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6. Athens: Aristotle

Abstract

Aristotle (384-322 B. C.) was a native of northern Greece, where his father was a physician . At the age of seventeen he went to Athens, where he formed a close association with Plato and the Academy which lasted until the death of Plato twenty years later. He spent the next twelve years teaching and studying in several different places, including the court of King Philip of Macedonia, where for at least three years he was the tutor of the future Alexander the Great . Much has been written about the relationship between Aristotle and his famous pupil, but most of it is speculation. We simply know very little about it . After the battle of Chaeronea and the accession of Alexander to the Macedonian throne, Aristotle returned to Athens (335 B. C.) and founded the Lyceum, a school patterned after the Academy which survived with it until A. D. 529. During the uprising in Athens which followed the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B. C., Aristotle, whose name had been associated with the conqueror and his Macedonian governor of Greece, thought it best to flee the city. He died in the following year. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Greek history, Greek civilization, Greek philosophers, city-state, King Philip of Macedonia, Alexander the Great, Lyceum

Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Ancient Philosophy | Classics | Cultural History | History

Comments

This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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6. Aristotle (*a great classifier*)

(62)

Aristotle (384-322 B. C.) was a native of northern Greece, where his father was a physician. At the age of seventeen he went to Athens, where he formed a close association with Plato and the Academy which lasted until the death of Plato twenty years later. He spent the next twelve years teaching and studying in several different places, including the court of King Philip of Macedonia, where for at least three years he was the tutor of the future Alexander the Great. Much has been written about the relationship between Aristotle and his famous pupil, but most of it is speculation. We simply know very little about it. After the battle of Chaeronea and the accession of Alexander to the Macedonian throne, Aristotle returned to Athens (335 B. C.) and founded the Lyceum, a school patterned after the Academy which survived with it until A. D. 529. During the uprising in Athens which followed the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B. C., Aristotle, whose name had been associated with the conqueror and his Macedonian governor of Greece, thought it best to flee the city. He died in the following year.

While the guiding spirit of the Lyceum, Aristotle both taught and studied. His interests were spread out in many directions, in almost every area relating to man and nature into which the Greek mind roamed. His work in biology was more comprehensive than anything that had been done before. His efforts in psychology and political science were sufficiently important to justify his being called the father of both disciplines. Within the field of philosophy he was the first to systematize the study of logic and he wrote an influential treatise on ethics. Plato had treated the whole field of knowledge as though it were one; Aristotle divided it into many of the same classifications we have today and in some instances

gave them the names which are still in use. He has been called the first encyclopedist, but he was far more than just a compiler. It is doubtful whether any man since Aristotle has succeeded in making such substantial contributions to as many different disciplines as he did. Since the field of knowledge has expanded so tremendously since his day, it is doubtful whether any man ever will.

The writings of Aristotle that have survived, though less voluminous than those of Plato, form a considerable body of material. Most of them were composed in connection with his teaching at the Lyceum and are in the form of textbooks or lecture material. Some of them bear the marks of having been in preparation for many years, while others were never much more than rather full outlines.

Aristotle ^{criticized} and eventually departed from Plato's views at significant points. As we might expect, his basic criticism centered around a basic issue: the problem of the forms. He was critical in two respects. First, Plato's forms seemed to be beyond scientific reason, beyond experience. Second, since they were above individual things, for Aristotle they were incapable of doing or causing anything. He took Plato's use of the word "participate" to be nothing more than a restatement of the problem. Aristotle, for reasons that can never be more than conjecture, was more interested in the particular things than he was in the universal forms. He regarded everything in the universe -- including triangles, trees, and acts -- as a combination both of form and of matter. There were only two exceptions to this broad generalization. At the very top of the hierarchy discernible in the universe there is form without matter (God) and at the very bottom there is matter without form. In all other instances, form exists in particular things and has no separable or independent existence of its own.]

