

2. Aristotle's concept of the state

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Abstract:

In contrast to a little bit utopian standpoint offered by Plato in his teachings about the state or politeia where rulers aren't "in love with power but in virtue", Aristotle's teaching on the same subject seems very realistic and pragmatic. In his most important writing in this field called "Politics", Aristotle classified authority in the form of two main parts: the correct authority and moose authority. In this sense, correct forms of government are 1.basileus, 2.aristocracy and 3.politeia. These forms of government are based on the common good. Bad or moose forms of government are those that are based on the property of an individual or small governmental structures and they are: 1.tiranny, 2.oligarchy and 3.democracy. Also, Aristotle's political thinking is not separate from the ethical principles so he states that the government should be reflected in the true virtue that is "law" or the "golden mean".

Keywords:

Government; stat; , virtue; democracy; authority; politeia; golden mean.

Aristotle's concept of the state

1.1. Aristotle's "Politics"

Politics in its defined form becomes affirmed by the ancient Greek world. The ancient Greeks didn't know the difference between *social* and *political life*¹. The distinction didn't exist, because the ancient Greeks bartered all under policy. The word *policy* comes from the ancient Greek word "*polis*" and from it created another word "*politeia*" which refers to a *life style* and "*a general thing of all citizens*". "*Bios politikos*" or practical life was related to life in community with other people. The definition of man as a *political being* (*physei zoon politikon*) comes from Aristotle. Aristotle declared this community described as a community of people who live in the patterns of the common good and justice, and that which are associated is speech (logos) and work (praxis). They faced one another. The conversation was *lofty speech*, a policy was *sublime teachings*.

Aristotle's most important work in the field of political philosophy is his book "*Politics*". He speaks about the ideal polis. Polis indicates an ancient town which is also the state. Aristotle believes that one needs to climb on the hill and until his view reaches that's his state. The purpose of such a state is a happy life. His idea of a happy life is actually the backbone for understanding the modern concept of the state.²

*"Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for mankind always act in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good. Some people think that the qualifications of a statesman, king, householder, and master are the same, and that they differ, not in kind, but only in the number of their subjects. For example, the ruler over a few is called a master; over more, the manager of a household; over a still larger number, a statesman or king, as if there were no difference between a great household and a small state. The distinction which is made between the king and the statesman is as follows: When the government is personal, the ruler is a king; when, according to the rules of the political science, the citizens rule and are ruled in turn, then he is called a statesman."*³

Why the state did is the best solution for the communion of men? Aristotle believes that man by nature must live in the community because he was a political creature or *zoon politikon*. Those who can't live in the community is either *God* or *the beast*. Aristotle even approaches the psychological analysis of the man who is socially accomplished and mentions his psychological pathology. He talks about the need for another being, which is central issue in his teachings.

¹ This is a standpoint of Hannah Arendt.

² Olivera Z. Mijuskovic, "What can we learn about the state from Aristotle?", Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs Global Ethics Network, <http://www.globalethicsnetwork.org/profiles/blogs/what-can-we-learn-about-the-state-from-aristotle-1>

³ Aristotle, "Politics", Book 1, Part I, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.mb.txt>

When he talking about the state he is talking about a community of free people. Aristotle even makes a clear parallel between those who are born to rule and those who are subdued - slaves.

“He who thus considers things in their first growth and origin, whether a state or anything else, will obtain the clearest view of them. In the first place there must be a union of those who cannot exist without each other; namely, of male and female, that the race may continue (and this is a union which is formed, not of deliberate purpose, but because, in common with other animals and with plants, mankind have a natural desire to leave behind them an image of themselves), and of natural ruler and subject, that both may be preserved. For that which can foresee by the exercise of mind is by nature intended to be lord and master, and that which can with its body give effect to such foresight is a subject, and by nature a slave; hence master and slave have the same interest. Now nature has distinguished between the female and the slave. For she is not niggardly, like the smith who fashions the Delphian knife for many uses; she makes each thing for a single use, and every instrument is best made when intended for one and not for many uses. But among barbarians no distinction is made between women and slaves, because there is no natural ruler among them: they are a community of slaves, male and female.”⁴

He’s criticized for this part of learning because it corresponds to the race theory of society. Aristotle certainly wrote and contemplated in accordance with the spirit of the time in which he lived, but it is dangerous nowadays to take into account its determination of free people and slaves after they give birth. Aristotle in one place speaks of slaves who fall into slavery under applicable state laws, such as prisoners of war. Aristotle believes that they should have no civil rights. He also makes a clear distinction between free men who possess civil rights - the class of the rich and the poor class.

