysics) is concerned with truth or knowledge for its own sake; practical science with good action; and productive science with making useful or beautiful objects (*Top*. VI.6.145a14–16, *Met*. VI.1.1025b24, XI.7.1064a16–19, *EN*

VI.2.1139a26–8). Politics is a practical science, since it is concerned with the noble action or happiness of the citizens (although it resembles a productive science in that it seeks to create, preserve, and reform political systems). Aristotle thus understands politics as a normative or prescriptive discipline rather than as a purely empirical or descriptive inquiry.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle describes his subject matter as 'political science', which he characterizes as the most authoritative science. It prescribes which sciences are to be studied in the city-state, and the others — such as military science, household management, and rhetoric — fall under its authority. Since it governs the other practical sciences, their ends serve as means to its end, which is nothing less than the human good. "Even if the end is the same for an individual and for a city-state, that of the city-state seems at any rate greater and more complete to attain and preserve. For although it is worthy to attain it for only an individual, it is nobler and more divine to do so for a nation or city-state" (*EN* I.2.1094b7–10). The two ethical works (the *Nicomachean* Ethics and the *Eudemian Ethics*) explain the principles that form the foundations for the *Politics*: that happiness is the highest human good, that happiness is the activity of moral virtue defined in terms of the mean, and that justice or the common advantage is the political good. Aristotle's political science thus encompasses the two fields which modern philosophers distinguish as ethics and political philosophy. (See the entry on Aristotle's ethics.) Political philosophy in the narrow sense is roughly speaking the subject of his treatise called the *Politics*. For a further discussion of this topic, see the following supplementary document:

Supplement: Characteristics and Problems of Aristotle's Politics

2. Aristotle's View of Politics

Political science studies the tasks of the politician or statesman (*politikos*), in much the way that medical science concerns the work of the physician (see *Politics* IV.1). It is, in fact, the body of knowledge that such practitioners, if truly expert, will also wield in pursuing their tasks. The most important task for the politician is, in the role of lawgiver (*nomothetês*), to frame the appropriate constitution for the city-state. This involves enduring laws, customs, and institutions (including a system of moral education) for the citizens. Once the constitution is in place, the politician needs to take the appropriate measures to maintain it, to introduce reforms when he finds them necessary, and to prevent developments which might subvert the political system. This is the province of legislative science, which Aristotle regards as more important than politics as exercised in everyday political activity such as the passing of decrees (see *EN* VI.8).

Aristotle frequently compares the politician to a craftsman. The analogy is imprecise because politics, in the strict sense of legislative science, is a form of practical knowledge, while a craft like architecture or medicine is a form of productive knowledge. However, the comparison is valid to the extent that the politician produces, operates, maintains a legal system according to universal principles (*EN* VI.8 and X.9). In order to appreciate this analogy it is helpful to observe that Aristotle explains the production of an artifact such as a drinking cup in terms of four causes: the material, formal, efficient, and final causes (*Phys*. II.3 and *Met*. A.2). For example, clay (material cause) is molded into a roughly cylindrical shape closed at one end (formal cause) by a potter (efficient or moving cause) so that it can contain a beverage (final cause). (For discussion of the four causes see the entry on Aristotle's physics.)

One can also explain the existence of the city-state in terms of the four causes. It is a kind of community (*koinônia*), that is, a collection of parts having some functions and interests in common (*Pol*. II.1.1261a18, III.1.1275b20). Hence, it is made up of parts, which Aristotle describes in various ways in different contexts: as households, or economic classes (e.g., the rich and the poor), or demes (i.e., local political units). But, ultimately, the city-state is composed of individual citizens (see III.1.1274a38–41), who, along with natural resources, are the "material" or "equipment" out of which the city-state is fashioned (see VII.14.1325b38–41).

The formal cause of the city-state is its constitution (*politeia*). Aristotle defines the constitution as "a certain ordering of the inhabitants of the city-state" (III.1.1274b32–41). He also speaks of the constitution of a community as "the form of the compound" and argues that whether the community is the same over time depends on whether it has the same constitution (III.3.1276b1–11). The constitution is not a written document, but an immanent organizing principle, analogous to the soul of an organism. Hence, the constitution is also "the way of life" of the citizens (IV.11.1295a40–b1, VII.8.1328b1–2). Here the citizens are that minority of the resident population who possess full political rights (III.1.1275b17–20).

The existence of the city-state also requires an efficient cause, namely, its ruler. On Aristotle's view, a community of any sort can possess order only if it has a ruling element or authority. This ruling principle is defined by the constitution, which sets criteria for political offices, particularly the sovereign office (III.6.1278b8–10; cf. IV.1.1289a15–18). However, on a deeper level, there must be an efficient cause to explain why a city-state acquires its constitution in the first place. Aristotle states that "the person who first established [the city-state] is the cause of very great benefits" (I.2.1253a30–1). This person was evidently the lawgiver (*nomothetês*),

someone like Solon of Athens or Lycurgus of Sparta, who founded the constitution. Aristotle compares the lawgiver, or the politician more generally, to a craftsman (*dêmiourgos*) like a weaver or shipbuilder, who fashions material into a finished product (II.12.1273b32–3, VII.4.1325b40–1365a5).

