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Contemporary Civilizations

(3) Aristotle's political philosophy and ethics are mere justifications of the power relations in his time. Discuss.

Awareness: Liberating the Animal within the Political

Aristotle is one of the most deeply influential intellectual figures in 'western' history -- whose remnants of works have shaped the political and philosophical landscape of modernity. Given Aristotle's status of power within the larger Greek political context, one must think critically about the lens through which Aristotle had to operate for his thought to be consumed and revered. It is improbable that he could have presented radical ideas -- that could disharmonize systems of power during his time -- without sacrificing his reputation and subsequently his capacity to spark change. Thus, a delicate balance must be struck between justifying the status quo and presenting any progressive commentary. Perhaps this is why Aristotle's *Politics*, particularly Book I, reads as a somewhat clumsy deliberation and justification of slavery to the overt and self-justifying powerful male citizen reader. However, Aristotle subtly presents a radical commentary about the unique nature of mankind within the 'city.' He forms his argument using his definitions of 'nature,' the 'political animal,' and the 'natural slave,' accredited by his background in biology. Drawing connections between these symbologies, Aristotle challenges the morality and status quo of *everyone* in *Politics* Book I -- including the powerful citizen male.

Defining nature is the first fundamental step in the search for truth. Aristotle's understanding of nature is similar to modern Darwinism -- nothing is without an end to its

means. Aristotle writes: “for nature does nothing stintingly... but one thing for one job, since in that way, by serving not for many jobs but for one, each of the instruments accomplishes its work in the most beautiful manner.”¹

From here, a natural and widely accepted relationship -- that of man to domesticated animal -- sets the stage to discuss the master/slave power relationship via its parallels. Aristotle writes “and their usefulness is only slightly different [between slaves and tame animals], since assistance with necessities by means of the body comes from both, from slaves and from tame animals.”² A domesticated animal can most beautifully fulfill a purpose designnated unto it by domestication, showing domestication is natural within the means-to-an-end definition of nature. A wild animal, on the other hand, is rudimentarily multifaceted. Ruled by “feelings” as opposed to “reason,” wild things opt for self-preservation rather than group sufficiency, a role of domesticated animals.³ Aristotle argues wild animals are an ill analogy for humans because they are not working towards sustainment of ‘sufficiency’ “...self-sufficiency is both an end and is also what is best.”⁴ Further, a human who operates like a wild animal rather than a domesticated one is hardly human, or natural: Aristotle writes that “one who is no part of a city, either from lacking the power to be in association or from needing nothing on account of self-sufficiency, is for that reason either a beast or a god.”⁵ Though we may find ourselves in a more individualistic culture today, a herd animal with an identity associated with the collective good would be a sensible and normal humanistic comparison during Aristotle’s time.

¹ Aristotle, and Joe Sachs. *Aristotle Politics: Translation, Introduction, and Glossary*. Indianapolis, Indiana: Focus Pub., 2012. Bk1 ch2 p3 1252b1-5

² Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch5 p9 1254b27-29

³ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch5 p9 1254b26-27)

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch2 p4 line 1253a1-2

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch2 p5 1253A26-30

Factoring in Aristotle's distinction between 'wild' and 'tame' (or domesticated) animals, Aristotle's notorious definition of "man as a political animal" takes on entirely new meaning.⁶ 'Political animal' initially reads as paradoxical and oxymoronic -- it could be interpreted to justify power relationships insofar as it could place humans above nature, above other animals, or even humans above other humans. The implications of these potential definitions on justifying power relations calls for a more thorough contextualization, which Aristotle provides throughout Book 1 of *Politics*.

Aristotle's understanding of man as a 'political animal' is entrenched deeply within his definition of nature -- including aforementioned parallels of domesticated animals and humans. The distinction appears as Aristotle says that "it is plain that the city is one of things that are by nature, and that a human being is by nature an animal meant for a city..."⁷ Translator Joe Sachs opted to translate "Zoon Politikon," widely known as 'political animal,' to "an animal meant for a city."⁸ A city naturally serves the collective over the individual, and fosters the relational, furthering Aristotle's distinction of herd-like operation for the collective good.

Aristotle says "the science of human good is politics" -- the making of a good life is quite subjective.⁹ Aristotle explains that a city allows people the resources to move beyond mere self-preservation and seek out their own definition of the good life "...[a city] gets to the threshold of full self-sufficiency, coming into being for the sake of being, but being for the sake of living well."¹⁰ Aiming towards this end is natural (because it is an end to aim for), and "hence every city is by nature..."¹¹

⁶ Lexico Dictionaries | English. "Zoon Politikon English Definition and Meaning." Lexico Dictionaries. Accessed October 14, 2021. https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/zoon_politikon.

⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch2 p4 1253A1-4

⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch2 p4 1253A3

⁹ Aristotle, Ross, W. D., and Lesley Brown. *Nicomachean Ethics (Oxford World's Classics)*. Oxford University Press, 2009. Bk1 Sect. 2 1094a18

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch2 p4 1252b28-32

¹¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch2 p4 1252b28-32

This definition of “politikon” (of the city) as a facet of nature can be extended to any scale -- from households to nation-states.¹² For the individual, the smallest system that surpasses the sustained-fulfillment quota and moves towards the good life is the one with the most direct relationships and impact. Aristotle proposes this when saying “So the kind of association organized in accord with nature for every day life is a household...”¹³ Thus *any* relation in which fundamental needs are met is by nature, since it holds the means to work towards the end -- living a good life.

