



Aristotle's Political Philosophy Frederick Mayer

...[In his *Politics*, Aristotle] wrote that man is naturally a social animal and that a life of political isolation is impossible. The state he regarded as the highest form of community life. As a member of the state, man is the noblest of all animals; if he lives outside it, he reverts to a beast.

Unlike modern totalitarians, Aristotle did not believe that the state exists as a goal in itself. To him it was not an autonomous organization, nor did it possess a supermoral status. On the contrary, he claimed, the purpose of the state is the moral perfection of its citizens.

Most remarkable in Book One of the *Politics* is the discussion of slavery, which Aristotle viewed as a natural institution. He defined the slave as a piece of property, and he argued for slavery on the basis that everywhere in nature we find a ruler and a subject. Slaves, he felt, could acquire only an inferior type of virtue. But he did not mean that a slave should not receive any education at all, for he thought a slave could achieve a certain level of moral insight.

Turning from the subject of slavery, Aristotle discussed the relation of husband and wife. Unlike Plato, he did not believe in the equality of the sexes. It is best for the husband to rule the household, he decided, and the wife to take care of domestic duties.

In Book Two of the *Politics* Aristotle criticized the various concepts of Utopia. He was especially harsh with Plato's *Republic*, for he believed such a republic would create too much uniformity and reduce all citizens to the same level. Furthermore, he objected to Plato's confiscation of private property, an action which would only create strife and civil disorder. As for setting up a community of wives and children, this step in his opinion would destroy natural emotions.

Unlike Plato, Aristotle regarded private property as a source of happiness because it teaches men to lead a civilized life and to enjoy the fruits of their efforts. If it were abolished, he declared, we would return to lawless barbarism. Plato's Utopia he considered impractical and utterly unworkable in a realistic society.

As a practical political scientist, he turned to the existing types of states. Whereas Plato had idealized the Spartan way of life, Aristotle knew the weaknesses of the Spartans. Among the defects of the Spartan state he noted, first, the women were too influential. Second, wealth was owned by the few. Third, the executive and legislative organs of the Spartan government had disintegrated. Fourth, the Spartan state was fit only for war, and yet even in war Sparta could make little progress because of an inadequate financial system.

Book Three of the *Politics* discusses the problem of citizenship. In it Aristotle held that the citizen should know both how to rule and how to obey. Since citizenship requires leisure, he advocated that mechanics be excluded from the ideal state.

He defined three types of good governments: monarchy, aristocracy, and polity (aristocratic democracy). Then he noted three perversions of these good types: tyranny, oligarchy, and extreme democracy.

He emphasized the importance of having rational laws. Governments which are based merely on instinct and momentary passion soon disintegrate, he declared; in the best government there is equilibrium of the classes. This ideal influenced the founders of our

American republic, who likewise believed in a definite division of powers.

Every state, Aristotle noted in Book Four, is composed of three classes: one which is wealthy, another which is poor, and the middle class. As in his ethical philosophy, he favored a compromise:

. . . The middle class is least likely to shrink from rule, or to be overambitious for it; both of which are injuries to the state. Again, those who have too much of the goods of fortune, strength, wealth, friends, and the like, are neither willing nor able to submit to authority. The evil begins at home; for when they are boys, by reason of the luxury in which they are brought up, they never learn, even at school, the habit of obedience. On the other hand, the very poor, who are in the opposite extreme, are too degraded. So that the one class cannot obey, and can only rule despotically; the other knows not how to command and must be ruled like slaves. Thus arises a city, not of freemen, but of masters and slaves, the one despising, the other envying; and nothing can be more fatal to friendship and good fellowship in states than this: for good fellowship springs from friendship; when men are at enmity with one another, they would rather not even share the same path. But a city ought to be composed, as far as possible, of equals and similars; and these are generally the middle classes. Wherefore the city which is composed of middle-class citizens is necessarily best constituted” (Pol 4.1295b).

A government based on the middle class is likely to be more stable:

Thus it is manifest that the best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class, and that those states are likely to be well-administered, in which the middle class is large, and stronger if possible than both the other classes, or at any rate than either singly; for the addition of the middle class turns the scale, and prevents either of the extremes from being dominant. Great then is the good fortune of a state in which the citizens have a moderate and sufficient property; for where some possess much, and the others nothing, there may arise an extreme democracy, or a pure oligarchy; or a tyranny may grow out of either extreme—either out of the most rampant democracy, or out of an oligarchy; but it is not so likely to arise out of the middle constitutions and those akin to them” (Pol 4.1295b).

According to Aristotle, if a new constitution is to be established, the legislator must understand the functions, powers, and importance of the other departments of the government. In this view we have the genesis of the American form of government, which believes that justice is best administered when there is a balance of power among the three branches of government.