The notion of final cause dominates Aristotle's *Politics* from the opening lines:

> Since we see that every city-state is a sort of community and that every community is established for the sake of some good (for everyone does everything for the sake of what they believe to be good), it is clear that every community aims at some good, and the community which has the most authority of all and includes all the others aims highest, that is, at the good with the most authority. This is what is called the city-state or political community. [I.1.1252a1–7]

Soon after, he states that the city-state comes into being for the sake of life but exists for the sake of the good life (2.1252b29–30). The theme that the good life or happiness is the proper end of the city-state recurs throughout the *Politics* (III.6.1278b17–24, 9.1280b39; VII.2.1325a7–10).

To sum up, the city-state is a hylomorphic (i.e., matter-form) compound of a particular population (i.e., citizen-body) in a given territory (material cause) and a constitution (formal cause). The constitution itself is fashioned by the lawgiver and is governed by politicians, who are like craftsmen (efficient cause), and the constitution defines the aim of the city-state (final cause, IV.1.1289a17–18). Aristotle's hylomorphic analysis has important practical implications for him: just as a craftsman should not try to impose a form on materials for which it is unsuited (e.g. to build a house out of sand), the legislator should not lay down or change laws which are contrary to the nature of the citizens. Aristotle accordingly

rejects utopian schemes such as the proposal in Plato's *Republic* that children and property should belong to all the citizens in common. For this runs afoul of the fact that "people give most attention to their own property, less to what is communal, or only as much as falls to them to give attention" (*Pol*. II.3.1261b33–5). Aristotle is also wary of casual political innovation, because it can have the deleterious side-effect of undermining the citizens' habit of obeying the law (II.8.1269a13–24). For a further discussion of the theoretical foundations of Aristotle's politics, see the following supplementary document:

> Supplement: Presuppositions of Aristotle's Politics

It is in these terms, then, that Aristotle understands the fundamental normative problem of politics: What constitutional form should the lawgiver establish and preserve in what material for the sake of what end?

3. General Theory of Constitutions and Citizenship

Aristotle states, "The politician and lawgiver is wholly occupied with the city-state, and the constitution is a certain way of organizing those who inhabit the city-state" (III.1.1274b36–8). His general theory of constitutions is set forth in *Politics* III. He begins with a definition of the citizen (*politês*), since the city-state is by nature a collective entity, a multitude of citizens. Citizens are distinguished from other inhabitants, such as resident aliens and slaves; and even children and seniors are not unqualified citizens (nor are most ordinary workers). After further analysis he defines the citizen as a person who has the right (*exousia*) to participate in deliberative or judicial office (1275b18–21). In Athens, for example, citizens had the right to attend the assembly, the council, and other bodies, or to sit on juries. The Athenian system differed from a modern representative democracy in that the citizens were more directly involved in governing. Although full citizenship tended to be restricted in the Greek

city-states (with women, slaves, foreigners, and some others excluded), the citizens were more deeply enfranchised than in modern representative democracies because they were more directly involved in governing. This is reflected in Aristotle's definition of the citizen (without qualification). Further, he defines the city-state (in the unqualified sense) as a multitude of such citizens which is adequate for a self-sufficient life (1275b20–21).

Aristotle defines the constitution (*politeia*) as a way of organizing the offices of the city-state, particularly the sovereign office (III.6.1278b8–10; cf. IV.1.1289a15–18). The constitution thus defines the governing body, which takes different forms: for example, in a democracy it is the people, and in an oligarchy it is a select few (the wealthy or well born). Before attempting to distinguish and evaluate various constitutions Aristotle considers two questions. First, why does a city-state come into being? He recalls the thesis, defended in *Politics* I.2, that human beings are by nature political animals, who naturally want to live together. For a further discussion of this topic, see the following supplementary document:

Supplement: Political Naturalism

Aristotle then adds, "The common advantage also brings them together insofar as they each attain the noble life. This is above all the end for all both in common and separately" (III.6.1278b19–24). Second, what are the different forms of rule by which one individual or group can rule over another? Aristotle distinguishes several types of rule, based on the nature of the soul of the ruler and of the subject. He first considers despotic rule, which is exemplified in the master-slave relationship. Aristotle thinks that this form of rule is justified in the case of natural slaves who (he asserts without evidence) lack a deliberative faculty and thus need a natural master to direct them (I.13.1260a12; slavery is defended at length in *Politics* I.4–8). Although a natural slave allegedly benefits from having a master, despotic rule is still primarily for the sake of the master and only incidentally for the slave (III.6.1278b32–7). (Aristotle provides no argument for this: if some persons are congenitally incapable of governing themselves, why should they not be ruled primarily for their own sakes?) He next considers paternal and marital rule, which he also views as defensible: "the male is by nature more capable of leadership than the female, unless he is constituted in some way contrary to nature, and the elder and perfect [is by nature more capable of leadership] than the younger and imperfect" (I.12.1259a39–b4).

