

THE  
POLITICAL  
THOUGHT  
OF  
PLATO  
AND  
ARISTOTLE



# THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

*Mues*  
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adopted. "He disputes subtilely to and fro of many points, and judiciously of many errors, but concludes nothing himself."<sup>1</sup> The reader of the *Politics* must determine not to expect consistency, still less certainty, but to content himself with being stimulated to think. He must take a view in its context: he must beware of quoting as Aristotle's view what is perhaps only a tentative solution, or what, again, may be some previous thinker's view, which is ultimately combated or modified.

A constant  
discussion of  
current opinion

The explanation of these characteristics of Aristotle's work seems most naturally to be found in the view, that it represents rather a lecture than a set work, and a lecture more by way of discussion, than of set enunciation. Postponing for the present this question, we may first of all notice the form which Aristotelian discussion takes. It is Aristotle's first object to collect the received views on the subject which he is discussing, whether they are the ordinary and accepted popular views, or those of previous thinkers. This is a procedure followed in theoretical works like the *De Anima*, but still more in practical treatises like the *Ethics* or *Politics*. Here it is popular opinion which is the fundamental basis of inquiry. For in subjects like these popular opinion is not simply what most people think about the subject of discussion, as it is in biology: popular opinion is itself the subject of discussion. Ethics deals with the types of character generally approved by men's opinion: universal opinion is the test of ethical truth. Similarly, the subject of politics is no subject simply given, like the bones of an animal, to be treated in itself by the inquirer, without any necessary reference to what any man ever thought of it before: its subject is political institutions moulded, worked and directed by men's minds—alterable by human thinking, and by human thinking made what they are. And thus while a theoretical science like physics, dealing with things eternal, need not so much be treated—though by Aristotle it is treated—with reference to previous research or opinions, a practical science like politics must always be discussed with regard to opinions, because it is constituted by them. The opinions of the many or the wise are therefore the basis of discussion; but opinion needs correction or amplification, if not, as with

<sup>1</sup> Filmer, *Patriarcha*, ii., c. 10.

the opinions of some thinkers, entire rejection. To examine opinion is to see difficulties or inconsistencies, statements that err by excess or defect, or statements that contradict one another. This is the stage of *ἀπορία*, in which thought is involved in an apparent *cul de sac*, from which some escape must be found. And here the second, or a *priori*, element of discussion enters. For Aristotle applies to opinion metaphysical principles of his own, principles elsewhere established, to elicit the deeper meaning of opinion, or to correct its errors. Seldom, if ever, is opinion rejected in the sphere of practical science. It is developed by criticism: its excesses or defects are qualified: its inconsistencies are reconciled by some proof, that either of the two contradictories represents one aspect of truth. The presence of these two elements—received opinion and metaphysical principle—has various results. It makes Aristotle's method of science neither inductive nor deductive, but "a continual and living play between both". It makes his style assume almost the form of a dialogue, in which popular opinion states its case, or previous thinkers urge their views, on the one side, and on the other Aristotle the metaphysician answers. There is a constant dialectic for the eliciting of truth. This is no eristic—no chopping of logic for the sake of confutation; on the contrary, Aristotle seeks to absorb what he can from previous opinion, and, even if he rejects it, to appreciate its better side by showing that its error is half a truth. It is an honest facing and weighing of all possibilities for truth's sake. But dialectic such as this, dialectic which almost leads to dialogue, reminds us naturally of Plato; and the suggestion comes readily, that enough of the spirit of Platonic dialogue had been imbibed, during those years of study under the master, to inspire, not only the exoteric discourses of Aristotle, but also his lectures in the inner school. Nor is the dialectic reminiscent only of Plato; it suggests the very process of the human mind in its normal working. Do we not all bring to the facts we are considering certain general conceptions, to which our experience and temper have brought us, and which we always tend to use as clues to the truth? These conceptions are our principles (*ἀρχαί*): conformity to them means for us the mental satisfaction which we call truth. Nor is the



process by which these principles meet their material in the mind at all unlike dialogue. It is often a one-sided dialogue, in which the side that suits our principles says everything; but so is the Platonic dialogue too. Indeed, compared with Aristotle, Plato himself may sometimes seem, for instance in the *Laws*, less dialectician than preacher; and the peripatetic monologue, which has been contrasted with the Platonic dialogue, may appear the true dialogue.

