CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

ARISTOTLE

The Politics

and

The Constitution of Athens
CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Introduction

The Politics is to be ranked amongst the greatest works of political philosophy. Not only does Aristotle provide a theory of the nature and the function of the state and an analysis of possible constitutional structures, but he also gives us detailed discussions of such subsidiary topics as equality, justice, property, citizenship and the causes of political stability and revolution. No philosopher before him had attempted to provide such a coherent and systematic study of the science of politics. Even more striking than the range and originality of the Politics is the consistent rigour and precision of its argument. Although there is indeed a powerful political theory to be found in the Politics, Aristotle rarely, if ever, allows the attraction of providing a systematic theory to lead him into smudging arguments or ignoring inconvenient evidence. As a pioneering natural as well as political scientist, Aristotle shows a proper respect for evidence and for precision in its analysis. The combination of this quality with an unsurpassed ability to see the philosophical implications of his subject-matter makes Aristotle a rare political theorist indeed.

It cannot be said, however, that the Politics is an easy work. Aristotle’s style is terse and economical. The very precision and complexity of its arguments place demands on the reader which Aristotle makes little attempt to palliate. It is widely believed – and may very well be true – that the surviving works of Aristotle, including the Politics, are lecture notes and that he would have been able, as he lectured, to expand on points which may seem obscure on the page. Even if this is true, its effect should not be
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over-emphasised. The argument of the Politics may lack rhetorical presentation, but the general effect of this is that the details of the argument are to be seen without a distorting polish. If the Politics is a difficult work, this is because the problems with which it deals are not such as to allow solutions that are both simple and true.

There is a more important factor which may obscure Aristotle’s account of the state to the reader who comes to the Politics for the first time, and this is the fact that Aristotle’s political theory is closely related to claims and types of explanation which he uses and justifies elsewhere in his works. It is not that one cannot understand the Politics without reading other works, but rather that the nature of Aristotle’s argument is more easily grasped if one has at least a tentative understanding of what he has to say, for instance, in the Physics about nature or the Ethics about human flourishing. In this introduction, as well as providing an outline of what I take to be Aristotle’s general political theory, I shall also try to describe, briefly, its connection with what he has to say elsewhere.

Aristotle

Aristotle was born in 384 BC in Stagira in Macedon. His father, Nicomachus, was physician to the family of Amyntas, the king of Macedon. It seems that Nicomachus died when Aristotle was young and that Aristotle was brought up under the guardianship of a man called Proxenus. In 367, when Aristotle was seventeen, he went to Athens to join the Academy, the school of Plato. He stayed there until Plato’s death in 347, when he left for Assos in Asia Minor, where he seems to have pursued the study of natural history in earnest, before moving to Lesbos. In 343, he returned to Macedon and was appointed by Amyntas’ son Philip, now himself king, to be tutor to Philip’s son Alexander. In 336 Philip was assassinated and was succeeded by Alexander, who continued to pursue his father’s ambitions for Macedonian hegemony in Greece. Aristotle returned to Athens in 335 to found his own school, the Lyceum. He remained in Athens until 322 and died in Chalce a year later.

Although Aristotle spent most of his life in Athens, his Mace-
donian origin prevented him from being a citizen there. There is a striking contrast between Aristotle’s political theory and his own status and associations. For Aristotle, as we shall see, citizenship in a state and participation in its political life was a precondition of achieving human flourishing – a precondition denied to Aristotle himself. Given the emphasis which he places upon the importance of citizenship, one cannot but be struck by his matter-of-fact description of the position of resident aliens within the state: ‘we call them citizens only in a qualified sense, as we might apply the term to children who are too young to be on the register, or to old men who are to be relieved of civic duties’ (III.1, 1275a14–16).

Striking also is that, despite his association with Philip and Alexander the Great, Aristotle takes the polis to be the perfect political unit. There is no support to be found in the pages of the Politicus for the Macedonian kings’ ambition to rule Greece and to found an empire. Aristotle does remark that if the Hellenic race were ‘formed into one state it would be able to rule the world’ (VII.7, 1327b32–3), but it is evident from what he has already said that he does not regard this as a desirable or a proper ambition: ‘Yet to a reflecting mind it must appear very strange that the statesman should always be considering how he can dominate and tyrannize over others, whether they are willing or not’ (VII.2, 1324b22–6).