Aristotle is persuasive when he argues that children need adult supervision because their rationality is "imperfect" (*ateles*) or immature. But he is unconvincing to modern readers when he alleges (without substantiation) that, although women have a deliberative faculty, it is "without authority" (*akuron*), so that females require male supervision (I.13.1260a13–14). (Aristotle's arguments about slaves and women appear so weak that some commentators take them to be ironic. However, what is obvious to a modern reader need not have been so to an ancient Greek, so that it is not necessary to suppose Aristotle's discussion is disingenuous.) It is noteworthy, however, that paternal and marital rule are properly practiced for the sake of the ruled (for the sake of the child and of the wife respectively), just as arts like medicine or gymnastics are practiced for the sake of the patient (III.6.1278b37–1279a1). In this respect they resemble political rule, which is the form of rule appropriate when the ruler and the subject have equal and similar rational capacities. This is exemplified by naturally equal citizens who take turns at ruling for one another's advantage (1279a8–13). This sets the stage for the fundamental claim of Aristotle's constitutional theory: "constitutions which aim at the common advantage are correct and just without qualification, whereas those which aim only at the advantage of the rulers are deviant and unjust, because they involve despotic rule which is inappropriate for a community of free persons" (1279a17–21).

The distinction between correct and deviant constitutions is combined with the observation that the government may consist of one person, a few, or a multitude. Hence, there are six possible constitutional forms (*Politics* III.7):

	Correct	**Deviant**
One Ruler	Kingship	Tyranny
Few Rulers	Aristocracy	Oligarchy
Many Rulers	Polity	Democracy

This six-fold classification (which is doubtless adapted from Plato's *Statesman* 302c–d) sets the stage for Aristotle's inquiry into the best constitution, although it is modified in various ways throughout the *Politics*. For example, he observes that the dominant class in oligarchy (literally rule of the *oligoi*, i.e., few) is typically the wealthy, whereas in democracy (literally rule of the *dêmos*, i.e., people) it is the poor, so that these economic classes should be included in the definition of these forms (see *Politics* III.8, IV.4, and VI.2 for alternative accounts). Also, polity is later characterized as a kind of "mixed" constitution typified by rule of the "middle" group of citizens, a moderately wealthy class between the rich and poor (*Politics* IV.11).

Aristotle's constitutional theory is based on his theory of justice, which is expounded in *Nicomachean Ethics* book V. Aristotle distinguishes two different but related senses of "justice" — universal and particular — both of which play an important role in his constitutional theory. Firstly, in the universal sense "justice" means "lawfulness" and is concerned with the common advantage and happiness of the political community (*NE* V.1.1129b11–19, cf. *Pol*. III.12.1282b16–17). The conception of universal justice undergirds the distinction between correct (just) and deviant (unjust) constitutions. But what exactly the "common advantage" (*koinê*

sumpheron) entails is a matter of scholarly controversy. Some passages imply that justice involves the advantage of all the citizens; for example, every citizen of the best constitution has a just claim to private property and to an education (*Pol*. VII.9.1329a23–4, 13.1332a32–8). But Aristotle also allows that it might be "in a way" just to ostracize powerful citizens even when they have not been convicted of any crimes (III.13.1284b15–20). Whether Aristotle understands the common advantage as safeguarding the interests of each and every citizen has a bearing on whether and to what extent he anticipates what moderns would understand as a theory of individual rights. (See Fred Miller and Richard Kraut for differing interpretations.)

Secondly, in the particular sense "justice" means "equality" or "fairness", and this includes distributive justice, according to which different individuals have just claims to shares of some common asset such as property. Aristotle analyzes arguments for and against the different constitutions as different applications of the principle of distributive justice (III.9.1280a7–22). Everyone agrees, he says, that justice involves treating equal persons equally, and treating unequal persons unequally, but they do not agree on the standard by which individuals are deemed to be equally (or unequally) meritorious or deserving. He assumes his own analysis of distributive justice set forth in *Nicomachean Ethics* V.3: Justice requires that benefits be distributed to individuals in proportion to their merit or desert. The oligarchs mistakenly think that those who are superior in wealth should also have superior political rights, whereas the democrats hold that those who are equal in free birth should also have equal political rights. Both of these conceptions of political justice are mistaken in Aristotle's view, because they assume a false conception of the ultimate end of the city-state. The city-state is neither a business enterprise to maximize wealth (as the oligarchs suppose) nor an association to promote liberty and equality (as the democrats maintain). Instead, Aristotle argues, "the good life is the end of the city-state," that is, a life consisting of noble

actions (1280b39–1281a4). Hence, the correct conception of justice is aristocratic, assigning political rights to those who make a full contribution to the political community, that is, to those with virtue as well as property and freedom (1281a4–8). This is what Aristotle understands by an "aristocratic" constitution: literally, the rule of the *aristoi*, i.e., best persons. Aristotle explores the implications of this argument in the remainder of *Politics* III, considering the rival claims of the rule of law and the rule of a supremely virtuous individual. Here absolute kingship is a limiting case of aristocracy. Again, in books VII-VIII, Aristotle describes the ideal constitution in which the citizens are fully virtuous.

Although justice is in Aristotle's view the foremost political virtue (*Pol*. III.9.1283a38–40), the other great social virtue, friendship, should not be overlooked, because the two virtues work hand in hand to secure every sort of association (*EN* VIII.9.1159b26–7). Justice enables the citizens of a city-state to share peacefully in the benefits and burdens of cooperation, while friendship holds them together and prevents them from breaking up into warring factions (cf. *Pol*. II.4.1262b7–9). Friends are expected to treat each other justly, but friendship goes beyond justice because it is a complex mutual bond in which individuals choose the good for others and trust that others are choosing the good for them (cf. *EE* VII.2.1236a14–15, b2–3; *EN* VIII.2.1155b34–3.1156a10). Because choosing the good for one another is essential to friendship and there are three different ways in which something can be called 'good' for a human being—virtuous (i.e., good without qualification), useful, or pleasant—there are three types of friendship: hedonistic, utilitarian, and virtuous. Political (or civic) friendship is a species of utilitarian friendship, and it is the most important form of utilitarian friendship because the polis is the greatest community. Opposed to political friendship is enmity, which leads to faction or civil war (*stasis*) or even to political revolution and the breakup of the polis, as discussed in Book V of the *Politics*. Aristotle offers general accounts of

political or civic friendship as part of his general theory of friendship in *EE* VII.10 and *EN* VIII.9–12.