One of the questions asked by Aristotle about particular things was similar to Plato's question: How can they be known? The answer which Aristotle gave was different. He replied that we know by means of causes, four of which he identified: (1) the material, which is the matter (Aristotle accepted an earlier Greek division of matter into earth, air, fire, and water); (2) the formal, which is the form according to which the matter is molded; (3) the efficient, which is the power that brings the material and formal causes together; and (4) the final, which is the end or purpose for which the particular thing exists. He used a statue to illustrate these four causes. There is the block of marble; there is the shape of the figure in the mind of the sculptor; there is the efficiency in the sculptor's arm; and there is the garden to be decorated. Understanding these four causes enables us to know everything there is to know.]

As we have already seen, Plato interpreted reality in terms of being which was to be comprehended in the perfect forms. He doubted that one could learn much from the sensory world which

Every body in ^{deductive (general to specific)} ~~is~~ a college student
 J. is in ~~the~~ college
 J. is a ~~college~~ college student

^{Inductive}
 specific to general.
 (Aristotle)

was in continual flux and from which we could gain only opinion. Aristotle, on the other hand, interpreted reality in terms of growth. He was more interested in becoming, which was for him a thing's process of "coming to be" what was its end or purpose. For example, [an acorn has within itself the possibility of becoming an oak tree and then a table] [That was for Aristotle the significant or determining thing about it -- its end, purpose, or final cause "what each thing is when fully developed we call its nature," he wrote.]

This distinction in emphasis between Plato and Aristotle can be seen so generally and under various guises in the sweep of Western thought that the poet Coleridge was led to observe that every thinking man was born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian. But, if Aristotle had taken a view completely opposite to that of Plato, he would have come very close to the position of Democritus, who denied the existence of anything other than matter. The fact that he did not take this position classifies him somewhere in the middle ground between two extremes. When the Renaissance painter, Raphael (1483-1520), did his famous painting, the School of Athens, he showed Plato with his hand stretched upward and Aristotle with his stretched outward, not downward.

Aristotle sought to find man's place in the universe by asking: What is the end of man? Man too is a combination of matter and form. He has a body corresponding to the material cause. He has a soul, which is the combination of the formal, efficient, and final causes. His soul includes the characteristic functions of both vegetable and animal souls: nutrition, reproduction, sensibility, and locomotion. Its distinguishing characteristic is reason and man's end or purpose is the use of this reason. It is the rational part of the human soul which determines man's growth and development. It is this which draws him up to the highest level of the universe itself, to the contemplation of the Good. At this point Aristotle reaches ground made familiar (or at least made known) by Plato. This highest level Aristotle called the Final Cause, the Uncaused Cause, the Unmoved Mover, the Soul of Nature, and the Soul of the Universe. The Final Cause is Mind, which combines Plato's concept of the Good and his concept of cause. As such, Aristotle can also call it God. *use of reason to its fullest*

Unlike Plato, Aristotle refused to accept any idea of creation. He believed that the natural universe is eternal; there never has been a time when it did not exist. He agreed with Plato that man's soul is immortal, but for a different reason and in a different way. For him, immortality arose from the fact that man's contemplative reason is part of the eternal reason which is the determining factor of the universe. He could not accept belief in personal immortality because he could not believe that the soul, which is form, could have an existence apart from the material body.

For the more practical-minded Aristotle, man's knowledge begins with scientific inspection and classification of the things and experiences which he encounters. Because for him the forms are in particular things, it is possible by careful inspection of things to arrive at the forms and so to classify everything correctly according to genera and species. This helps to explain why Aristotle became the great classifier of Classical times.