Aristotle’s interests were all-encompassing. His surviving writings range from a systematic study of deductive inference to detailed descriptions of animal species. His work is scientific in that he is concerned to describe and explain the natural world – of which man is a part – and to provide the conceptual tools with which to do this. In the Politicus itself, we find a typical Aristotelian combination of conceptual analysis and attention to the facts. At the end of the Nicomachean Ethics, when Aristotle announces his move to the study of the state, he says that he will do so ‘in the light of the constitutions we have collected’ (1181b16–20). Underlying the theory of the Politicus are not just the ethical and scientific doctrines of the Ethics and Physics but the collection of 158 constitutions compiled by Aristotle and his colleagues in the Lyceum.

The Politicus must also be seen as part of a series of works in which Aristotle is concerned with human affairs. The most studied of these, at least in modern times, has been the Nicomachean Ethics.
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(NE). There is also a work called the Eudeman Ethics (EE) which has traditionally received less scholarly attention. In the nineteenth century it was considered to be by Aristotle’s pupil Eudemus rather than Aristotle himself but is now generally accepted as a genuine member of the Aristotelian corpus and, indeed, as important for the study of Aristotle’s ethical theory as the NE.

Only one of the constitutions collected by Aristotle’s school has survived – the Constitution of Athens. This contains both a political history of Athens and a description of the constitution as it stood at the time of writing – although there is some reason to think that the work was updated to keep up with further constitutional changes. According to a recent and major commentary, ‘as a historian [the author] is mediocre (though by no means useless to us), but as a describer of constitutional practice he is first in the field’.1 The Constitution of Athens has not come down to us with the other works of Aristotle but exists on two papyri. On neither is the text explicitly attributed to Aristotle, and its identification as the Aristotelian Constitution of Athens was made at the end of the nineteenth century. Whilst there is no serious doubt that it did indeed form part of the Lyceum’s collection of constitutions, it is not clear whether it was written by Aristotle himself or one of his students. This does not affect its usefulness. Whether or not Aristotle wrote all 158 constitutions, he certainly authorised them and made use of them in the writing of the Politics.

Aristotle’s method and the collection of constitutions

Indeed, Aristotle’s interest in the work of earlier legislators is motivated by more than the desire to provide historical examples to illustrate his arguments. In the Politics, as throughout the Aristotelian corpus, he takes the beliefs of his predecessors, along with people’s ordinary beliefs, to have evidential value, and this is central to his method of inquiry. He gives an explicit statement of this method at the start of his discussion of akrasia in Book VII of the NE:

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We must, as in all other cases, set the appearances before us and, after first discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the opinions about these affections or, failing this, of the greatest number and the most important, for if we both resolve the difficulties and leave the opinions undisturbed, we shall have proved the case sufficiently.

(vii 1, 1145b1–7)

The starting-points of Aristotle’s inquiry are provided by experience – the appearances – and by what people have believed about the matter in question. Taken together, of course, these may contain inconsistencies and so present the difficulties which the theorist must resolve. People may have disagreed, for instance, about the nature of akrasia or what constitution the state should have, and particular theoretical claims may conflict with what is obviously the case. Indeed, as one’s beliefs become more theoretical and thus less immediately grounded in experience, in the way things appear, so there is greater vulnerability to error. As his criticism of Plato in Politics II makes clear, Aristotle himself is perfectly aware that too unguarded an enthusiasm for theorising is quite as likely to take one away from the truth as it is to help one to attain it.

Theoretical success consists in resolving the difficulties presented by the appearances and people’s existing beliefs: ‘the solution of the difficulty is the discovery of the truth’ (NE vii.2, 1146b6–8). This is not because Aristotle thinks that evaluative or normative beliefs are capable only of some lesser type of truth than, say, scientific beliefs. The method of ‘saving the appearances’ is one he follows in the physical and psychological treatises as well as in the Ethics and Politics. Rather, Aristotle believes that human beings are naturally sensitive to the way things are and so accepts that there is a presumption that our experience, and the beliefs to which it gives rise, will be true. He does not, of course, take that presumption to be indefeasible and does not deny that the world can be other than it appears or that we can hold false beliefs about it. He does accept, however, that if something is generally believed, or is believed by someone who has thought seriously about an issue, this is at least a sign of its truth – and this is why he makes it a requirement on the theorist who would deny the truth of some such belief that he should explain why
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someone should have held that belief in the first place (see *Physics* IV.4, 211a7–11).