It is this play of dialectic which leads to the constant use of the aporetic method—a tentative method of propounding a thesis, stating its difficulties, and working towards a solution of those difficulties before attempting to prove the thesis. Take, for instance, the thesis that the virtue of the good man is the same as the virtue of the good citizen. Aristotle, proceeding as he himself says by the aporetic method, suggests various difficulties in the way of this thesis. The State as an association is composed of dissimilar members: citizen differs from citizen. Different citizens have different virtues; but the good man has always the same kind of virtue, and the virtue of the good citizen is therefore *not* the same as that of the good man. But Aristotle suggests, in the form of a question, a tentative escape from this *impasse*. May it not be the case, that though *all* good citizens are not as good men, yet *some* citizens have the same virtues as they? Logically this is possible; and Aristotle proceeds to prove that it is in fact the case. The citizen who rules has political faculty: the good men moral prudence. But these virtues are really identical; and therefore the good citizen, *if he be a ruler*, is the same as the good man. The thesis is finally established, but only under limitations and with a qualification, which the use of an aporetic method has discovered.

Analysis

We may finally notice the part played by analysis in Aristotle's procedure. This has been referred to his medical training; but, as we have seen, the Socratic tradition was *divide et intellige*, and analysis was a method inherited by Aristotle from his master. He speaks of it as his guiding method in the *Politics*; and his first procedure in the very first book is to employ the method of analysis for the understanding of the State. As a compound the State is analysed into its constituent units of family and villages, in order to attain a proper comprehension

of its character, just as life is elsewhere considered in its divisions—nutritive, sensitive, rational—in order to attain an understanding of the principle of life in general. In other passages in the *Politics*, analysis is used to distinguish the several attributes of a subject, with the aim of eliminating its essential attribute, and thereby attaining a proper definition. Such an essential attribute is one which is true in every instance of a subject, and true of nothing but that subject. Hence in the third book, in discussing the essential attribute of the State, he dismisses successively the various attributes which his analysis gives—necessary aid to life, alliance, commercial union (c. ix.); habitation in a common city, intermarriage (c. iii.)—because all these are attributes of other things than the State. They are not true of the State specifically; and they are not essential attributes of the State. But the sixth and final attribute, a common interest in a good life, does characterise a State specifically: it is the essential attribute of the State; nor can a State be otherwise defined, than as an association, whose members are united by a common interest in a good life.

Dialectical, aporetic, analytic—such are the characteristics of Aristotle's method. And now it follows, in the light which these considerations furnish, to inquire into the text of the *Politics*, and the proper order of the eight books of which it is composed.<sup>1</sup> A treatise in which terms are carefully analysed, and in which difficulties are raised and considered, but not necessarily solved, suggests of itself the lecturer rather than the author. And such a suggestion receives confirmation from what we know, or can readily guess, of the philosophic schools, which arose at Athens in the fourth century. They depended simply on oral teaching, transmitted orally. A master relied on the living word, and sought to quicken men's minds rather than to leave written monuments. A pupil, who had heard and imbibed the teaching of his master, arose in his own day, to propound the same doctrine with more or less modification, as his greater or less originality suggested. Where the master had been an Aristotle, the divergence of his pupils would be but slight. This oral tradition, transmitted inside the school, would have one fixed and central point, which would preserve continuity

*Politics*  
lecture-notes

<sup>1</sup> For the history of the text I follow Shute, *History of the Aristotelian Writings*.