1.2. Aristotle about authority

Important for modern political practice is the part of his teaching which states that all citizens should participate alternately in authority. Slightly smaller range of civil rights is participation in the *General Assembly* and the *courts*. It regarded that farmers should not participate in civic life, because due to hard physical work they’re not able to know the true virtue. The warriors are those that are best characterized - youth spend in defence of the state, the mean age they spend in the legislation, and age implemented they spend as priests. This classification is based on the principle of justice and it’s considered the backbone of modern political science to this day.

“Our purpose is to consider what form of political community is best of all for those who are most able to realize their ideal of life. We must therefore examine not only this but other constitutions, both such as actually exist in well-governed states, and any theoretical forms which are held in esteem; that what is good and useful may be brought to light. And let no one suppose that in seeking for something beyond them we are anxious to make a sophistical display at any cost; we only undertake this inquiry because all the constitutions with which we are acquainted are faulty.”⁵

⁴ Aristotle, “Politics”, Book 1, Part II, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.mb.txt>

⁵ Aristotle, “Politics”, Book 2, Part I, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.mb.txt>

Also, Aristotle mentions the form of private property. He believes that all free citizens should have their own piece of land, some in the very policy, some on its borders in order to participate in the defense of the state. Slaves and barbarians would be in the tillage. Private property as a fundamental right of every free man has a very important moment in the philosophical thinking of Aristotle.

“Property is a part of the household, and the part of acquiring property is a part of the art of managing the household; for no man can live well, or indeed live at all, unless he be provided with necessaries. And as in the arts which have a definite sphere the workers must have their own proper instruments for the accomplishment of their work, so it is in the management of a household. Now instruments are of various sorts; some are living, others lifeless; in the rudder, the pilot of a ship has a lifeless, in the look-out man, a living instrument; for in the arts the servant is a kind of instrument. Thus, too, a possession is an instrument for maintaining life. And so, in the arrangement of the family, a slave is a living possession, and property a number of such instruments; and the servant is himself an instrument which takes precedence of all other instruments.”⁶

1.3. Aristotle`s form of government

Aristotle talks about the good and bad forms of government. He says that there`re no eternal legal norms.

“We maintain that the true forms of government are three, and that the best must be that which is administered by the best, and in which there is one man, or a whole family, or many persons, excelling all the others together in virtue, and both rulers and subjects are fitted, the one to rule, the others to be ruled, in such a manner as to attain the most eligible life. We showed at the commencement of our inquiry that the virtue of the good man is necessarily the same as the virtue of the citizen of the perfect state. Clearly then in the same manner, and by the same means through which a man becomes truly good, he will frame a state that is to be ruled by an aristocracy or by a king, and the same education and the same habits will be found to make a good man and a man fit to be a statesman or a king.”⁷

Having arrived at these conclusions, we must proceed to speak of the perfect state, and describe how it comes into being and is established.

What's that supposed to mean? This means that civil law are relative – citizen in democracy may be deprived of its rights in the oligarchy and so on. Democracy is the authority of all citizens, while oligarchy is the authority of the wealthy people. When talking about to democracy Aristotle says that it is ideal, but the poorest citizens haven`t practical wisdom and they are prone to making wrong decisions. The monarchy would be the ideal form of government if the monarch was smarter and more capable than any other people, but it is unknown. When talking about the aristocracy he believes that it constituted of the best members of the community, but because they are such rare and this form of authority would be turned into an oligarchy. The most important moment in his

⁶ Aristotle, “Politics”, Book 1, Part IV, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.mb.txt>

⁷ Aristotle, “Politics”, Book 3, Part XVIII, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.mb.txt>

teachings is the part where he says that the best form of government and political system is a constitutional republic in which authority is sub-divided between the free people and the elites. Also, the well-being and optimal functioning of society would not exist if it would not create a middle class.