Perhaps the question which interested Aristotle most and which he asked most frequently was: Why? What is the end, the purpose, or the final cause of things? We have seen how he asked this question in the case of man. He was equally interested in asking it of everything else. The important thing about the egg was that its purpose was to become the chicken and eventually contribute to the sustenance of man. For many centuries after Aristotle this preoccupation with the why of things dominated scientific thinking. His works on such subjects as physics and astronomy were accepted as the voice of ultimate authority. The facts that he had been inquisitive in his own day and that his writings were sometimes only half-completed efforts were forgotten. This helps to explain why the beginnings of modern science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries represented a revolt against Aristotelianism. Interest has shifted from the why of things, from the final cause, to the how of things, to the material and the efficient causes. Scientists are no longer certain that the human mind can grasp the purpose for which the egg becomes the chicken. They are content to explore the many avenues opened by the question: How does the transformation take place? ✓

took 2000 yrs. for men to stop asking why and start asking how
It is perhaps in the areas of logic, ethics, and politics that Aristotle has cast his longest shadows on subsequent thought. Logic for him was a set of rules according to which we can relate universals (such as genera and species) in a way that will produce a consistent result. But logic is both a necessary beginning instrument for science (which relates the particulars to universals) and a higher form of knowing. Different schools of later philosophy have emphasized now one and now the other of these functions.

The contribution of Aristotle was to initiate the study and formulate the rules of logic; or, as it has sometimes been expressed, he invented logic. [Logic includes propositions and syllogisms, or relations between propositions. A correct proposition is one in which we have related an individual thing to its correct universal.] All men are mortal. The subject of the sentence is included in the classification which is the predicate. Certain things cannot be derived from this proposition. We cannot say that all mortals are men, only that some are. When we try to relate two propositions of this kind, we must put them together in ways specified by Aristotle. When correctly related we have a valid syllogism: All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal. ✓ *deductive* But we do not have a valid syllogism if we say: All Communists believe in desegregation.

tion. Mr. X. believes in desegregation. Therefore, Mr. X. is a Communist. The major question to be asked about Aristotle's logic is whether it is capable of adding to man's knowledge or whether it is merely a means of explaining and clarifying what we already know. Again, later thinkers have disagreed on the answer.

The syllogism is illustrative of deductive reasoning, which begins with a general truth (All men are mortal) and proceeds by means of a middle term (Socrates is a man) to an individual case (Socrates is mortal). This can be recognized as the method of geometry and it was also the method which Plato found most useful and congenial. If we remember what he thought of forms and of particular things, we can understand why this was true. Deductive reasoning can be contrasted with inductive reasoning, which seeks by observing a sufficient number of individual facts or by experimentation to arrive at a general truth. It is obvious that Aristotle made use of both of these methods. His interest in biology and medicine led him to value induction highly.

The ^{reflects the good.} ~~second~~ area of Aristotle's greatest influence was the ethical. He treated the subject of ethics in a book called Nicomachean Ethics, named after his son, Nicomachus, who may have edited and published it after his father's death. All action, as all knowing, Aristotle wrote, "may be said to aim at some good." The highest form of action is that by which the soul rules the body in the ordering of human life and it aims at the highest good. Happiness answers the description of the highest good better than anything else, but to Aristotle happiness is something in "accordance with complete or perfect virtue." His inquiry thus switches to a discussion of virtue.

[Aristotle believed that both body and soul were equally necessary to the good life. Accordingly, he could not see good solely in terms of bodily pleasure or of pleasures of the soul. His conclusion was that "virtue therefore will aim at the mean," at obtaining a harmony between body and soul. The Golden Mean, as this harmony came to be called, is another major Greek contribution to Western thought.]