A good example of this occurs in *Politics* III.9, where Aristotle discusses justice and has to deal with the fact that there are differences between oligarchic and democratic conceptions of justice. He begins by claiming that ‘all men cling to justice of some kind’, but notes that there is disagreement concerning what justice is: ‘their conceptions are imperfect and they do not express the whole idea’. Whereas some think that justice is equality, others think it lies in inequality. Aristotle must thus resolve this contradiction and, importantly, he also seeks to explain why such disagreement should occur at all. In this case, people disagree ‘because they are bad judges in their own affairs’ and also ‘because both the parties to the argument are speaking of a limited and partial justice, but imagine themselves to be speaking of absolute justice’ (1280a20–2).

Thus, Aristotle’s motivation for generally beginning his works by canvassing, and criticising, the views of his predecessors is not simply an antiquarian one. He regards them as having been engaged in the same inquiries as he is himself and so takes it that their conclusions will deserve to be assessed seriously to see if they are true. Even when they do go wrong, determining precisely where and why they go wrong will itself help in seeing where the truth lies.

Whilst earlier thinkers had written a great deal about many of the subjects which Aristotle deals with, political science had been comparatively neglected by earlier Greek thinkers. So, at the end of what is in effect the prologue to the *Politics*, the final chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he says that ‘our predecessors have left the subject of legislation unexamined’ (1181b12–13). This is an exaggeration, as Aristotle’s criticism of Plato and others in *Politics* II itself makes evident. Nevertheless, what he goes on to say is revealing of what he takes his sources to be for the examination of existing beliefs about his subject.

First, then, if anything has been said well in detail by earlier thinkers, let us try to review it, then in the light of the constitutions we have collected let us study what sorts of influence preserve and destroy states, and what sorts preserve or destroy the particular kinds of constitution, and to what causes it is due that some are well and others ill administered. When these have been studied we
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shall perhaps be more likely to see which constitution is best, and how each must be ordered, and what laws and customs it must use.

(1181b13–22)

This is echoed at the start of Politics II, when Aristotle says that his purpose is ‘to consider what form of political community is best of all for those who are most able to realise their ideal of life’, and so he must ‘examine not only [the perfect state] but other constitutions, both such as actually exist in well-governed states, and any theoretical forms which are held in high esteem, so that what is good and useful may be brought to light’ (1260b25–31).

Politics II indeed provides the clearest example of the method, for it consists precisely of an examination of Plato’s two differing accounts of the ideal state in the Republic and the Laws, and of the theoretical constitutions developed by Phaleas and Hippodamus as well as the actual constitutions of Sparta and Crete. The project in the Politics is to determine what is the best constitution: how the state should be set up if it is best to fulfil its purpose. Existing states are seen to be attempts at doing this, and the study of these has the additional advantage that the political scientist can find out the actual effects of different kinds of constitution and law. The Constitution of Athens duly falls into two parts: in the first half the author provides a history of the development of the Athenian state and, in the second, a description of the constitution as it then was. Although we do not possess the other constitutions collected by Aristotle’s school, it seems likely that they too contained both historical and constitutional material. Certainly, the Politics deploys both kinds of information in the development of its theory of the state.

The polis and the state

I have described Aristotle as providing a theory of the nature and function of the state. Some would contest this claim on the grounds of anachronism Aristotle’s subject, they would say, is not the state, but the historically specific ‘city-state’ – the polis.2 If

2 Plural poleis
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this complaint were true, it would certainly have the effect of limiting the interest of the Politics, as the practical purpose Aristotle intends for it would be not be one which we could any longer pursue ourselves. His discussion might tell us a great deal about the government of ancient cities but it will not cast light, other than accidentally, upon the nature and proper authority of later political institutions.

The idea that Aristotle's political interests are historically constrained in this way is not unmotivated. Not only were the societies which Aristotle knew, and whose constitutions he collected, generally cities, but he himself actually denies that a polis can function effectively if it becomes too large – where too large seems to be the size where a herald cannot make himself heard to all (1326b6) or the citizens are too numerous to know each other's characters (1326b14–15). If a polis consists of too many people, it will be self-sufficient only as a nation, an ethnos, since it will be 'almost incapable of constitutional government' (1326b4–5). If these claims were part of the definition of the polis, then we would have to accept that the Politics provides a theory of a political institution which has now all but died out. In fact, however, as Aristotle's acknowledgement at 1326b11 that deciding the possible size of the polis is a matter of experience suggests, these claims about size of population are quite contingent, and it is clear from Aristotle's formal account of the polis in Book III that his theory is not restricted in its application to those poleis that happen to be cities.