and a certain stability. The original master must have made notes for his lecture: it is impossible that a teacher like Aristotle, covering such a wide range of subjects, and referring to so many facts as his political lectures, for instance, embrace, should ever have done otherwise. Such notes, whether in the master's own hand, or, as Shute prefers to think, in a good copy, would be treasured in the school: they would be treasured with the more veneration, the more scrupulous adherence to every word and syllable, as the school grew older and the prestige of the master became greater. It is likely that our text of Aristotle represents notes of this kind, thus carefully preserved. It is more likely than the view that it represents the notes of pupils. That view involves the difficulty of explaining how one pupil's notes became the *textus receptus*, when there would be numbers of versions: it involves the graver difficulty of accounting for the unity of style which pervades all the Aristotelian treatises—for though that unity may be explained by the assumption, that our text of all these treatises represents the notes of a single pupil, such an hypothesis is very improbable.

Reasons for  
this view

It has thus been assumed, on general grounds, that the Aristotelian works which we possess are not set compositions intended for publication and given to the world by Aristotle himself, as the Platonic dialogues had been by Plato; they are not writings for the world, but notes for a school. The assumption is supported by a variety of particular reasons. In the first place, we cannot explain the ignorance of the *Politics* which the world showed for some centuries after Aristotle's death, if we assume that it had been already published by Aristotle himself. Polybius would not have shown knowledge of the *Politics*, and ignorance of the *Politics*, if the latter had been accessible to him in the form of a book. This ignorance is however explicable if we assume, that the *Politics* was preserved esoterically in the school for some centuries, before it was given finally to the world. Secondly, the difference in style between Aristotle's set writings, and treatises like the *Politics*, is so great, that one cannot hold the two to be in any way parallel. It is true that we have very little of Aristotle's set compositions by which to judge. The dialogues, and the set discourses like the *Protrepticus*, are lost. There is, indeed, the *Αθηναίων πολιτεία*; and possibly the two

books of the *Politics* which deal with the ideal State, forming as they do a decided exception to the rest in point of style, were published by Aristotle himself. A German critic speaks of the "masterly style" of the former;<sup>1</sup> and Shute points to the set avoidance of hiatus in the latter. No one would speak of the masterly style of treatises like the other six books of the *Politics*, or notice in them any particular avoidance of defects of style. But, apart from any judgment on this ground, we can use two other and perhaps more cogent reasons for regarding the Aristotelian works which we possess as no set compositions. The first is the high opinion entertained by antiquity of Aristotle as a writer, if that opinion may be taken to be represented by Cicero, who again and again praises the "eloquence," the "golden flow," of his style. The second<sup>2</sup> lies in the fact that Aristotle was at any rate versed in the theory of style. He had lived in an Athens where style was cultivated—where Isocrates taught and practised eloquence, and Plato chiselled his sentences to perfection; and he had put contemporary practice into theory in the *Rhetoric*. But the theory of the *Rhetoric* is not followed—it is consistently violated—by the practice of the *Ethics* and *Politics*. It would seem to follow, therefore, that we must regard the Aristotelian treatises as sets of notes—notes made by Aristotle himself for use in his lectures. As such, they were meant for an audience, which could be assumed, as it is constantly in so many words assumed by Aristotle, to know previously something of the main Aristotelian doctrines. The hearer of the opening lectures on ethics is required to know something of Aristotle's metaphysics, in order to understand his teleological point of view; of his logic, in order to appreciate his criticism of the "Idea of the Good"; and of his psychology, in order to follow his theory of man's highest Good. The same is true of the *Politics*: the political lectures imply a previous knowledge of the Aristotelian system, in the light of which they acquire a deeper meaning; while in every way they would naturally be vivified by a fuller, richer, and more explicit treatment in class.

Publication of  
*Politics*

<sup>1</sup> The Aristotelian authorship of the *Αθηναίων πολιτεία* is, however, dubious.

<sup>2</sup> Used by Oncken, *Staatslehre*.