4. Study of Specific Constitutions

The purpose of political science is to guide "the good lawgiver and the true politician" (IV.1.1288b27). Like any complete science or craft, it must study a range of issues concerning its subject matter. For example, gymnastics (physical education) studies what sort of training is best or adapted to the body that is naturally the best, what sort of training is best for most bodies, and what capacity is appropriate for someone who does not want the condition or knowledge appropriate for athletic contests. Political science studies a comparable range of constitutions (1288b21–35): first, the constitution which is best without qualification, i.e., "most according to our prayers with no external impediment"; second, the constitution that is best under the circumstances "for it is probably impossible for many persons to attain the best constitution"; third, the constitution which serves the aim a given population happens to have, i.e., the one that is best "based on a hypothesis": "for [the political scientist] ought to be able to study a given constitution, both how it might originally come to be, and, when it has come to be, in what manner it might be preserved for the longest time; I mean, for example, if a particular city happens neither to be governed by the best constitution, nor to be equipped even with necessary things, nor to be the [best] possible under existing circumstances, but to be a baser sort." Hence, Aristotelian political science is not confined to the ideal system, but also investigates the second-best constitution or even inferior political systems, because this may be the closest approximation to full political justice which the lawgiver can attain under the circumstances.

Regarding the constitution that is ideal or "according to prayer," Aristotle criticizes the views of his predecessors in the *Politics* and then offers a

rather sketchy blueprint of his own in *Politics* VII–VIII. Although his own political views were influenced by his teacher Plato, Aristotle is highly critical of the ideal constitution set forth in Plato's *Republic* on the grounds that it overvalues political unity, it embraces a system of communism that is impractical and inimical to human nature, and it neglects the happiness of the individual citizens (*Politics* II.1–5). In contrast, in Aristotle's "best constitution," each and every citizen will possess moral virtue and the equipment to carry it out in practice, and thereby attain a life of excellence and complete happiness (see VII.13.1332a32–8). All of the citizens will hold political office and possess private property because "one should call the city-state happy not by looking at a part of it but at all the citizens." (VII.9.1329a22–3). Moreover, there will be a common system of education for all the citizens, because they share the same end (*Pol*. VIII.1).

If (as is the case with most existing city-states) the population lacks the capacities and resources for complete happiness, however, the lawgiver must be content with fashioning a suitable constitution (*Politics* IV.11). The second-best system typically takes the form of a polity (in which citizens possess an inferior, more common grade of virtue) or mixed constitution (combining features of democracy, oligarchy, and, where possible, aristocracy, so that no group of citizens is in a position to abuse its rights). Aristotle argues that for city-states that fall short of the ideal, the best constitution is one controlled by a numerous middle class which stands between the rich and the poor. For those who possess the goods of fortune in moderation find it "easiest to obey the rule of reason" (*Politics* IV.11.1295b4–6). They are accordingly less apt than the rich or poor to act unjustly toward their fellow citizens. A constitution based on the middle class is the mean between the extremes of oligarchy (rule by the rich) and democracy (rule by the poor). "That the middle [constitution] is best is evident, for it is the freest from faction: where the middle class is numerous, there least occur factions and divisions among citizens" (IV.11.1296a7–9). The middle constitution is therefore both more stable and more just than oligarchy and democracy.

Although Aristotle classifies democracy as a deviant constitution (albeit the best of a bad lot), he argues that a case might be made for popular rule in *Politics* III.11, a discussion which has attracted the attention of modern democratic theorists. The central claim is that the many may turn out to be better than the virtuous few when they come together, even though the many may be inferior when considered individually. For if each individual has a portion of virtue and practical wisdom, they may pool these moral assets and turn out to be better rulers than even a very wise individual. This argument seems to anticipate treatments of "the wisdom of the multitude" such as Condorcet's "jury theorem." In recent years, this particular chapter has been widely discussed in connection with topics such as democratic deliberation and public reason.

In addition, the political scientist must attend to existing constitutions even when they are bad. Aristotle notes that "to reform a constitution is no less a task [of politics] than it is to establish one from the beginning," and in this way "the politician should also help existing constitutions" (IV.1.1289a1–7). The political scientist should also be cognizant of forces of political change which can undermine an existing regime. Aristotle criticizes his predecessors for excessive utopianism and neglect of the practical duties of a political theorist. However, he is no Machiavellian. The best constitution still serves as a regulative ideal by which to evaluate existing systems.

