

## Aristotle, the “Good Life,” and Athenian Democracy: The Promise of Happiness Through Virtue Made Possible by the State

Aristotle, the Western world’s first and perhaps greatest systematic thinker, emerged out of what historian Thomas Cahill refers to as “the most wildly participatory democracy in history” (*Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea* 119). An heir to Greek philosophical tradition which had seen a progressive move away from myth and towards *logos*, and a student of Plato, Aristotle departed from his teacher’s theory of ideal forms and set about to develop a universal method of reasoning by which he could know everything there was to know about reality. Aristotle was also the product of a culture which had, in a few centuries, not only developed the arts of philosophy and politics into a high intellectual achievement, but which also created the *polis* from which modern Western states and their institutions evolved.

These formative influences are reflected in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle lays out his conception of what it means to live a life of *eudaimonia*, of living well, of flourishing. In this work, starting with man’s natural desire to achieve happiness, Aristotle moves to a discussion of human volition and moral deliberation, develops a schema whereby he explains key virtues as the mean between two destructive extremes, and ends with a defense of intellectual pursuit. The good life, however, is not lived in isolation and in the *Politics*, Aristotle explains the origins of the state, evaluates the merits and defects of various types of governments, and describes the requirements and responsibilities of the citizen. This essay will look at how the concepts in these two works are connected. What is Aristotle’s vision of the good life? How are his views on an ideal constitution supportive of a good life for all? And finally, in light of Cahill’s comment above, in what ways does Athenian democracy measure up to Aristotle’s vision?

To understand Aristotle’s theory of the good life we must do as Aristotle and start with the end in mind. For Aristotle, every natural thing has a nature which is defined by its end (*telos*) and, for the individual and the state alike, the good of human life is to be found in the fulfillment or actualization of that nature. It is man’s nature to desire happiness, and thus happiness is the ultimate good for the individual and the state alike. Aristotle does not equate happiness with pleasure, however, but with virtuous action. Thus he says that “the good of man is an activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue” (*NE* I. 7. 1098a15). As for the state, Aristotle asserts that political society exists not simply to provide for a communal life but “for the sake of noble actions” (*Pol.* III. 9.1281a3). If this is true, then clearly the development of virtue in the individual is not only necessary for the realization of a good state; is the critical function of the state.

For Aristotle what we call virtue is connected to excellence and it is formed by habit [*ethos*]. While we may have a capacity for the various virtues, we acquire them only through first putting them into action (*NE* II. 1.1103a30). If we want to be courageous or just, we must perform courageous or just acts (*NE* II. 1.1103b2). Thus, our activities dictate our character. But virtues, concerned as they are with our emotions and our actions, can be destroyed by excess and by deficiency. For example, in striving for courage we may fall short and be cowardly, or we may be excessive and act recklessly. Thus we must find the mean or median and the way to do so is through a rational principle (*NE* II. 6.1106b15).

The role that reason plays in Aristotle's philosophy cannot be understated. Because the good life is an end towards which our desire is directed and the choices we make are motivated by our desire, it is only by employing our rational faculty that we may determine whether or not the choice is good, and indeed, whether or not our desire is correct. Emotion and appetite are notoriously ineffective when it comes to making good choices and, thus, for Aristotle, "Good choices are those which stem from intelligence motivated by desire, or desire operating through thought," not emotion (*NE VI. 2. 1139b4*). Indeed, it is emotion, though considered by Aristotle to be one of the three kinds of things found in the soul, which presents particular dangers to one's moral excellence, for along with appetite it has the power to overcome right reason, thus leading to moral weakness (*NE VII. 3.1147b2*). Moral strength, on the other hand, is connected not only to self-control, tenacity and steadfastness but to what Aristotle calls practical wisdom, for "A man of practical wisdom knows not only what he ought to do but also is able to act accordingly" (*NE VII.10.1152a8*).