Especially illuminating is Aristotle’s discussion of revolutions in Book Five of the *Politics*. Among the causes of revolution we generally find a struggle between rich and poor as a danger signal. Whenever one class becomes too powerful, the danger of political violence increases. The middle class usually preserves the balance of power and thus tends to prevent revolutions.

In democratic states, Aristotle averred, revolution is frequently caused by demagogues who become generals and by intense competition among the politicians. When the rich are persecuted, they usually rebel against the rule of the people. In oligarchies the people may resist their oppressors, although oligarchies are usually overthrown by their own members. Frequently ambition conspires against oligarchy, and one man may arise who assumes absolute control of the government. Aristotle noted that aristocracies tend to

become oligarchies. Aristocracies are threatened both by the underprivileged class and by ambitious men.

How can revolutions be avoided? How can the spirit of insurrection be conquered? How can governments be best preserved? Aristotle believed that the ruler should exemplify certain virtues, such as loyalty, ability, and justice. Furthermore, citizens should be educated in the spirit of the constitution. To preserve the status quo, Aristotle made some very practical proposals: (1) The rights of the underprivileged are to be safeguarded; (2) there is to be harmony between ruler and subjects; (3) subversive forces are to be watched; (4) property qualifications are to be changed from time to time; (5) no individual or class is to become too powerful; (6) corruption among public officials is not to be allowed; (7) no class is to be oppressed.

Aristotle even gave some excellent advice to the tyrants and showed how their form of government could be preserved. The ruler of this type of government

should lop off those who are too high; he must put to death men of spirit; he must not allow common meals, clubs, education, and the like; he must be on his guard against anything which is likely to inspire either courage or confidence among his subjects; he must prohibit literary assemblies or other meetings for discussion, and he must take every means to prevent people from knowing one another (for acquaintance begets mutual confidence). Further, he must compel all persons staying in the city to appear in public and live at his gates; then he will know what they are doing; if they are always kept under, they will learn to be humble. In short, he should practice these and the like Persian and barbaric arts, which all have the same object. A tyrant should also endeavor to know what each of his subjects says or does, and should employ spies, like the 'female detectives' at Syracuse, and the eavesdroppers whom Hiero was in the habit of sending to any place of resort or meeting; for the fear of informers prevents people from speaking their minds, and if they do, they are more easily found out. Another art of the tyrant is to sow quarrels among the citizens; friends should be embroiled with friends, the people with the notables, and the rich with one another. Also he should impoverish his subjects; he thus provides against the maintenance of a guard by the citizens, and the people, having to keep hard at work, are prevented from conspiring. . . . Another practice of tyrants is to multiply taxes, after the manner of Dionysius at Syracuse, who contrived that within five years his subjects should bring into the treasury their whole property. The tyrant is also fond of making war in order that his subjects may have something to do and be always in want of a leader. And whereas the power of a king is preserved by his friends, the characteristic of a tyrant is to distrust his friends, because he knows that all men want to overthrow him, and they above all have the power" (Pol. 1313a-1313b).

Yet, there is another method by which tyranny may be maintained. Aristotle sounds almost like Adachiavelli, for he stressed the importance of deception on the part of the tyrant:

In the first place he should pretend a care of the public revenues, and not waste money in making presents of a sort at which the common people get excited when they see their hard-won earnings snatched from them and lavished on courtesans and strangers and artists. He should give an account of what he receives and of what he spends (a practice which has been adopted by some tyrants); for then he will seem to be a steward of the public rather than a tyrant; nor need he fear that, while he is the lord of the city, he will ever be in want of money. Such a policy is at all events much more advantageous for the tyrant when he goes from home, than to leave

behind him a hoard, for then the garrison who remain in the city will be less likely to attack his power; and a tyrant, when he is absent from home, has more reason to fear the guardians of his treasure than the citizens, for the one accompany him, but the others remain behind. In the second place, he should be seen to collect taxes and to require public services only for state purposes, and that he may form a fund in case of war, and generally he ought to make himself the guardian and treasurer of them, as if they belonged, not to him, but to the public. He should appear, not harsh, but dignified, and when men meet him they should look upon him with reverence, and not with fear. Yet it is hard for him to be respected if he inspires no respect, and therefore whatever virtues he may neglect, at least he should maintain the character of a great soldier, and produce the impression that he is one. Neither he nor any of his associates should ever be guilty of the least offense against modesty towards the young of either sex who are his subjects, and the women of his family should observe a like self-control towards other women; the insolence of women has ruined many tyrannies” (Pol. 5.1314a-1314b).

Aristotle goes on by saying that such a tyrant should be discreet. If he cannot control his lusts, he should at least hide them. He will find religion to be extremely helpful.