These topics occupy the remainder of the *Politics*. Books IV–VI are concerned with the existing constitutions: that is, the three deviant constitutions, as well as polity or the "mixed" constitution, which are the best attainable under most circumstances (IV.2.1289a26–38). The mixed constitution has been of special interest to scholars because it looks like a

forerunner of modern republican regimes. The whole of book V investigates the causes and prevention of revolution or political change (*metabolê*) and civil war or faction (*stasis*). Books VII–VIII are devoted to the ideal constitution. As might be expected, Aristotle's attempt to carry out this program involves many difficulties, and scholars disagree about how the two series of books (IV–VI and VII–VIII) are related to each other: for example, which were written first, which were intended to be read first, and whether they are ultimately consistent with each other. Most importantly, when Aristotle offers practical political prescriptions in Books IV–VI, is he guided by the best constitution as a regulative ideal, or is he simply abandoning political idealism and practicing a form of Realpolitik?For a further discussion of this topic, see the following supplementary document:

Supplement: Characteristics and Problems of Aristotle's Politics

5. Aristotle and Modern Politics

Aristotle has continued to influence thinkers up to the present throughout the political spectrum, including conservatives (such as Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, and Eric Voegelin), communitarians (such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Sandel), liberals (such as William Galston and Martha C. Nussbaum), libertarians (such as Tibor R. Machan, Douglas B. Rasmussen, and Douglas J. Den Uyl), and democratic theorists (such as Jill Frank and Gerald M. Mara).

It is not surprising that such diverse political persuasions can lay claim to Aristotle as a source. For his method often leads to divergent interpretations. When he deals with a difficult problem, he is inclined to consider opposing arguments in a careful and nuanced manner, and he is often willing to concede that there is truth on each side. For example, though he is critical of democracy, in one passage he allows that the case

for rule by the many based on the superior wisdom of the multitude "perhaps also involves some truth" (*Pol*. III.11.1281a39–42). Again, he sometimes applies his own principles in a questionable manner, for example, when he reasons that because associations should be governed in a rational manner, the household should be run by the husband rather than by the wife, whose rational capacity "lacks authority" (I.13.1260a13). Modern commentators sympathetic with Aristotle's general approach often contend that in this case he applies his own principles incorrectly–leaving open the question of how they *should* be applied. Further, the way he applies his principles may have seemed reasonable in his socio-political context–for example, that the citizen of a polity (normally the best attainable constitution) must be a hoplite soldier (cf. III.7,1297b4)–but it may be debatable how these might apply within a modern democratic nation-state.

The problem of extrapolating to modern political affairs can be illustrated more fully in connection with Aristotle's discussion of legal change in *Politics* II.8. He first lays out the argument for making the laws changeable. It has been beneficial in the case of medicine, for example, for it to progress from traditional ways to improved forms of treatment. An existing law may be a vestige of a primitive barbaric practice. For instance, Aristotle mentions a law in Cyme that allows an accuser to produce a number of his own relatives as witnesses to prove that a defendant is guilty of murder. "So," Aristotle concludes, "it is evident from the foregoing that some laws should sometimes be changed. But to those who look at the matter from a different angle, caution would seem to be required" (1269a12–14). Since the law gets its force from the citizens' habit of obedience, great care should be exercised in making any change in it. It may sometimes be better to leave defective laws in place rather than encouraging lawlessness by changing the laws too frequently. Moreover, there are the problems of how the laws are to be changed and who is to change them. Although Aristotle offers valuable insights, he

breaks off the discussion of this topic and never takes it up elsewhere. We might sum up his view as follows: When it comes to changing the laws, observe the mean: don't be too bound by traditional laws, but on the other hand don't be overeager in altering them. It is obvious that this precept, reasonable as it is, leaves considerable room for disagreement among contemporary "neo-Aristotelian" theorists. For example, should the laws be changed to allow self-described transsexual persons to use sexually segregated restrooms? Conservatives and liberals might agree with Aristotle's general stricture regarding legal change but differ widely on how to apply it in a particular case.

Most scholars of Aristotle advisedly make no attempt to show that he is aligned with any contemporary ideology. Rather, insofar as they find him relevant to our times, it is because he offers a remarkable synthesis of idealism and pragmatism unfolding in deep and thought-provoking discussions of perennial concerns of political philosophy: the role of human nature in politics, the relation of the individual to the state, the place of morality in politics, the theory of political justice, the rule of law, the analysis and evaluation of constitutions, the relevance of ideals to practical politics, the causes and cures of political change and revolution, and the importance of a morally educated citizenry.

Glossary of Aristotelian Terms

- action: *praxis*
- citizen: *politês*
- city-state: *polis* (also 'city' or 'state')
- community: *koinônia*
- constitution: *politeia* (also 'regime')
- faction: *stasis* (also 'civil war')
- free: *eleutheros*
- friendship: *philia*

- good: *agathos*
- happiness: *eudaimonia*
- happy: *eudaimôn*
- justice: *dikaiosunê*
- law: *nomos*
- lawgiver: *nomothetês*
- master: *despotês*
- nature: *phusis*
- noble: *kalon* (also 'beautiful' or 'fine')
- people (*dêmos*)
- political: *politikos* (of, or pertaining to, the *polis*)
- political science: *politikê epistêmê*
- politician: *politikos* (also 'statesman')
- practical: *praktikos*
- practical wisdom: *phronêsis*
- revolution: *metabolê* (also 'change')
- right: *exousia* (also 'liberty')
- ruler: *archôn*
- self-sufficient: *autarkês*
- sovereign: *kurios*
- virtue: *aretê* (also 'excellence')
- without qualification: *haplôs* (also 'absolute')
- without authority: *akuron*

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Note on Citations. Passages in Aristotle are cited as follows: title of treatise (italics), book (Roman numeral), chapter (Arabic numeral), line reference. Line references are keyed to the 1831 edition of Immanuel Bekker which had two columns ("a" and "b") on each page. *Politics* is abbreviated as *Pol*. and *Nicomachean Ethics* as *NE*. In this article, "*Pol*. I.2.1252b27", for example, refers to *Politics* book I, chapter 2, page 1252,

column b, line 27. Most translations include the Bekker page number with column letter in the margin followed by every fifth line number.