An example of the mean is courage, lying between two extremes or limits: cowardice on the one hand and foolhardiness on the other. Another example is modesty, between the extremes of bashfulness and shamelessness. The mean is not to be determined on a purely mathematical basis. An individual's position relative to his needs varies with time and circumstance. At different times the mean will be closer to one extreme than to the other:

...it is possible to go too far, or not to go far enough, in respect of fear, courage, desire, anger, pity and pleasure and pain generally, and the excess and the deficiency are alike wrong; but to experience these emotions at the right times and on the right occasions and

towards the right persons and for the right causes and in the right manner is the mean or the supreme good, which is characteristic of virtue. Similarly there may be excess, deficiency, or the mean, in regard to actions. *

To locate this mean for any particular action, one must find a higher reference point, one which transcends both extremes. This higher reference point is the Good. Aristotle is in complete agreement with Plato that the intellectual striving to arrive at this Good is the supreme happiness for man as a rational animal. He described it as coming as close to immortality as man can come. All of the virtues of the mean are instruments in the process of attaining a knowledge of the Good.

The Golden Mean is not synonymous with the phrase: moderation in all things. There are certain actions and emotions which are beyond the extremes and therefore intrinsically evil. He identified some of these as murder, theft, envy, and adultery. Such acts as these are "beyond the pale".

Human nature?

...It is never possible then to be right in respect of them; they are always sinful. Right or wrong in such actions as adultery does not depend on our committing them with the right person, at the right time or in the right manner; on the contrary it is sinful to do anything of the kind at all... **

Aristotle realized the difficulty involved in determining the mean:

It has now been sufficiently shown that moral virtue is a mean state, and in what sense it is a mean state; it is a mean state as lying between two vices, a vice of excess on the one side and a vice of deficiency on the other, and as aiming at the mean in the emotions and actions.

That is the reason why it is so hard to be virtuous; for it is always hard work to find the mean in anything, e.g. it is not everybody, but only a man of science, who can find the mean or centre of a circle. So too anybody can get angry -- that is an easy matter -- and anybody can give or spend money, but to give it to the right persons, to give the right amount of it and to give it at the right time and for the right cause and in the right way, this is not what anybody can do, nor is it easy. That is the reason why it is rare and laudable and noble to do well... ***

* The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle . . . , trans. J. E. C. Welldon (London: Macmillan And Co., Limited, 1930), p. 46. Used with permission.

** Ibid., p. 48.

*** Ibid., pp. 55-56.

The ~~third area~~ of Aristotle's greatest influence was the political. The work incorporating his most important contribution in this field was the Politics, in which he struggled with the same problems dealt with in the Republic and the Laws. Aristotle drew freely from both of these earlier works, criticizing some of Plato's ideas and taking others to develop them in accordance with his own beliefs. Aristotle could not bring himself to speculate on the ideal state in anything like the detail of the Republic. One has the feeling that such a task was repulsive to him. He apparently began something of the sort but never finished it. At one point he declared that if an ideal state which is very different from existing states were really a good thing, surely someone would have thought of it long before his day. Aristotle turned away from describing ideal states to enunciating his political ideals.

Like that of Plato, Aristotle's political thought was expressed exclusively in terms of the Greek city-state. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Alexander the Great did not learn anything political from Aristotle or that he found he could not use what he did learn. Equally difficult to avoid is the conclusion that Aristotle learned absolutely nothing from Alexander's conquests that might have led him to think in terms of anything larger than the polis, in which the individual citizen was still a large enough fraction of the whole body of citizens to count for something substantial. While Alexander was thinking of a large empire in which the barriers between Greeks and barbarians would be broken down forever by intermarriage and migration, Aristotle counseled him to preserve a sharp distinction by behaving as leader of the Greeks and the master of everyone else.

We must remember, then, that everything which Aristotle wrote about the role of the citizen and the purpose of the state pertained to the polis. He saw the state as the result of a progression beginning with the family and culminating in the polis. In the following selection we can see how he applies his emphasis on becoming to the state and how he regards the state as natural because of the moral purpose it fulfills:

Here, as elsewhere, the best system of examination will be to begin at the beginning and observe things in their growth.