In III.3 Aristotle raises the question of how poleis are to be individuated. This has both theoretical and practical significance. It is theoretically important because it is clearly a basic requirement of a theory of the state that it should specify what it is for something to be a state. Its practical importance lies in the fact that, as Aristotle recognises, when there is dispute over whether one state is the same as another (after a revolution, for instance), it becomes a matter of dispute whether contracts in which the original state had been a party are still valid.

Aristotle considers and rejects two possible answers. According to the first, a polis is identified by its place and on the second by its inhabitants. The first will not do because it is too vague:
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When are men, living in the same place, to be regarded as a single polis — what is the limit? Certainly not the wall of the polis, for you might surround all Peloponnesus with a wall.

(1276a24–7)

One can mark out a place which contains a group of people but the society which occupies that place will not thereby have the unity needed for a polis. Nor can one identify a polis with its citizens, as these can change without bringing about the demise of the polis.

Aristotle’s own answer is that the polis should be identified with its constitution:

Since the polis is a partnership, and is a partnership of citizens in a constitution, when the form of government changes, and becomes different, then it may be supposed that the polis is no longer the same . . . And in this manner we speak of every union or composition of elements as different when the form of their composition alters.

(1276b1–4, 6–8)

A polis is a composition of elements — the citizens — but, as a composition, its identity is determined not by reference to its constituents but to the way in which they are structured: we speak of the same state by attending to its constitution (1276b9–11).

Aristotle’s analysis here is a particular application of his more general distinction between the form of a substance and its matter. The form of an object is given by specifying what it is to be the sort of thing it is, and the matter is what instantiates that form. Thus, to take an example from the Metaphysics, the form of a particular bronze sphere is being spherical and its matter is the bronze. Even this simple example, however, highlights an apparent difficulty in Aristotle’s identification of the polis with its constitution — which is that it is in principle possible for two different poleis to share the same constitution. Clearly, two different particular spheres will instantiate the same form: what will distinguish them will be that that form is instantiated by different matter. Similarly, two different states could have the same form — the same constitution — but be different because each is differently instantiated, i.e. has a different citizenry.
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It is perhaps to allow room to deal with this difficulty that Aristotle claims only that the state is chiefly determined by its constitution, thus allowing other factors to be brought in. If this leaves a gap in the account, it is one that is easily filled: at any one time, one can identify a particular polis as the instantiation of a constitution by a particular set of citizens. Once this identification has been made, it is not necessary for the citizenry to remain constant if the polis is to persist, but it is necessary that its form of government should not change. This provides the necessary asymmetry between the constitution and the citizenry to support Aristotle’s giving priority to the former rather than the latter.

It is because any polis is a particular governmental arrangement of citizens that Aristotle is so concerned both to provide an account of the various possible kinds of government and also, at the beginning of III, to establish what it is to be a citizen.

He who would inquire into the essence and attributes of various types of government must first of all determine what a polis is. But a polis is composite, like any other whole made up of many parts—these are the citizens who compose it. It is evident, therefore, that we must begin by asking, Who is the citizen, and what is the meaning of that term?

(1274b32–4, 1274b38–1275a2)

This again turns out to be a less straightforward matter than one might at first have thought. So, one cannot, for instance, just take a citizen of a polis to be an inhabitant of the territory occupied by the polis; otherwise, resident aliens and slaves would count as citizens (1275a7–8). What, on Aristotle’s view, is distinctive of the citizen of a state, as opposed to a member of some society, is the right to participate in the administration of justice and government (1275a22–33). Thus, he concludes, ‘he who has the power to take part in the deliberative or judicial administration of any state is said by us to be a citizen of that polis, and, speaking generally, a polis is a body of citizens sufficing for the purposes of life’ (1275b18–21).

There is obviously nothing in this definition of the polis which is such as to restrict it in principle to the city-state. Any association will count as a polis, so long as it has a constitution, i.e. it is unified under a government. If Aristotle would not count modern states
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as poleis, this would not just be because they are not cities. If what it is for something to be a polis is for it to be a society unified by a single constitution, then there is no reason in principle why a much larger society than a city should not be a polis. Aristotle's subject in the Politics is neither the nature of the city, nor even of the 'city-state', but of a society unified under a government – and the closest notion we have to capture this is that of the state.