It remains to determine the date of the publication of these sets of notes. It is possible, *a priori*, that it may have been some centuries after the lectures were delivered by Aristotle, when they were first given to the world as a published work. During those centuries the notes, in a form modified by the working of oral tradition, would be continuously delivered and expounded in the Peripatetic school at Athens, where they might be heard by all who cared to join the course. Among the Peripatetics there would be no oblivion of Aristotelian doctrines; but for want of publication they would be unknown to a wider public. It is possible, however, that the lectures on politics may have fallen into desuetude: the city-state was dead, and men's minds were more set on the problem of individual happiness, as Stoic and Epicurean philosophy shows. Copies of some of the notes may have been procured for the Alexandrian library, and the notes of the *Politics* may have been among those which were copied. But according to the tradition of antiquity there was no real publication until shortly after 100 B.C., or almost two centuries and a half after Aristotle's death. Anxious for Greek authors with the anxiety of the modern Renaissance, the Roman Renaissance, which had developed under the patronage of the Scipios, now won for itself a published Aristotle through the instrumentality of Sulla,<sup>1</sup> who brought the Aristotelian books to Rome, to be edited there by two Romanised Greeks. "From this time forward . . . Rome is the centre of Aristotelian culture, as Athens is of Platonic."<sup>2</sup> And at Rome a published Aristotle is the basis of this culture; while previously at Athens it had been an oral Aristotle, modified in the process of oral transmission, which had formed the basis of Peripatetic philosophy.

Several questions arise out of this theory. Does the text which we possess represent Aristotle's own notes, word for word, or have we a text modified in the course of tradition? Are the books, as we have them, of Aristotle's dividing? Did he leave them in our present order? Leaving, for the moment, the question of the absolute authenticity of our text, we may suggest that it is very unlikely that lecture-notes would be divided

<sup>1</sup> Apellicon had already begun a published Aristotle at Athens, before Sulla carried away his library to Rome.

<sup>2</sup> Shute.

into books. They might be divided according to the terms in which they were delivered, or according to the main subjects they treated, but not according to books. The division into books would be made by editors, after the lecture-notes had been published in the form of a book, a form which would naturally suggest such a scheme of division. But if the later editors charged themselves with this function, may they not have ventured on more? May they not have altered the text itself? It is true that the Sullan editors had before them, if not Aristotle's autograph, at any rate the copy belonging to Theophrastus, his immediate successor, which, after having lain in oblivion for some time, had been lately recovered. On the other hand, they would also have the modified version of the Peripatetic school at Athens. It seems possible that if there were any lacunæ or obscurities in the former text, they may have been supplied, or elucidated, from the text of the Peripatetic version. It may be doubted if the respect of modern textual criticism for *ipsissima verba* would then be felt. At any rate the references in our present text, which allude to a past or promise a future treatment of some subject, would certainly appear to have been added by later editors. In the light of these considerations, the problem of the proper order of the books becomes easy. In discussing that problem, we must first ask, what was the order left by Aristotle, and secondly, what was the order adopted by the editors. Now if the *Politics* formed a single body of lectures, it might be expected that there would be a single natural order left by Aristotle himself. But the *Politics* does not seem to form such a single body. There are three sets of lectures, on distinct subjects, in distinct styles. It is important, not only as regards the order of the books, but also for the general understanding of the *Politics*, to realise this division. There is, first, a set of lectures, general and introductory, which lays down the principles of political science and of "economy" as one of its branches (books i. and iii.), and criticises the suggestions of Aristotle's predecessors and the construction of the most generally admired of existing States (book ii.). There is, secondly, a set of lectures practical and detailed (books iv.-vi. in the old order), discussing and classifying the actual constitutions of contemporary Greece; showing



where they are wrong or likely to go wrong, and in what way they may be corrected; and suggesting in conclusion that a mixture of oligarchy and democracy is—for practical purposes, and as an average best—the proper aim of the statesman. The first of these sets is to the second, as a treatise on the principles of physiology to a manual of pathology. Lastly, there is a set of lectures on the ideal State (books vii.-viii. in the old order), discussing the best methods of realising the conclusions attained in the first set of lectures with regard to the purpose and aim of the State, and forming the positive or constructive side to the negative criticism which, in that set, Aristotle had passed on Platonic ideals and Spartan institutions.