Passages in Plato are cited in a similar fashion, except the line references are to the Stephanus edition of 1578 in which pages were divided into five parts ("a" through "e").

Caveat on Bibliography. Although fairly extensive, this bibliography represents only a fraction of the secondary literature in English. However, the items cited here contain many references to other valuable scholarly work in other languages as well as in English.

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Characteristics and Problems of Aristotle's Politics

The work which has come down to us under the title *POLITIKA* appears to be less an integrated treatise than a loosely related collection of essays or lectures on various topics in political philosophy, which may have been compiled by a later editor rather than by Aristotle. The following topics are discussed in the eight books:

I Naturalness of the city-state and of the household

II Critique of ostensibly best constitutions

III General theory of constitutions

IV Inferior constitutions

V Preservation and destruction of constitutions

VI Further discussion of democracy and oligarchy

VII–VIII Unfinished outline of the best constitution

This ordering of the books reflects, very roughly, the program for the study of constitutions which concludes the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

First, then, if any particular point has been treated well by those who have gone before us, we must try to review it; then from the constitutions that have been collected we must try to see what it is that preserves and destroys each of the constitutions, and for what reasons some city-states are well governed and others the reverse. For when these things have been examined, we will perhaps better understand what sort of constitution is best, and how each is structured, and which laws and customs it uses. Let us then begin our discussion. [X.9.1181b15–23]

However, scholars have raised several general problems concerning the *Politics* and its place in Aristotle's philosophical system. Four issues are especially noteworthy: How did Aristotle intend for the *Politics* to be organized? In what order did he write the different books within the *Politics*? Is the work considered as a whole consistent? How is the *Politics* related to Aristotle's ethical treatises?

(1) The intended organization of the *Politics* Some scholars (including W. L. Newman) have questioned the traditional ordering of the eight books of the *Politics*, arguing that the discussion of the best constitution (books VII–VIII) should follow directly after book III. Indeed, book III concludes with a transition to a discussion of the best constitution (although this may be due to a later editor). However, cross-references between various passages of the Politics indicate that books IV–V–VI form a connected series, as do books VII–VIII, but these series do not refer to each other. Nonetheless, both series refer back to book III which in turn refers to book I. Moreover, book II refers back to book I and refers forward to both series. With some oversimplification, then, the *Politics* is comparable to a tree trunk supporting two separate branches: the root system is I, the trunk is II–III, and the branches are IV–V–VI and VII–VIII. (The summary at the end of *Nicomachean Ethics* X.9 describes only the visible part of the tree.) All modern critical editions and most translations and commentaries follow the traditional ordering of the books.

Noteworthy exceptions are Newman's commentary and Simpson's translation, which follow the revised ordering: I—II—III—VII—VIII—IV—V—VI.

(2) The order of composition This problem concerns the order in which the books were actually written. If they were composed at very different dates, they might represent discordant stages in the development of Aristotle's political philosophy. For example, Werner Jaeger argued that books VII–VIII contain a youthful utopianism, motivating Aristotle to emulate his teacher Plato in erecting "an ideal state by logical construction." In contrast, books IV–VI are based on "sober empirical study." Other scholars have seen a more pragmatic, even Machiavellian approach to politics in books IV–VI. A difficulty for this interpretation is that in book IV Aristotle regards the business of constructing ideal constitutions as perfectly compatible with that of addressing actual political problems. Although much ink has been spilled since Jaeger attempted to discern different chronological strata in the Politics, it has resulted in no clear scholarly consensus. Because there is no explicit evidence of the dates at which the various books of the *Politics* were written, argument has turned on alleged discrepancies between different passages.

(3) The internal consistency of the *Politics* This leads to the question whether there are major inconsistencies of doctrine or method in the *Politics*. For example, Aristotle's account of the best constitution assumes his theory of justice, a moral standard which cannot be met by the actual political systems (democracies and oligarchies) of his own day. He does discuss practical political reforms in books IV–VI but more in terms of stability than justice. Some commentators view books IV–VI as a radical departure from the political philosophy of the other books, while others find a great deal of coherence among the books. Resolution of this problem requires careful study of the *Politics* as a whole.

(4) The relation of the *Politics* to the ethical works The last problem concerns the complex relationship between Aristotle's *Politics* and his two treatises dealing with ethical matters: the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics*. Although commentators often treat the ethical works in separation from the *Politics*, the *Nicomachean Ethics* represents itself as concerned with politics (*hê politikê*, *EN* I.2.1094a27, 1094b10–11; 4.1095a15–16; I.13.1102a12–13), and the *Eudemian Ethics* suggests circumspectly that it is a philosophical inquiry concerned with "political affairs" (*ta politika*, *EE* I.5.1216b37). More explicitly, the *Magna Moralia* in its opening lines states that the study of ethical affairs belongs to politics (*politikê*) and denies that there is a separate field of ethics (*êthikê*) (*MM* I.1.1181a26–1182a1). But this work was probably written not by Aristotle himself but by an early Peripatetic. The question of how Aristotle's political views relate to his ethical views is further complicated by various problems concerning the relationship between the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics* (see the entry on Aristotle's ethics).