The state and nature

To be a citizen is to be a citizen of some particular state, which is why, for instance, 'he who is a citizen in a democracy will often not be a citizen in an oligarchy' (III.1, 1275a3–5). A state is thus, as Aristotle claims more than once, prior to its citizens, as 'the whole is of necessity prior to the part' (I.2, 1253a20). This claim is actually used in Book VIII to justify the state's rather than parents' taking charge of the education of children, since 'the neglect of education does harm to the constitution' and 'the training in things which are of common interest should be the same for all' (1337a13–14; 26–7): we must not 'suppose that anyone of the citizens belongs to himself, for they all belong to the state, and are each of them a part of the state, and the care of each part is inseparable from the care of the whole' (1337a27–9). Now, it is one thing to maintain that the state is definitionally prior to its citizens but quite another to claim that it is prior to the people who are its citizens. Any club is prior to its members but this does not itself entitle it to direct their lives – and certainly not the lives of their children. The difference, for Aristotle, is that whilst it will be a contingent matter whether people are members of types of association such as clubs, they are naturally, and hence necessarily, such as to be citizens of a state. Thus, the state is actually 'by nature prior to the family and the individual' (12, 1253a18–19). To see why this is so, one needs to see how Aristotle justifies what is perhaps the central thesis of the Politics – that the state is itself a natural institution.

Aristotle's first move is to provide an account of the development of human society, claiming that 'he who thus considers things in their first growth and origin, whether a state or anything else, will obtain the clearest view of them' (1242a24–5). The state
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is presented as the culmination of a series of human associations, each of which is the natural successor to the one before.

The first stage of the process leading to the state consists of two necessary relations: marriage and slavery. These are necessary because they are between ‘those who cannot live without each other’ (1252a26). Marriage is not the result of choice but of instinct: ‘in common with other animals and with plants, mankind has a natural desire to leave behind them an image of themselves’ (1252a29–30). In contrast, the relation between master and slave is strictly necessary only for the slave, since the ‘natural slave’ does not himself possess reason, and so needs to be directed by those who do, whereas those people who cannot afford slaves can make do with animals instead.

The two relations of marriage and slavery are treated as basic and together they constitute the first type of association – the family. Since the family consists of natural relations, it is itself a natural association: ‘The family is the association established by nature for the supply of men’s everyday wants’ (1252b12–14). As the population expands through reproduction, so the next type of association arises – the village. This, which is simply the combination of several families, is also a natural association and the first one which ‘aims at something more than the supply of daily needs’ (1252b15–16). The end of this process of social development is the state itself, which comes into existence when ‘several villages are united in a single complete community, large enough to be nearly or quite self-sufficing’ (1252b28).

Now, it might seem that it is this developmental account of the state which is supposed to justify the claim that the state is natural:

And therefore, if the earlier forms of society are natural, so is the state, for it is the end of them, and the nature of a thing is its end. For what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature, whether we are speaking of a man, a horse, or a family. Besides, the final cause and end of a thing is the best, and to be self-sufficing is the end and the best. Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal (1252b30–1253a3).

If this is Aristotle’s argument, however, it is problematic. He
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argues that the state is a natural society if the earlier social forms were natural – but the implication here is far from obvious. It is plausible enough to claim that the family comes about as the result of natural human instincts and needs, and that villages will arise as families multiply. In other words, the simple desire for sex or reproduction will indeed lead to the growth of families and then of villages. The state, however, is more than a collection of villages. What is distinctive of the state is, at least in part, that it has a constitution. This, however, is something which is indeed the result of deliberation and choice, and so a matter of artifice rather than nature. Indeed, if states were institutions which just happened to come about without planning, the project of the Politics would itself be beside the point.

Of course, Aristotle does not claim in 1.2 that the state arises spontaneously – and the purpose of the argument in 1.2 might be taken to be precisely to secure the naturalness of the state despite the fact that it is the result of deliberation. The state would be natural because it constitutes the end of the process of social development – a process whose origins are natural. As the culmination of a natural process, the state could be seen to be natural, even though the particular move from a collection of villages to the state is one which takes thought. In fact, however, Aristotle could not deploy this argument without begging the question. For although the state is indeed natural because it is the ‘end’, the telos, of the process of social development and ‘what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature’, it is not the end in virtue of constituting the necessary finishing-point of that process. As Aristotle acknowledges, states can themselves proceed to degenerate into unnatural associations, such as empires. This does not count against the claim that the state is the telos of human society, since in fact that term signifies not the final point of the process of change but its culmination. The nature of a thing is what it is when fully developed – ‘whether we are speaking of a man, a horse, or a family’ – and what it is for something to be ‘fully developed’ is not for it to have reached its final stages. To see why this is so, it is important to recognise the role which natures play in Aristotelian explanation.