Also he should appear to be particularly earnest in the service of the gods; for if men think that a ruler is religious and has a reverence for the gods, they are less afraid of suffering injustice at his hands, and they are less disposed to conspire against him, because they believe him to have the very gods fighting on his side. At the same time his religion must not be thought foolish. And he should honor men of merit, and make them think that they would not be held in more honor by the citizens if they had a free government. The honor he should distribute himself, but the punishment should be inflicted by officers and courts of law. It is a precaution which is taken by all monarchs not to make one person great; but if one, then two or more should be raised, that they may look sharply after one another. If after all some one has to be made great, he should not be a man of bold spirit; for such dispositions are ever most inclined to strike. And if any one is to be deprived of his power, let it be diminished gradually, not taken from him all at once” (Pol. 5.1314b-1315a).

This discussion could scarcely be surpassed in its cynical implications. Aristotle realized that what counts most in political affairs is appearance and that the people are easily deceived. His discussion does not imply that he was a friend of tyranny, for he knew that such a government usually is short-lived and extremely unstable.

In Book Seven of the *Politics* Aristotle pictured the ideal state. He believed in maintaining a small population because it is more manageable. The territory of the state should be large enough for the means of livelihood to be supplied. It should be distant from a harbor, which Aristotle regarded as a source of immorality. He felt that the moral effects of sea trade are inevitably unfortunate. Besides mechanics, he would exclude merchants and businessmen from citizenship. Only warriors, rulers, and priests should be citizens. In various periods of his life a citizen should be a warrior, a ruler, and a priest. In old age, the citizens may dedicate themselves to speculative philosophy. The population of the city, Aristotle stated, is to contain a harmonious blend of Asiatic and Nordic races. Here again we notice his ideal of the Golden Mean. Excessive property is not to be allowed and usury is to be outlawed. Aristotle, it is clear, was opposed to a profit economy.

He made detailed suggestions regarding the location of the city. Attention should be paid to strategic necessities, to public health, and to political considerations. It would be a

mistake, he stated, if beauty were regarded as the only factor, for there is always a danger that war may break out, in which case city walls are of primary importance.

In the last part of the *Politics*, Aristotle turned to education. It is the task of the educator, he believed, to produce the type of citizen who can best function in the ideal state. From birth, children should be watched carefully and guided by the wisest citizens. Special attention must be placed upon cleanliness of mind and body. The games of children should be neither vulgar, nor too fatiguing, nor too soft. If possible, he thought, children's games should be imitations of the activities of later life.

In this educational process the state, according to his plan, supervises almost all activities. The state fixes the age of marriage, superintends the physical condition of the parents, and determines the educational curriculum.

Elaborate attention is to be paid to the moral education of the citizens. Students are not to be exposed to pictures and plays which will have a degrading influence on their character, nor is indecency to be allowed. Aristotle thought it only a short step from indecency in language to indecency in acts.

The curriculum should embrace reading, writing, and drawing, as well as music. Physical education is to form the first stage of the educational process, but the teacher must see to it that athletics is not overemphasized and that physical training does not become a goal in itself. Music, above all, is an excellent instrument of instruction, according to Aristotle. Not only does it serve as a form of recreation, but it is also a moral discipline and leads to a fuller understanding of life. He thought that various harmonies should be used to inspire corresponding moral virtues. Like Plato, he was conscious of the great moral effect of music. All the modes of music are to be employed but not all in the same manner:

In education the most ethical modes are to be preferred, but in listening to the performances of others we may admit the modes of action and passion also. For feelings such as pity and fear, or, again, enthusiasm, exist very strongly in some souls, and have more or less influence over all. Some persons fall into a religious frenzy, whom we see as a result of the sacred melodies—when they have used the melodies that excite the soul to mystic frenzy—restored as though they had found healing and purgation. Those who are influenced by pity or fear, and every emotional nature, must have a like experience, and others in so far as each is susceptible to such emotions, and all are in a manner purged and their souls lightened and delighted. The purgative melodies likewise give an innocent pleasure to mankind. Such are the modes and the melodies in which those who perform music at the theater should be invited to compete. But since the spectators are of two kinds— the one free and educated, and the other a vulgar crowd composed of mechanics, laborers, and the like— there ought to be contests and exhibitions instituted for the relaxation of the second class also" (Pol. 8.1342a).

The goal of Aristotle's educational plan was the enjoyment of leisure. He subordinated the utilitarian aspects of education to its cultural implications. What is necessary, what serves as a preparation for making a living, was not the important consideration for Aristotle, since he felt that all of education is a preparation for aristocratic existence. This view of education dominated 19th-century American educational institutions. Progressive education, according to John Dewey, maintains the opposite outlook. It equates education with life and believes that education is never to be parasitical. Mere culture is regarded with contempt by Dewey, who favors the democratic spirit and complete adjustment to life.

The problem raised by Aristotle regarding the function of education has not been solved. There are many today who believe that America has gone to the other extreme and stresses

utility at the expense of rational enjoyment and the cultivation of the intellect. The solution probably lies in a compromise between these two attitudes, in an educational system which develops both a cultured class of leaders and the techniques through which a high standard of living can be achieved.

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