Another paradox quickly emerges from the ‘political animal,’ in that a subject without a ruler is devolved back towards self-preservation, and away from the collective good. When multiple individual efforts are combined within a ‘city’ sufficient resources emerge for all to aim for the collective ‘good life.’ Within this environment, a human (like a domestic animal) serves this goal through their entire sense of self and world. However, domestic animals lose their naturalness (their contributions to an end) when they are without a ruler. Aristotle defines the axiom of ruler and ruled as a necessary aspect of nature when he says “For ruling and being ruled are not only among the necessities but also among things that are advantageous...”¹⁴

Like animals, any human who is not either ruling or being ruled is unnatural. Aristotle proposes three main ruling relations within the (direct) lives of individuals: “a master and a slave, a husband and a wife, and a father and children...”¹⁵ These are the power relations of his time -- it seems ruling is reserved for solely the male citizen. Everyone else’s role (including women, slaves, and domesticated animals) is that of the domestic animal -- sustaining sufficiency so that the ‘good life’ is a possible end. The role of the assumed male citizen is to manage, or

¹² Lexico Dictionaries. “Zoon Politikon”

¹³ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch2 p3 1252b14-15

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, bk1 ch5 p8 1254a22-25

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch3 p6 1253b5-6

rule, these bodies and their functions for the same end. However, it will become apparent that the “male citizen” is not an identity inherently entitled to management or ruling.

This ruler and ruled axiom within the “Zoon Politikon” manifests on many levels, from the city-state to the household. When Aristotle says: “For it seems to some that master of slaves is a certain kind of knowledge, and that household management, mastery of slaves, political rule, and kingship are the same...”¹⁶ Since even a slave-owning male citizen is ruled by a king (and a king is ruled by the Gods), everyone who rules is also ruled. Thus, the knowledge required to ‘rule’ over others and ‘be ruled’ in any capacity is fundamentally the same. Though *Politics* has been used to justify centuries of exploitation, colonization, and slavery in the modern definition -- it is clear here that Aristotle’s ‘slave’ is loosely allegorical to anyone who is ruled within the context of a system.

The idea that everyone is a slave in some capacity is potentiated by the existence of the inner axioms: soul and mind ruling body and feelings. “For the soul rules over the body with the rule of a master, while intellect rules over desire [feelings] with political or kingly rule.”¹⁷ The balanced hierarchy reveals the separate concept of ‘slave’ as a universally accessible imbalance -- determined by the rule of the body. This ruling of a slave is done by another. Since, distinctively, “a slave is an ensouled possession...” “the severity of one’s own slavery is dependent on the balance of soul and body.”¹⁸ An imbalance brings the need to have ruler over one's body, since one’s own soul is unfit to rule.

‘Slavery by nature’ more specifically defines this state of man. Aristotle writes, “for someone is by nature a slave if he is capable of belonging to another person (and hence also does belong to another person), and if he shares in reason only to the extent of perceiving it but not

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch3 p7 1253b18-21

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch5 p9 1254b4-5

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch3 p7 1253b33

having it.¹⁹ It may seem that ‘mental incompetence’ in the modern sense is what Aristotle means by ‘natural slavery.’ However, the ‘it’ he refers to seems to be one’s bodily belonging to another soul. If one can perceive of this slavery conceptually, but not understand their own personal enslavement, or even take ownership of themselves with their own soul, they are subsequently a ‘slave by nature.’ Aristotle points out that *everyone* is subject to ruling relations. In this sphere, the individual unconsciously relinquishes the power of their soul to the fundamental power relations of the system in which they live: ‘nature’ and the ‘city,’ the ‘animal’ and the ‘political.’ Whether for better or worse, succumbing to these power relations is what Aristotle calls ‘natural slavery.’

Understanding Aristotle’s position on ‘natural slavery,’ involves revisiting the equivocation of domestic animals and ‘natural slaves’ -- for something, in fact, separates the two. Domestic animals are the most ‘natural’ beings to rule: they operate via the body and feelings of “pain and pleasure,” and are naturally dispositioned away from ruling via their own mind and soul.²⁰ So too is the ‘natural slave,’ according to Aristotle. However, the fundamental differentiation of humans from animals is speech, meaning “...for disclosing what is advantageous and what is harmful, and so too what is just and what is unjust.”²¹ The ability to make value judgments and intelligible connections, to ask *why*, is uniquely human. Thus the defining aspect of man -- the political animal -- is the potentiality of the mind and soul. This potentiality allows oneself to understand the world, and, uniquely, free oneself from the ‘natural slavery’ of power relations.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch5 p9 1254b22-26

²⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch2 p5 1253a12

²¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk1 ch2 p5 1253a15-17

Thus, what separates a free person from a 'slave by nature' is awareness. However, being a 'slave by nature' is neither good nor bad -- it arguably depends on the characteristics of the ruling relations. However, in a society where 'the good life' is both natural and valuable (and only accessible to those whose sufficiency is sustained) Aristotle would likely advocate for awareness over ignorance.

Using elusive yet thorough and credible definitions of 'domestic animals,' 'natural slaves,' and rulership axioms to disguise *Politics* as a convoluted justification for slavery, Aristotle instead subtly suggests that *all people*, including the male citizens in power that he taught, are subject to 'natural slavery' by the fundamental definition of nature. Further, he seems to call for individuals to liberate themselves using their human gift of awareness. This, of course, is too powerful a message to suggest overtly without causing social disharmony. Aristotle's 'natural slavery' has astounding implications surrounding the morality of the city, and of the ruler/ruled axioms -- thus having the potential to expose and invalidate the power relations of his time.

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