The question of how to specify the nature of a substance is raised in Physics and Aristotle canvasses two opposed answers:
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Some identify the nature or substance of a natural object with the immediate constituent of it which taken by itself is without arrangement, e.g. the wood is the nature of the bed, and the bronze the nature of the statue . . . Another account is that nature is the shape or form which is specified in the definition of the thing (193a10–12; 30–1)

As his refusal to identify the state with its citizenry will already have made clear, Aristotle accepts the second of these – 'the form indeed is nature rather than the matter' (193b7) His preference here is well motivated, if not uncontroversial. Simply, his thought is that to understand the behaviour of complex natural things, we cannot simply describe them in terms of their constitutive stuffs but must treat as basic the fact that they are particular types of thing

This is apparent in the treatment of growth

What grows qua growing grows from something into something. What, then, is growing? Not that from which it arose but that to which it tends.

(193b16–17)

What is the substance that starts off as an acorn and grows into an oak tree? Aristotle's answer is that it is an oak tree. If we want to understand why the acorn changes as it does, we have to explain it in terms of its potential for becoming the oak tree. A substance's nature, on Aristotle's view, is an inner principle of change. The acorn changes as it does because it has the nature it does – and that nature cannot be understood other than as a potential oak tree. So, when Aristotle claims in Politics 1.2 that the state is natural because it is the end of the process of social development, he is placing his theory of the state in the context of his general account of natural change.

It is the fact that one will need to appeal to a substance's nature in order to explain its development which allows Aristotle to distinguish between something's telos and the condition in which it happens to end up. Many people's eyes, for instance, deteriorate with age, but we will not make reference to defective eyes in giving an account of what it is to be an eye: we will explain the development of the eye by reference to its function, and a fully developed eye will be one which performs this function properly. The notion
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of an ‘end’ here is teleological rather than temporal – natural change will not be properly explained unless its purpose is made clear.

For those things are natural which, by a continuous movement originated from an internal principle, arrive at some end . . . It is absurd to suppose that purpose is not present because we do not observe the agent deliberating . . . If, therefore, purpose is present in art, it is also present in nature.

(Physics 199b16–17; 26–7, 29–30)

The telos is not the point at which the process of growth happens to finish, it is that point which the whole process was for: we will not understand the process without seeing it as aiming towards that point. It is not, of course, that Aristotle imagines the work of some external or divine agent. The ‘nature’ here is just the – quite non-conscious – nature of the thing in question. It is the nature of an acorn to grow into an oak tree and so, Aristotle believes, we can properly talk of such growth as purposeful. Its changes take place for the sake of its becoming an oak tree and cannot be understood otherwise.

There is, however, an obvious difference between an institution such as the state and a natural substance such as an oak tree. When an acorn grows into an oak tree, there is a persisting subject of change throughout the process – and there is nothing in the development of the state which is analogous to this. Aristotle takes it to be a good of the acorn to realise its nature – to fulfil its potential to mature into an oak tree. The development of the oak tree is to be explained by reference to the good of the oak tree itself. The coming into being of the state, in contrast, is to be explained by reference to the good of its citizens: its claim to be a natural institution is justified because it can and should be explained by reference to human nature. What secures the status of the state as the telos of the process of social development is that it is the state rather than any other type of association which is able to allow its members to achieve the best life of which they are naturally capable.

The process of social development originates ‘in the bare needs of life’ and continues in existence ‘for the sake of a good life’ (1252b30). Each association in the process leading to the state is
marked out by what it provides for the members of that association. The family supplied everyday wants. The village ‘aimed’ at ‘something more than the supply of daily needs’ and, now, the state exists for the sake of the good life. Aristotle’s view of social and political association is firmly teleological: each type of association is explained by reference to what it is for, where this is some human good. It does not matter for the naturalness of the state that it is instituted through deliberation and choice – it is because humans are by nature political animals that the state is a natural institution. So, that a particular person’s health may be a product of the doctor’s skill – and so in some sense artificial – does not mean that his healthy condition is an unnatural one. Similarly, whilst the fact that the state has to be instituted by means of political skill means that in one sense states are artificial, its necessary role in allowing the proper development of its citizens entitles its claim to be a natural association.

