

ARISTOTLE'S POLITICS

POINTS FROM RUSSELL'S 'HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY' CHAPTER 21

Aristotle only appears to know Hellenic government (in its many forms), and never mentions Alexander or Macedon.

1. The basis of the state is that "nothing that is contrary to nature is right" (VII:3) (*physis* 'nature', rather than *nomos* 'convention').
2. The two fundamental natural relationships are man-and-woman and master-and-slave (some are 'born for slavery').
3. This leads to the natural basic human group of a family (masters + women + children + slaves).
4. Several families naturally come together to form a village - even if there is no obvious benefit (III:6)
5. A state is a combination of villages which is large enough to be self-sufficient.
6. The state is the most natural of all groups because it is "fully developed", like a mature organism.
7. A thing is defined by its purpose (*telos*), and humans can only fulfil their purpose within a state.
8. We are kept in the habit of virtue and away from the life of animals by law, which only a state can provide.
9. The state enables economic exchange and the maintenance of law, but its main aim to facilitate the good life for man. (VII:8)
10. "A political society exists for the sake of noble actions, not of mere companionship" (1281a, III:9)
11. Slaves are non-Greeks (who have less spirit), and prisoners of war (who demonstrate inferiority by their defeat) (1256b).
12. The natural means to acquire wealth is through house and land, so retail trade is naturally inferior (1257a).
13. The worst sort of trade is usury, because it is the least natural (1258, I:10) [This hugely influenced medieval thought]
14. Russell notes that Greek and medieval philosophers tended to be of the landowning class, which naturally hates usury.
15. Calvinism is the rise of a business class within the church, which therefore reverses the attitude to usury.
16. Plato's *Republic* is criticised for giving too much unity to the state, so that it begins to behave like an individual.
17. Plato's attempt to abolish the family is wrong, because it is natural to favour your own relatives ('kin selection' - Dawkins).
18. Communal property is also hopeless, as it leads to quarrels and resentment against non-contributors.
19. Owners of private property should practice the virtues, which include friendship and generosity in sharing their possessions.
20. On the question of equality he notes that excess is the greatest social evil, not poverty.
21. There are six main types of government, though mixtures of these types are common (numbers showing rank order):

Good (<i>Benefits the community</i>)	Bad (<i>Benefits itself</i>)
Monarchy (<i>duty and honour</i>) [1]	Tyranny (<i>wealth and pleasure</i>) [6]
Aristocracy (<i>the virtuous</i>) [2]	Oligarchy (<i>the rich</i>) [5]
Constitutional government ('polity', 1293b, III:8) (<i>rich and free</i>) [3]	Democracy (<i>the free</i>) [4]

22. Good and bad governments results from the moral qualities of the rulers, not from the form of the constitution.
23. Non-hereditary monarchy is the best, but the worst occurs when the best becomes corrupted - thus his ranking.
24. [Similarly, man is the best of animals, but "worst of all when divorced from law and morals" (I:2)]
25. Most governments are corrupt, and then democracy is the hardest to corrupt, like polluting a large expanse of water (III:15).
26. Remember that here democracy means appointing magistrates and juries by lot, and the assembly is above the law.
27. Revolutions usually result from conflict of democrats (claiming equality) and oligarchs (claiming superiority) (1301a, V:2).
28. Democracies are less liable to revolution, because groups of oligarchs are liable to fall out with one another.
29. To prevent revolution you need control of education, respect for law, and justice in law and administration (1307).
30. "Equality according to proportion, and for every man to enjoy his own" (1310a). ('Proportion' problematic, notes Russell)
31. Monarchs desire honour and duty, but rule by assent; tyrants desire wealth and pleasure, but rule by force (V:10).
32. Tyrants have to stunt civil life in order to protect their power, and create artificial targets, like war or pyramids (1313).
33. The natural activity of a state is peaceful. War and conquest are unnatural - except for defence and to subjugate slaves (I:8).
34. The maximum size of a *polis* is fixed by nature at self-sufficiency (1326b, VII:5) and a need for the voters to know one another.
35. Farm-workers and tradesmen should be slaves, preferably southerners, who are intelligent but not too spirited (1327).
36. Only citizens should be educated, but not above the level of leisured cultured gentlemen, with the aim of virtue, not utility.

FURTHER GLEANINGS FROM THE TEXT

1. A family or city is only possible if moral standards are shared (which distinguish the 'political animal' from other animals) (I:2)
2. Aristotle is a pluralist, both about virtue (each activity has its own good), and in the state (which accommodates variety of life).
3. The best judge of music and poetry is the people *as a whole*, "the collective intelligence of the masses" (III:11).
4. "There are tasks of which the actual doer is not either the best or the only judge" (III:11).
5. Noble birth, free birth and property are all natural qualities which require consideration in a political state. (III:12).
6. An old and fundamental question is "Is it best to be ruled by the Best Man, or by the Best Laws?" (III:15) [he says Law]
7. In law you have "the intellect without the passions", and "the law is the mean", which is what is right (III:16)
8. His method of examining democracies and oligarchies is to examine "a characteristic piece of legislation from both" (IV:9)
9. It is characteristic of democracy to give the same education to the sons of the rich as to the sons of the poor. (IV:9)
10. Owning a middling amount of wealth is best for the virtuous life (like aristocrats, rather than oligarchs)
11. The three main functions of government are deliberation, administration and justice (IV:14)
12. Democracies cannot avoid a degree of oligarchy, in the group which decides the agenda for meetings of the Assembly. (IV:15)
13. Oligarchies presume (falsely?) that inequality in one thing (wealth) means inequality in all things (V:1)
14. Drawing lots may be better for democracy than elections, because the latter are too influenced by canvassing (V:3)
15. Demagogues are a danger for democracy, but fortunately wonderful speakers are rarely also good military commanders (V:5)
16. The chief cause of a state's collapse is gradual deviation from its own constitution, which must be nipped in the bud (V:7)
17. In a democracy the rich should be treated with respect, and not have their wealth redistributed by taxation (V:8)
18. States should positively discriminate in favour of those excluded by the constitution (rich in democracy, poor in oligarchy) (V:8)
19. Democracy encourages total freedom in behaviour, but this undermines the life of virtue. (VI:4)
20. "If we wish to discuss the Best State really adequately, we must first decide what is the most desirable life" (VII:1)
21. The mind is superior to the body and possessions, and brings *eudaimonia* (happiness), just as it does with God (VII:1)
22. "Obviously the best constitution must be one which is so ordered that any person whatsoever may act and live happily" (VII:2)