“Let us begin by considering the common definitions of oligarchy and democracy, and what is justice oligarchical and democratical. For all men cling to justice of some kind, but their conceptions are imperfect and they do not express the whole idea. For example, justice is thought by them to be, and is, equality, not, however, for however, for but only for equals. And inequality is thought to be, and is, justice; neither is this for all, but only for unequals. When the persons are omitted, then men judge erroneously. The reason is that they are passing judgment on themselves, and most people are bad judges in their own case. And whereas justice implies a relation to persons as well as to things, and a just distribution, as I have already said in the Ethics, implies the same ratio between the persons and between the things, they agree about the equality of the things, but dispute about the equality of the persons, chiefly for the reason which I have just given- because they are bad judges in their own affairs; and secondly, because both the parties to the argument are speaking of a limited and partial justice, but imagine themselves to be speaking of absolute justice. For the one party, if they are unequal in one respect, for example wealth, consider themselves to be unequal in all; and the other party, if they are equal in one respect, for example free birth, consider themselves to be equal in all. But they leave out the capital point. For if men met and associated out of regard to wealth only, their share in the state would be proportioned to their property, and the oligarchical doctrine would then seem to carry the day. It would not be just that he who paid one mina should have the same share of a hundred minae, whether of the principal or of the profits, as he who paid the remaining ninety-nine. But a state exists for the sake of a good life, and not for the sake of life only: if life only were the object, slaves and brute animals might form a state, but they cannot, for they have no share in happiness or in a life of free choice. Nor does a state exist for the sake of alliance and security from injustice, nor yet for the sake of exchange and mutual intercourse; for then the Tyrrhenians and the Carthaginians, and all who have commercial treaties with one another, would be the citizens of one state. True, they have agreements about imports, and engagements that they will do no wrong to one another, and written articles of alliance. But there are no magistrates common to the contracting parties who will enforce their engagements; different states have each their own magistracies. Nor does one state take care that the citizens of the other are such as they ought to be, nor see that those who come under the terms of the treaty do no wrong or wickedness at all, but only that they do no injustice to one another. Whereas, those who care for good government take into consideration virtue and vice in states. Whence it may be further inferred that virtue must be the care of a state which is truly so called, and not merely enjoys the name: for without this end the community becomes a mere alliance which differs only in place from alliances of which the members live apart; and law is only a convention, 'a surety to one another of justice,' as the sophist Lycophon says, and has no real power to make the citizens”⁸

⁸ Aristotle, “Politics”, Book 3, Part IX, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.mb.txt>

1.4. Ethics and Politic

In his political learning, Aristotle doesn't exclude ethic. He talks about the state and the society in which people have virtues and where the purpose is the happy life of the people and the goal is good that needs to be pursued.

"There is a point nearly allied to the preceding: Whether the virtue of a good man and a good citizen is the same or not. But, before entering on this discussion, we must certainly first obtain some general notion of the virtue of the citizen. Like the sailor, the citizen is a member of a community. Now, sailors have different functions, for one of them is a rower, another a pilot, and a third a look-out man, a fourth is described by some similar term; and while the precise definition of each individual's virtue applies exclusively to him, there is, at the same time, a common definition applicable to them all. For they have all of them a common object, which is safety in navigation. Similarly, one citizen differs from another, but the salvation of the community is the common business of them all. This community is the constitution; the virtue of the citizen must therefore be relative to the constitution of which he is a member. If, then, there are many forms of government, it is evident that there is not one single virtue of the good citizen which is perfect virtue. But we say that the good man is he who has one single virtue which is perfect virtue. Hence it is evident that the good citizen need not of necessity possess the virtue which makes a good man.

The same question may also be approached by another road, from a consideration of the best constitution. If the state cannot be entirely composed of good men, and yet each citizen is expected to do his own business well, and must therefore have virtue, still inasmuch as all the citizens cannot be alike, the virtue of the citizen and of the good man cannot coincide. All must have the virtue of the good citizen- thus, and thus only, can the state be perfect; but they will not have the virtue of a good man, unless we assume that in the good state all the citizens must be good.

Again, the state, as composed of unlikes, may be compared to the living being: as the first elements into which a living being is resolved are soul and body, as soul is made up of rational principle and appetite, the family of husband and wife, property of master and slave, so of all these, as well as other dissimilar elements, the state is composed; and, therefore, the virtue of all the citizens cannot possibly be the same, any more than the excellence of the leader of a chorus is the same as that of the performer who stands by his side. I have said enough to show why the two kinds of virtue cannot be absolutely and always the same."⁹

Aristotle creates a more realistic picture of the state than Plato, who speaks about the idea of an ideal state. Aristotle speaks in the spirit of his time and about the relatively best state. Also, what is an important issue in Aristotle's notion is the property rights and creation of the middle class, unlike Plato, who is prone to extreme laissez-faire individualism. If Aristotle offers a broad more pragmatic image than Plato, he doesn't separate the ethical values of the policy because the policy is the most

⁹ Aristotle, "Politics", Book 3, Part IV, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.mb.txt>

exalted science. In this sense, he speaks of a kind of utilitarian value of good for all citizens. Happy life in his case is not only an idea as for Plato, but a model by which to be guided by *practical life (praxis)*. In this sense Aristotle's political doctrine is actually the backbone of modern political science.

1.5. Conclusion

What conclusion can we draw today? Is it possible to apply some of Aristotle's principle of political philosophy in the time in which we live? Certainly we can't accept the principle of slavery, but a state that cares about the happiness of their citizens certainly can. Certainly what we should strive for is ethics which is related to policy. Modern philosophy has resentment to Aristotle the institute of slavery and somewhat rigid attitudes towards women. It should take into account the fact that Aristotle created his teachings at a time when the political turmoil within the ancient world was conditioned to frequent conflicts. His attitude to "*slavery*" and women's rights is actually a reflection of the spirit of time ancient Greek polis and every serious philosopher discusses his own thoughts in accordance of the spirit of the times in which she or he lives.

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