Now it seems most likely that Aristotle left these three sets separate and distinct, and in no definite order relatively to one another. In our traditional text they stand to one another in the order in which they have just been mentioned. But that is not, apparently, the order in which they were placed by the editors who supplied the references. The references are inserted on the supposition that the lectures on the ideal State immediately follow the set of introductory lectures. Now as we have no original Aristotelian order, it seems best to follow the order which best suits the internal development of ideas. That order is the order which the editors who inserted the references had adopted. The lectures on the ideal State follow most naturally on the introductory lectures, which alike in their constructive principles and their destructive criticisms lay the foundations for the building of such a State. Thus the plan of the work would be (i.) a beginning of preliminary principles and criticism (the first three books); (ii.) a middle in which those principles and that criticism are used in the construction of an ideal State (the fourth and fifth books, traditionally arranged as the seventh and eighth books); (iii.) lastly, an end, peculiarly Aristotelian in character, analysing and classifying the actual facts of Greek politics—accepting those facts as given, while yet seeking to modify them into something better; and applying to politics the favourite doctrine of a golden mean, in the suggestion of a State midway between democracy and oligarchy. This end would form books six, seven and eight—the traditional fourth, fifth and sixth. The further and less important question of

Order of the  
books

order (whether a further rearrangement of the traditional order should be made in the three books which would now form the end, so that the old fourth should become the sixth, the old sixth the seventh, and the old fifth the eighth book) is perhaps too slight, and too dubious, to be discussed here. It is on the strength of the references that the change has been made; but they cut both ways. Hildenbrand argues that internal logic postulates the old order; and Newman preserves that order, while suggesting that the fourth and sixth books (of the traditional order—the sixth and eighth of the new) formed one treatise, into which the other book was intercalated.

But it cannot be said that even with this re-arrangement the *Politics* forms a complete and logically ordered treatise. It is obvious that the books on the ideal State are by no means finished. Something is said of its foundation: something, but not all that was intended, of its education; but there is little or nothing said of its constitution or of its laws. It may be, as has been suggested, that Aristotle, sober and practical by nature, soon tired of constructing an imaginary Utopia; or the composition may have been interrupted by other causes. In any case there is a lacuna. There is again a lacuna at the end of the set of lectures on practical politics—at the end of the last book of the *Politics*, in the revised order. One would have expected the discussion of the executive to be followed by a discussion of the judicature and the deliberative: the very words with which the book ends show that it is interrupted, and not finished. Besides these lacunæ at the end of two sets, there is also a large omission in the middle of one. In dealing with practical politics, it might seem that not only the constitution, but also the laws, would naturally have been discussed. In the *Laws* (the work of Plato which in many respects corresponds to this section of the *Politics*) they bulk largely. Aristotle himself had the greatest faith in laws: law, which is reason itself, is to him the only true sovereign. Indeed he practically promises to discuss legislation at the beginning of the three books on practical politics: it is part of political science, and the whole of political science must be fully discussed. There are thus three decided gaps in the *Politics*; and the plan of the whole work, had it ever been completed, would have been somewhat as follows.

*Politics* unfinished



## FIRST SET OF LECTURES

*Prolegomena of Politics*, or the theory of the State in general, including:—

Plan of the  
*Politics*

Book i.—the State in its relation to the household and household management; and books ii. and iii.—the data for the construction of an ideal State. Of these two books the former discusses the best constitutions already suggested in theory or existing in fact, in order that, when they have been sifted, the residue may be absorbed into Aristotle's projected construction; the latter, the fundamental book of the *Politics*, discusses the definition and classification of States. Incidentally to this definition, the meaning of citizenship is elucidated; while in treating of classification, Aristotle discusses the standard for the distribution of office, which is the same as the criterion of classification. In both respects he lays down principles of great importance to a builder of States.

The second and third sets of lectures both deal with particular States, the second with a suggested ideal State, the third with actual States.