The state and *eudaimonia*

Aristotle’s argument for the claim that the state is natural does not, then, rely on the account of its development but is rather derived from his view of human nature, according to which people are necessarily such as to be citizens, and hence parts of a state. The state is prior to the individual *by nature* because humans must be part of a state if their needs are to be met. That the state is natural is evident because

the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing, and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole. But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god. He is no part of a state.

\[(1253a2-3)\]

Self-sufficiency (*autarketa*) here is evidently not a purely economic notion. In *NE* 1.7, Aristotle defines the self-sufficient as ‘that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing’ (1097b14–15) and claims that this is what *eudaimonia* – traditionally translated as ‘happiness’ or ‘the good life’ – must be. Humans are not self-sufficient since they need the company of other people and membership of the state if they are to achieve a life that is
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self-sufficient Since that life must be complete, and so must not lack determinate types of good, and since not all goods are economic goods, the state’s self-sufficiency requires more than that it meet the economic needs of its citizens.

In Politics vii 5, when Aristotle is discussing how much land the state should own, he lays down the general condition that it should have the sort of land which will enable it to be most self-sufficient and concludes that ‘in extent and magnitude the land ought to be of a size that will enable its inhabitants to live a life of liberal and prudent leisure’ (1326b31–3). Thus, a state will be self-sufficient when it can produce enough to enable its citizens to have leisure. In viii 3, Aristotle contrasts leisure with business—the latter is pursued for the sake of the former since it is leisure which contains pleasure and happiness (1338a2–3). A state will certainly need to be self-sufficient economically, but full self-sufficiency will consist in its enabling its citizens to achieve the wide range of goods necessary for eudaimonia.

It is part of the definition of the state that it has the purpose of securing the happiness of its citizens. This may seem an anodyne claim to modern ears, to which talk of the pursuit of ‘happiness’ can sound rather vacuous. There are two aspects of Aristotle’s theory, however, which together save it from vacuity and at the same time give the state a proper interest in promoting its citizens’ virtue. The first is that Aristotle takes the purpose of the state to enable its citizens to lead the good life, and the second is his account of the good life itself.

The reason why it can seem trivial to claim that everybody desires happiness, and that the state has an interest in promoting the happiness of its citizens, is that we now tend to think of happiness as involving merely the satisfaction of desires which the individual already has or happens to acquire. What counts as happiness for one person can differ from what counts as happiness for another and happiness will thus be more or less difficult to achieve depending on the particular aspirations of the individual. If, for instance, someone sees no reason to be virtuous and does not want to act virtuously, then whatever reason there will be for legislating so as to encourage him to act virtuously, this will not be derived from a concern for securing his happiness.

Aristotle duly recognises that people disagree about the nature
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of happiness. Although everyone agrees that eudaimonia is indeed the highest good, there is disagreement about what it actually is.

For the [general run of men] think that it is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth or honour, they differ, however, from one another – and often even the same man identifies it with different things, with health when he is ill, with wealth when he is poor.

(NE 1.4, 1095a21–5)

Such disagreement, moreover, is naturally reflected in disagreement about what makes a state a good state:

those who hold that the well-being of the individual consists in his wealth, also think that riches make the happiness of the whole city, and those who value most highly the life of a tyrant deem that city the happiest which rules over the greatest number, while they who approve an individual for his excellence say that the more excellent a city is, the happier it is

(Politics v 2, 1324b8–13)

There are two possible responses to such disagreement. One is to take it to be an indication that the question at issue does not admit of an objective answer, the other is to treat the disagreement as something which should be resolved and so to maintain that at least one of the disputing parties must be in error. In most cases of disagreement it will be fairly obvious which of these responses will be the correct one. In the case of evaluative disagreement, however, it is much less obvious – or at least much more controversial – which response is correct.

According to a certain kind of subjectivism, someone is happy if they are contented and they will be contented if (sufficiently many of) the desires they have are satisfied. Rather than things being desirable because they are valuable, they are taken to be valuable just because they are desired – and what things are desired will depend upon the particular circumstances and character of each person. For Aristotle, on the other hand, the question of what is worth pursuing is an objective one, and this is of the greatest importance for his whole political theory. It will be obvious that the state will have a very different function if its purpose is to enable, and encourage, its citizens to lead the good life – where what such a life consists in is taken to be objective and
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determinable – than if its role is merely to ensure certain economic essentials and to help its citizens to live as they want.

It is important to recognise that Aristotle’s project in the *Politics* begins in the ethical treatises. Even though there is, for instance, little or nothing in the *NE* about the organisation and structure of political communities, Aristotle treats the enquiry in which he is engaged there as part of political science. This is precisely because the primary object of that enquiry is the concern of the political scientist. Determining the nature of the ‘highest end’ of action, *eudaimonia*, is the business of ‘that which is most truly the master art’; political science.