It is noteworthy that the *Politics* contains six explicit references to "the ethical discourses" (*êthikê logoi*), which most scholars view as references either to the *Eudemian Ethics* or to the book on justice claimed by both the *Eudemian Ethics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EE* IV=*EN* V). These passage discuss principles concerning themes that are fundamental to the argument of the *Politics*, and are as follows:

Politics	Passage in ethical works	Topic
II.2.1261a31	*EE* IV=*EN* V.5.1132b31–4	Reciprocal justice preserves the polis
III.9.1280a18	*EE* IV=*EN* V.3.1131a15–24	Distributive justice involves equality.
III.12.1282b20	*EE* IV=*EN* V.3.1131a24–9	Political justice involves equal merit.
IV.11.1295a36	*EE* VI=*EN* VII.13.1153b9–19	Happiness is unimpeded and virtue is a mean.
VII.13.1332a8	*EE* II.1.1218b31–1219a39	Happiness is the activity and employment of virtue.
VII.13.1332a22	*EE* VIII.3.1249a10–17	Goods without qualification are good to the virtuous person.

The many parallels and commonalities between the *Politics* and the ethical works are discussed in a number of recent works (see especially Bibliography E.2 Methodology and Foundations of Aristotle's Political Theory).

Return to Aristotle's Politics [Section 1]
Return to Aristotle's Politics [Section 4]

Presuppositions of Aristotle's Politics

Aristotle's political philosophy is distinguished by its underlying philosophical doctrines. Of these the following five principles are especially noteworthy:

(1) **Principle of teleology** Aristotle begins the *Politics* by invoking the concept of nature (see Political Naturalism). In the *Physics* Aristotle identifies the nature of a thing above all with its end or final cause (*Physiscs* II.2.194a28–9, 8.199b15–18). The end of a thing is also its function (*Eudemian Ethics* II.1.1219a8), which is its defining principle (*Meteorology* IV.12.390a10–11). On Aristotle's view plants and animals are paradigm cases of natural existents, because they have a nature in the sense of an internal causal principle which explains how it comes into being and behaves (*Phys*. II.1.192b32–3). For example, an acorn has an inherent tendency to grow into an oak tree, so that the tree exists by nature rather than by craft or by chance. The thesis that human beings have a natural function has a fundamental place in the *Eudemian Ethics* II.1,

Nicomachean Ethics I.7, and *Politics* I.2. The *Politics* further argues that it is part of the nature of human beings that they are political or adapted for life in the city-state. Thus teleology is crucial for the political naturalism which is at the foundation of Aristotle's political philosophy. (For discussion of teleology see the entry on Aristotle's biology.)

(2) **Principle of perfection** Aristotle understands good and evil in terms of his teleology. The natural end of the organism (and the means to this end) is good for it, and what defeats or impedes this end is bad. For example, he argues that animals sleep in order to preserve themselves, because "nature operates for the sake of an end, and this is a good," and sleeping is necessary and beneficial for entities which cannot move continuously (*De Somno* 2.455b17–22). For human beings the ultimate good or happiness (*eudaimonia*) consists in perfection, the full attainment of their natural function, which Aristotle analyzes as the activity of the soul according to reason (or not without reason), i.e., activity in accordance with the most perfect virtue or excellence (*EN* I.7.1098a7–17). This also provides a norm for the politician: "What is most choiceworthy for each individual is always the highest it is possible for him to attain" (*Pol*. VII.14.1333a29–30; cf. *EN* X.7.1177b33–4). This ideal is to be realized in both the individual and the city-state: "that way of life is best, both separately for each individual and in common for city-states, which is equipped with virtue" (*Pol*. VII.1.1323b40–1324a1). However, Aristotle recognizes that it is generally impossible to fully realize this ideal, in which case he invokes a second-best principle of approximism: it is best to attain perfection, but, failing that, a thing is better in proportion as it is nearer to the end (see *De Caelo* II.12.292b17–19).

Aristotle's perfectionism was opposed to the subjective relativism of Protagoras, according to which good and evil is defined by whatever human beings happened to desire. Like Plato, Aristotle maintained that the good was objective and independent of human wishes. However, he

rejected Plato's theory that the good was defined in terms of a transcendent form of the good, holding instead that good and evil are in a way relative to the organism, that is, to its natural end.

(3) **Principle of community** Aristotle maintains that the city-state is the most complete community, because it attains the limit of self-sufficiency, so that it can exist for the sake of the good life (*Pol*. I.2.1252b27–30). Individuals outside of the city-state are not self-sufficient, because they depend on the community not only for material necessities but also for education and moral habituation. "Just as, when perfected, a human is the best of animals, so also when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all" (1253a31–3). On Aristotle's view, then, human beings must be subject to the authority of the city-state in order to attain the good life. The following principle concerns how authority should be exercised within a community.