## SECOND SET OF LECTURES

*Suggested ideal State.* The first of the two books which deal with an ideal State begins with a short preface, on the nature of the best life which that State is to realise. It proceeds to postulate the elements of an ideal State, for which the founder must trust to fortune, *e.g.* the nature of the soil and the character of its people; and Aristotle then begins to discuss those elements, which it is within the province of human art to supply—discipline and instruction. He lays down the rules of discipline, beginning with the discipline of the body in tender years, and proceeding in the second book to deal with the discipline of the body of the young by gymnastics, and of their instincts by proper music—a subject which engages his attention for some chapters, and in the middle of which he suddenly breaks off this last set of lectures. The body and instincts have received their *discipline*; but nothing has been said of the *instruction* of the intellect by reason. And not only is the subject of education unfinished; but practically nothing is said of the constitutional



not constitutions at all. But while there must be law, to determine the channels of the action of the government, a difficult question at once arises, if we seek to determine the extent to which the law should control the government. On general principles, indeed, Aristotle comes rapidly to the conclusion that the true relation between law and government is secured by making the law sovereign and the government its servant. Whether power be given to the few or the many, it is argued, there is every probability that the government will tend of itself to selfishness. The few will oppress the many, or the many the few. To preserve unselfishness, law must be constituted sovereign, and the government left sovereign only over those particular details which law cannot touch because of its generality. But this consideration only touches oligarchy and democracy, and what applies to the few or the many will not necessarily apply to the one. If we suppose the existence in a State of a man ideally gifted in character and political capacity, of a "god among men," it cannot but appear ridiculous to impose laws on his actions, for his own wisdom is a still higher law. It would be absurd to consider him as a part of the State, when his supreme gifts make him as it were the whole, and when the rest of the civic body, less richly endowed, sinks by comparison into a mere part.<sup>1</sup> Two courses are open—either to banish him from a society of which he is too great to be a member, or to make him its absolute ruler. The former plan, which is that of ostracism, cannot be lightly dismissed as the mere "trick" of a tyranny or a democracy, intended to preserve a government which feels itself threatened: it is a practice known to good constitutions as well as to bad, and to barbarians as well as to Greeks. The excision of a too prominent feature from his work is necessary even to the artist, if he does not wish to spoil the unity of his composition. But ostracism can hardly be the right policy of a State, which makes virtue its aim, towards a member who is distinguished by a supreme degree of virtue. It would be too glaringly illogical. It remains therefore that the citizens

<sup>1</sup> That is to say, he possesses of himself everything which it is the aim of the State to secure, a perfect *αὐτάρκεια*; while the other members, even in their totality, are without him insufficient, and fall short of *αὐτάρκεια*.



## CHAPTER IX

[*Politics* I., c. ii.-xiii. ; II., c. i.-vii. : *Ethics*, V. v.]

### ARISTOTLE'S PRINCIPLES OF ECONOMICS

#### THE SPHERE OF ECONOMICS

§ 1. **T**HE subject of the first book of the *Politics* is defined by Aristotle himself as household management (*οἰκονομία*) and the method of dealing with slaves (*δεσποτεία*); and it is contrasted with the rest of the *Politics*, whose subject is the State and questions of politics. In dealing with the household before the State, Aristotle is following Nature: he is taking first that which comes first, and dealing with the part before he describes the whole. The end of the household is something necessary, but subsidiary, to the supreme end pursued by the State; it is equally necessary (if also a subsidiary matter) to begin a book on politics by an account of the methods and purpose of economics. But in postulating the necessity of a discussion on economics, we must be careful to define the term we use. In the first place, economics means the art of managing the affairs of a household, as politics the art of managing the affairs of a State. "Political economy" would therefore be, to a Greek, a contradiction in terms. One of the aims of Aristotle in the first book of the *Politics* is to distinguish carefully economics and politics, domestic management and political government; they had been, in his view, improperly confused by Plato in the *Politicus*. The sphere of economics is for Aristotle the family: for us it is the State. A second difference appears, when we reflect that the art of managing a household implies much more than we understand by the word "economy". It implies a faculty of dealing not only with the material necessities of life, but also with the

Meaning of  
*οἰκονομική*