There are certain primary essential combinations of those who cannot exist independently one of another. Thus male and female must combine in order to the procreation of children, nor is there anything deliberate or arbitrary in their so doing; on the contrary, the desire of leaving an offspring like oneself is natural to man as to the whole animal and vegetable world. Again, natural rulers and subjects combine for safety -- and when I say "natural," I mean that there are some persons qualified intellectually to form projects, and these are natural rulers or natural masters; while there are others qualified physically to carry them out, and these are subjects

or natural slaves, so that the interests of master and slave are coincident....

Again, the simplest association of several households for something more than ephemeral purposes is a village. It seems that the village in its most natural form is derived from the household, including all the children of certain parents and the children's children, or as the phrase sometimes is, "all who are suckled upon the same milk."...

Lastly, the association composed of several villages in its complete form is the State, in which the goal of full independence may be said to be first attained. For as the State was formed to make life possible, so it exists to make life good. Consequently if it be allowed that the simple associations, i.e. the household and the village, have a natural existence, so has the State in all cases; for in the State they attain complete development, and Nature implies complete development, as the nature of anything, e.g. of a man, a house or a horse, may be defined to be its condition when the process of production is complete. Or the naturalness of the State may be proved in another way: the object proposed or the complete development of a thing is its highest Good; but independence which is first attained in the State is a complete development or the highest Good and is therefore natural.

Thus we see that the State is a natural institution, that Man is naturally a political animal and that one who is not a citizen of any State, if the cause of his isolation be natural and not accidental, is either a superhuman being or low in the scale of civilization, as he stands alone like a "blot" on the backgammon board. The "clanless, lawless, hearthless" man so bitterly described by Homer is a case in point; for he is naturally a citizen of no state and a lover of war. Also that Man is a political animal in a higher sense than a bee or any other gregarious creature is evident from the fact that Nature, as we are fond of asserting, creates nothing without a purpose and Man is the only animal endowed with speech. Now mere sounds serve to indicate sensations of pain and pleasure and are therefore assigned to other animals as well as to Man; for their nature does not advance beyond the point of perceiving pain and pleasure and signifying these perceptions to one another. The object of speech on the other hand is to indicate advantage and disadvantage and therefore also justice and injustice. For it is a special characteristic which distinguishes Man from all other animals that he alone enjoys perception of good and evil, justice and injustice and the like. But these are the principles of that association which constitutes a household or a State. *

* The Politics of Aristotle . . . , trans. J. E. C. Welldon (London: Macmillan And Co., Limited, 1905), pp. 2-6. Used with permission.

He drives his point further by identifying the polis as the teacher of virtue.

.. [It is evident that a State which is not merely nominally but in the true sense of the word a State should devote its attention to virtue.] To neglect virtue is to convert the political association into an alliance differing in nothing except in the local contiguity of its members from the alliances formed between distant States, to convert the law into a mere covenant, or, as the sophist Lycophron said, a mere surety for the mutual respect of rights, without any qualification for producing goodness or justice in the citizens. But it is clear that this is the true view of the State, i.e. that it promotes the virtue of its citizens.... *

comes out of man's nature.

what is the purpose of the state ?? will be asked over & over.

Like Plato, Aristotle had in mind a limited number of citizens, similar to the prevailing Greek practice of his day. This was not deliberate snobbishness on his part. He considered the duties of citizens time consuming, bound up as they were with the virtuous life. Given the economic system of fourth century Greece, only a relatively small number of persons could be permitted the necessary leisure which the performance of those duties required. Neither the slaves who were necessary to help provide this leisure nor the men who were preoccupied with trading and commercial activities could hope to enjoy citizenship.

to make a good life.