If Aristotle places practical wisdom secondary to intelligence and theoretical wisdom as the best and pleasantest pursuit for man, indeed as that which defines man and brings him closest to the gods (*NE X. 7.1177b30,1178a5*), it is nonetheless practical wisdom which, being concerned with the affairs of man, figures in political life. Indeed, it is essential because politics requires a rational evaluation of what is good or bad for men and because it is concerned with action and deliberation (*NE VI. 8.1140b25-28*). That is, as Aristotle elaborates, "excellence in deliberation will be correctness in assessing what is conducive to the end [i.e. the good life] concerning which practical wisdom gives a true assessment" (*NE VI. 9.1142b33-35*). If we think of the function that deliberation plays in a government, especially a democracy, and the extent to which any real justice depends upon good deliberation, we can understand Aristotle's connection here. (And as Baird and Kaufman note, in Athens, those matters debated in the Council and the Popular Assembly were referred to as "deliberative" politics (410).)

To recall, for Aristotle, political society exists for the sake of noble actions and it is with this end in mind that he argues that "those who contribute most to society have a greater share in it than those who have the same or greater freedom or nobility of birth but are inferior to them in political virtue, or those who exceed them in wealth but are surpassed by them in virtue" (*Pol. III. 9.1281a5-8*). The rationale Aristotle employs here allows for differences in natural ability, privilege, class and virtue and also underscores his emphasis on virtuous action as the primary path to the good life. Moreover, it is reflective of the brand of participatory democracy Athens developed which differs broadly from our representational democracy, a form of government which takes as a premise the idea that "all men are created equal." This focus on virtue opens up participation to those who could not contribute under the Oligarchs, for example, or the "Thirty," not only because the primary claim to office of such leaders was wealth and nobility of birth and not political virtue, but also seems to indicate a tilt in favor of democracies, however linked they may be to aristocratic rule as Athenian democracy was under Pericles, because for Aristotle, only governments which have a regard to the common interest are in accordance with a strict principle of justice. Having said this, Aristotle is not a populist and though he argues that democracies support the good life in that they are more stable than oligarchies, he connects virtue and excellence to the higher

classes of society as can be seen by his exclusion of certain lower groups from eligibility for citizenship as he defines it.

In response to the need for stability in society and to combat the inequities and resulting injustices which naturally exist in all states where there is a stark division between the rich and the poor, Aristotle returns to the idea of the mean; on a social level, the mean finds its expression in the middle class. Because a life which is in a mean and is attainable by everyone is best (*Pol.* IV. 11.1295a35-40), Aristotle considers the middle class, existing as it does between the rich and the poor, as that most likely to be composed of equals and similars. As such it is therefore not only the most useful class to cities but also the most secure. Moreover, because democracies have a middle class that is more numerous and which has a greater share in the government, they are safer and more permanent than oligarchies (*Pol.* IV. 11. 1295b25-1296a15), a claim attested to in actuality by the relatively short rule of the Oligarchs and the “Thirty,” the latter of which had ruled just a generation before Aristotle’s birth in 384 B.C.

What Aristotle means by the middle class must be qualified, however, especially when we consider that Aristotle’s ideal state must be limited in size and that his middle class would be one composed solely of citizens, a term with distinct limitations compared to how it is used in a modern democracy. Aristotle’s citizen does not seem all that different from that favored by the oligarchic class; he (and of course, never she) would be propertied, enjoy good circumstances socially and morally, and come from one of only three distinct classes – the warrior, the councilor and the priest; indeed, Aristotle’s citizen would perform the function of each of these three different classes according to his stage of life. Other classes such as that composed by artisans and farmers “should have no share in the state” according to Aristotle for they neither have the leisure necessary for life in government nor do they produce excellence (*Pol.* VII. 9.1329a1).