(4) **Principle of rulership** Aristotle believes that the existence and well-being of any system requires the presence of a ruling element: "Whenever a thing is established out of a number of things and becomes a single common thing, there always appears in it a ruler and ruled …. This [relation] is present in living things, but it derives from all of nature" (1254a28–32). Just as an animal or plant can survive and flourish only if its soul rules over its body (*Pol*. I.5.1254a34–6, *De Anima* I.5.410b10–15; compare Plato *Phaedo* 79e-80a), a human community can possess the necessary order only if it has a ruling element which is in a position of authority, just as an army can possess order only if it has a commander in control. Although Aristotle follows Plato in accepting this principle, he rejects Plato's further claim that a single science of ruling is appropriate for all (see Plato *Statesman* 258e–259c). For Aristotle different forms of rule are required for different systems: e.g., political rule for citizens and despotic rule for slaves. The imposition of an inappropriate form of rule

results in disorder and injustice. This point becomes clearer in the light of the following corollary of the principle of rulership.

(5) **Principle of the rule of reason** Aristotle agrees with Plato's dictum that, whenever a system contains a rational element, it is appropriate for it to rule over the nonrational part, because the rational element alone knows what is best for the whole (see Plato *Republic* IV.441e). Aristotle elaborates on this principle: observing that different individuals can exemplify rationality in different ways and to different degrees, he maintains that different modes of rule are appropriate for different sorts of ruler and subject. For example, a child has a deliberative capacity, but it is undeveloped and incomplete in comparison with an adult's, so that a child is a fit subject for paternal rule by its father; but paternal rule would be inappropriate between two adults who both have mature rational capacities (see *Politics* I.13 and III.6). In a political context the principle of the rule of reason also implies that different constitutions are appropriate for different city-states depending on the rational capacities of their citizens. This is an important consideration, for example, in Aristotle's discussions of democracy and the rule of law (see *Politics* III.11 and 15–16).

The aforementioned principles account for much of the distinctive flavor of Aristotle's political philosophy, and they also indicate where many modern theorists have turned away from him. Modern philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes have challenged the principles of teleology and perfectionism, arguing against the former that human beings are mechanistic rather than teleological systems, and against the latter that good and bad depend upon subjective preferences of valuing agents rather than on objective states of affairs. Liberal theorists have criticized the principle of community on the grounds that it cedes too much authority to the state. Even the principles of rulership and of the rule of reason — which Aristotle, Plato, and many other theorists regarded as self-evident — have come under fire by modern theorists like Adam Smith and F. A. Hayek who argued that social and economic order may arise spontaneously as if by an "invisible hand." Modern neo-Aristotelian political theorists are committed to defending one or more of these doctrines (or a modified version of them) against such criticisms.

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Political Naturalism

Aristotle lays the foundations for his political theory in *Politics* book I by arguing that the city-state and political rule are "natural." The argument begins with a schematic, quasi-historical account of the development of the city-state out of simpler communities. First, individual human beings combined in pairs because they could not exist apart. The male and female joined in order to reproduce, and the master and slave came together for self-preservation. The natural master used his intellect to rule, and the natural slave employed his body to labor. Second, the household arose naturally from these primitive communities in order to serve everyday needs. Third, when several households combined for further needs a village emerged also according to nature. Finally, "the complete community, formed from several villages, is a city-state, which at once attains the limit of self-sufficiency, roughly speaking. It comes to be for the sake of life, and exists for the sake of the good life" (I.2.1252b27–30).

Aristotle defends three claims about nature and the city-state: First, the city-state exists by nature, because it comes to be out of the more primitive natural associations and it serves as their end, because it alone attains self-sufficiency (1252b30–1253a1). Second, human beings are by nature political animals, because nature, which does nothing in vain, has equipped them with speech, which enables them to communicate moral concepts such as justice which are formative of the household and city-state (1253a1–18). Third, the city-state is naturally prior to the individuals,

because individuals cannot perform their natural functions apart from the city-state, since they are not self-sufficient (1253a18–29). These three claims are conjoined, however, with a fourth: the city-state is a creation of human intelligence. "Therefore, everyone naturally has the impulse for such a [political] community, but the person who first established [it] is the cause of very great benefits." This great benefactor is evidently the lawgiver (*nomothetês*), for the legal system of the city-state makes human beings just and virtuous and lifts them from the savagery and bestiality in which they would otherwise languish (1253a29–39).

Aristotle's political naturalism presents the difficulty that he does not explain how he is using the term "nature" (*phusis*). In the *Physics* nature is understood as an internal principle of motion or rest (see III.1.192b8–15). (For discussion of nature see Aristotle's *Physics*.) If the city-state were natural in this sense, it would resemble a plant or an animal which grows naturally to maturity out of a seed. However, this seemingly cannot be reconciled with the important role which Aristotle also assigns to the lawgiver as the one who established the city-state. For on Aristotle's theory a thing either exists by nature or by craft; it cannot do both. (This difficulty is posed by David Keyt.) One way to escape this dilemma is to suppose that he speaks of the city-state as "natural" in special sense of the term. For example, he might mean that it is "natural" in the extended sense that it arises from human natural inclinations (to live in communities) for the sake of human natural ends, but that it remains unfinished until a lawgiver provides it with a constitution. (This solution was proposed by Ernest Barker and defended subsequently by Fred Miller and Trevor Saunders.) Another way of solving the dilemma is to understand legislation as an "internal movement" of the city-state rather than the activity of an external agent. (This approach is defended recently by Adriel Trott.)

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