examined different states to base his reasoning upon
Like Plato, Aristotle regarded economic activity in the polis as a necessary means to be used in promoting the good life of the citizen. It was never to be considered as an end in itself. This perhaps explains why economics did not emerge as a separate discipline from the investigations of Aristotle. He wrote at some length on the subject but it was always subordinate to ethics or to politics. Like Plato, Aristotle regarded the acquisitive instinct in man as one of the most dangerous enemies of the polis: it promoted an individualism which could not be harnessed to the service of the community. Since he believed that man reaches his fullest development in the polis, in which the highest activity of the soul is made possible and encouraged, he could not help but regard anything which weakened the polis as unnatural. The ideal polis was one which was economically as self-sufficient as it could possibly be, just as it was politically self-sufficient, and just as it was self-sufficient in every other way. Both Plato and Aristotle scorned more than a minimum of necessary commercial activities, simply because they believed these activities, if pursued on a large scale, would involve the community in foreign entanglements and domestic social difficulties which eventually would ruin the polis. The strictures of Aristotle against usury (interest) illustrate the general hostility he bore toward economic activity carried beyond "the point of satisfying mere requirements:"

* Ibid., 124-125.

Now, as we said, there are two species of Finance, one belonging to Domestic Economy and the other to Trade. The former is indispensable and laudable; whereas the latter which is an art of exchange is justly disparaged as being contrary to Nature and enriching one party at the expense of the other. But of all forms of bad Finance there is none which so well deserves abhorrence as petty usury, because in it it is money itself which produces the gain instead of serving the purpose for which it was devised. For it was invented simply as a medium of exchange, whereas interest multiplies the money itself. Indeed it is to this fact that it owes its name..., as children bear a likeness to their parents, and interest is money born of money. It may be concluded therefore that no form of moneymaking does so much violence to Nature as this. *

*Farmers
Small crafts-
men
(producing)*

*usury - any interest on money
Aristotle believed* *High interest rate
on a loan - usury*

Unlike Plato in the Republic, Aristotle thought in terms of government by laws and not by men. He believed that no man is ever good enough to be a philosopher-king; he entertained the possibility of this and then dismissed it. *Law is an impersonal thing binding both ruler and citizen. There is a flavor of voluntary consent about law which is lacking when the supreme authority is an individual, even one claiming to have a vision of the perfect Good. Voluntary consent among citizens, Aristotle believed, was necessary to good government. Moreover, *law is a distillate of the customs and the habits of the past. He could not help believing that this residue of human experience counted for something, that it was knowledge, and therefore good. He could not accept the argument that rulers were trained political physicians, to whose judgment everyone should submit. Citizens had to stand on a relationship of substantial equality to each other, he reasoned, or they would not be citizens. He was sure that their collective judgment expressed under the law in day to day decisions and through the law as it slowly accumulated over the years was very often basically sounder than the judgment of experts. This emphasis on government in which the rulers are subject to the law probably has been the most influential idea in the Politics. In the later Middle Ages, when the study of Aristotle was revived in Western Europe, this idea, reinforced from other sources, passed into the heritage of Western Civilization.

*Plato -
guardians
philosopher-king*

*Aristotle -
ruler is
under the
law*

Aristotle took over from Plato and made his own a classification of the forms of government which seems to encompass the range of human political experience:

...in any State the polity and the governing class are virtually the same, i.e. the polity is determined by the governing class, as the governing class is the supreme authority in a State, and as supreme power must be vested

* Ibid., pp. 27-28.

either in an individual or in a Few or in the Many, it follows that, when the rule of the individual or the Few or the Many is exercised for the benefit of the community at large, the polities are normal, whereas the polities which subserve the private interest either of the individual or the Few or the masses are perversions; for either the members of the State do not deserve the name of citizens, or they ought to have a share in its advantages. The form of Monarchy in which regard is paid to the interest of the community is commonly known as Kingship, and the government of the Few, although of a number exceeding one, for the good of all, as Aristocracy, whether because the rule is in the hands of the best citizens...or because they exercise it for the best interests...of the State and all its members; while when it is the masses who direct public affairs for the interest of the community, the government is called by the name which is common to all the polities, viz. a Polity. The result in this case is such as might have been expected. For although it is possible to find an individual or a few persons of eminent virtue, it can hardly be the case that a larger number are perfectly accomplished in every form of virtue; at the best they will be accomplished only in military virtue, as it is the only one of which the masses are capable. The consequence is that in this polity, viz. the Polity proper, the military class is supreme, and all who bear arms enjoy full political privileges.