At this point it is useful to gain a better idea of Athenian democracy in Aristotle’s day when the Golden Age of Greece was already in the past, for it was by no means a static reality but one which, according to Will Durant in *The Life of the Greeks*, operated in a state of bitter conflict between the oligarchic and democratic factions, a conflict that from Solon to the Roman conquest was “waged with oratory, votes, ostracism, assassinations and civil war.” Gone were such figures as Pericles, the Aristotelian ideal of the intelligent and incorruptible citizen-statesman who had managed to form a government that combined the “privileges of democracy with the advantages of aristocracy and dictatorship” and who had been elected and reelected by the Athenians for thirty years as one of their ten *stratego*i until eventually being voted into the position of highest power as commander in chief, or *stratego*i *autokrator* (249-255). In his wake came the brief reassertion of rule by the “ferocious oligarchic government of the “Thirty,” but, as Luciano Canfora observes in his essay, “The Citizen,” “The system based on guaranteeing the right of non-property owners to participate in citizenship had shown itself to be stronger [even] than the original nexus of democracy and sea power” which had first opened up citizenry to the lower classes without property, the *thetēs*, (129) and thus political power would swing in a dialectical arc between the oligarchic and the democratic factions until the final defeat of the Greek empire.

The main dispute between the oligarchic and democratic factions, the latter of which was composed of small businessmen, citizens who had become wage-workers and those who manned the merchant ships and Athenian fleet, centered on the issue of

extending the franchise to those without property, a criteria which would seem to place Aristotle in the camp of the oligarchs who also argued that ownership of property should be a critical requirement (*Pol.* VIII. 9.1329a18). Other criteria for citizenship remained unchallenged by either camp. Citizenship and the military and fiscal burdens of the state that went with it was limited to those freeborn males who had reached the age of twenty-one and who could boast Athenian parentage on both sides. It was only they and by extension their families that could enjoy civil rights. This meant that all women, slaves, and *metics*, or aliens, and nearly all workingmen and peasant proprietors, were excluded. Though the figures are purely conjectural, this means that a mere 43,000 out of an Attic population of perhaps 315,000 enjoyed political power in the form of *isonomia* and *isegoria*, that is, equal rights at law and in the Assembly (Durant 254). While this arrangement seems barely a democracy in our terms, when one considers the demands of a fully participatory democracy coupled with the physical difficulties of reaching Athens from the more remote parts of Attica, and when one imagines how limiting was the lack of a formal education for the larger share of the population, one can only admire the Greeks for the inroads they did make with this strikingly new form of government.

It is in this context that we can appreciate Aristotle's insistence on a life in conformity with virtue and excellence and that we can understand his support for a meritocratic kind of government which would restrict citizenship to the three classes mentioned earlier. Considering that each citizen not only voted but was expected to take his turn by lot and rote as magistrate, juror, or judge, that he must be free and able to serve the state at any time, and that each was by right a member of the *ekklesia*, or Assembly, and each, for at least one year of his life, a member of the *boule*, or Council – a sort of legislative committee - as well (Durant 255-260), we can understand Aristotle's insistence that the main share of the state be limited to soldier-statesmen from the propertied classes who had the leisure their position in society afforded, a leisure absolutely necessary for the deliberation upon which justice in the state depended. While on the surface this may seem grossly unjust, and while it would take another paper to explore the idea, we must ask if the opening up of citizenship, and thus deliberation and legislation, to the lower classes actually did lead to the decline of Athenian democracy.

Despite the defects of Athenian democracy which excluded even free women and children from the *isonomia* of the citizen and which allowed for the torture of slaves and capital punishment for minor offenses, as Durant points out, here for the first time in history was a government of laws and not of men (262.) It was a government, too, which produced leaders who did embody those virtues Aristotle extols – justice, self-control, courage, and temperance, among many others, in particular during its Golden Age. Moreover, the restrictions on citizenship notwithstanding, Aristotle's vision of the good life was one not entirely out of reach of those without political power. The direct kind of democracy the Athenians enjoyed not only allowed for efficient administration of the state but financed Greek drama, invested in great public works such as the construction of the Parthenon, and made itself responsible for the welfare of its people. Under such a government, the Athenians were availed of the opportunity “not only to live, but to live well” (Thucydides qtd in Durant 267). This would seem at least a start to the attainment of Aristotle's vision of the good life.

## Works Cited

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