As perverted forms of the polities just mentioned we have Tyranny by the side of Kingship, Oligarchy of Aristocracy and Democracy of Polity. For tyranny is monarchical rule for the good of the monarch, Oligarchy the rule of the Few for the good of the wealthy, and Democracy the rule of the Many for the good of the poor; none of them subserves the interest of the community at large *

Oligarchy = rule by the rich (modern conception)

But Aristotle was not satisfied. It was not enough to list mechanically six polities and stop there. He studied the constitutions of 158 city-states, representing a bewildering variety of human experience. As he sought to generalize upon this record of dynamic political behavior, he discovered (if he did not already know) the impossibility of reducing it all to a few convenient categories. His title as the father of political science rests upon his conclusion that it was the function of the student of government to study the workings of all possible polities and the socio-economic structure with which they are associated, and to be prepared to suggest the most intelligent direction of polities that are in operation or that could be put into operation. Perhaps without realizing it, when Aristotle reached this point -- however reluctantly, he did explain how to run a tyranny successfully -- he was on the verge of separating ethics and politics, which elsewhere in the Politics are bound closely together.

* Ibid., pp. 119-120.

After discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the different polities which he identified, Aristotle turned to the question: Which is the best of them all? His answer to this question represents another of the most influential ideas of the Politics in modern times.

...what is the best polity and the best life for the great majority of States and persons, as tested by the standard not of a virtue which is beyond the attainment of ordinary human beings, nor of such an education as requires natural advantages and the external resources which Fortune alone can give, nor again of the ideally constructed polity, but of such a life as the majority of people are capable of realizing in a political association and such a polity as the majority of States are capable of enjoying?...

In the determination of all these questions we may start from the same principles. If it has been correctly stated in the Ethics that the happy life is a life which is unimpeded in the exercise of virtue, and that virtue is a mean between two extremes, it follows that the mean life, viz. the attainment of the mean condition possible to the citizens of any State, is the best. And further the same canons of virtue and vice necessarily hold good for a State and for its polity, as the polity is, so to say, the life of a State.

In every State without exception there are three parts, viz. the very rich, the very poor and thirdly the intermediate class. As it is admitted then that the moderate or intermediate condition is best, it is evident that the possession of Fortune's gifts in an intermediate degree is the best thing possible. For this is the condition in which obedience to reason is easiest; whereas one who is excessively beautiful, strong, noble or wealthy, or on the contrary excessively poor or weak or deeply degraded cannot easily live a life conformable to reason.....in theory at least the State is composed as far as possible of persons who are equal and similar, and this is especially the condition of the middle class. And from this it follows that, if we take the parts of which the State in our conception is composed, it is a State of this kind, viz. composed largely of the middle class, which enjoys the best political constitution. Further it is this middle class of citizens which runs the least risk of destruction in a State. For as they do not like paupers lust after the goods of others, nor do others lust after theirs, as paupers after the property of the rich, they pass an existence void of peril, being neither the objects nor the authors of conspiracies....* It is clear then that the best political association is the one which is controlled by the middle class, and that the only States capable of a good administration are those in which the middle class is numerically large and stronger, if not than both the other classes, yet at least than either of them, as in that case the addition of its weight turns

the scale and prevents the predominance of one extreme or the other. Accordingly it is an immense blessing to a State that the active citizens should possess an intermediate and sufficient amount of property; for where there is a class of extremely wealthy people on the one hand and a class of absolute paupers on the other, the result is either an extreme Democracy or an untempered Oligarchy, or, as the outcome of the predominance of either extreme, a Tyranny. For Tyranny results from the most violent form of Democracy or from Oligarchy, but is far less likely to result from a polity in which the middle class is strong and the citizens all stand much on the same level] *