For even if the end is the same for a single man and for a state, that of the state seems at all events something greater and more complete both to attain and to preserve, for though it is worthwhile to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for states. These, then, are the ends at which our enquiry, being concerned with politics, aims.

*(NE 12, 1094b7–12)*

The *NE*, whose task is to determine what it is for an individual to achieve the good life, is thus a prolegomenon to the *Politics*, where Aristotle takes up the question of how to institute the state so as to attain *eudaimonia* for all its citizens. Knowing what the good life consists in is a necessary part of political science. If the very purpose of the state is to enable its citizens to achieve *eudaimonia*, one could hardly properly engage in the project of instituting the state if one were ignorant of what it is to achieve.

In Book I of the *NE*, Aristotle argues that there is a ‘final end’ of human action and that this is *eudaimonia*. He points out that whilst all actions are performed in order to achieve some good, some goods are merely instrumental, i.e. are desirable only as a means to some further end. Not everything can be chosen for the sake of something else, however, or ‘at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain’ (1094b20–1). So, although we desire some things only because they will be instrumental in achieving other things, there must be some goods which are desired in themselves. To put it in slightly different terms: unless there is *something* which is intrinsically
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valuable, then nothing will be of any value at all, even instrumentally

To claim that there must be something which is worth doing or having for itself, however, is one thing. To claim that there is a highest end of action for the sake of which everything else is done is quite another – and it has seemed to some that Aristotle fails to distinguish these claims. The fallacy which threatens is obvious enough, just as if one were to move, for instance, from the proposition that every person has a father to the conclusion that there is only one father and he is the father of everyone.

Fortunately, the threat of fallacy is averted once we understand what Aristotle’s claim that *eudaimonia* is the final end of actions amounts to. One way – no doubt the most obvious – of taking such a claim would be to treat it as similar, say, to the hedonist’s claim that everything is done for the sake of pleasure. Here the hedonist postulates a simple goal for all actions: take any action at all and one will discover that it was performed in order to get pleasure. If this is the sort of thing which Aristotle intends then he certainly provides us with no reason at all to believe it. In fact, his thesis is not like this at all. He does not need, or intend, to deny that there is a plurality of things which are desirable in themselves. Nor, to support the thesis that all actions are done for the sake of *eudaimonia*, does he need, or intend, to claim that there is only one type of motivation for human action.

Consider this passage from *NE* 1.7:

We call complete without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else. Now such a thing *eudaimonia* is held to be, for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of *eudaimonia*, judging that through them we shall be happy.

(1097a35–b5)

Aristotle explicitly allows here that honour, pleasure, reason and the other virtues are chosen for themselves – that if an action will achieve honour or pleasure or is a virtuous action, this is *reason enough* to do it. This is compatible with the thesis that there is a single highest end of action precisely because that end, *eudaimonia*,

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is not a simple good in the way that, say, pleasure is. Eudaimonia is the good life and, as such, it is composite, not simple. Honour, pleasure and the rest are parts of the good life because they are themselves of intrinsic value.

Eudaimonia is not something else over and above these things but rather a unified life constituted by them. To achieve it is to attain a life which is ‘complete’ and lacking in nothing of value. Someone who pursued honour, say, or pleasure to the exclusion of other genuine goods would not achieve happiness because his life would lack those goods and so be incomplete. To lead a happy life, one needs both to recognise what things are of value and to unify the pursuit of these into a coherent whole. This requires the exercise of what Aristotle calls phronesis – ‘practical wisdom’ – which is ‘a rational disposition to act with regard to human goods’ (NE VI.5, 1140b20–1). ‘It is thought to be a mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general’ (1140a25–8).

Determining what is the good life is something about which people can go wrong – most often, perhaps, because they fail to see the value in some class of goods. Practical wisdom requires experience: one cannot judge properly what is valuable and what is not unless one has been suitably trained. For instance, those who cannot see the reason to act virtuously, and so cannot see the value in virtuous action, have not received a proper moral education – just as those who cannot see the value in music or painting have not received a proper aesthetic education. The life of both the vicious person and the philistine will be diminished because there are things of value in which they cannot participate precisely because they are blind to their value. In neither case can one offer an argument to them in order to show their evaluative blindness – what they lack is the ability to understand what it is for something to be just or elegant or whatever, and thus also the appreciation of why it is good to act justly rather than unjustly or for something to be elegant rather than clumsy. The acquisition of such cognitive abilities comes not through argument but through training and experience.

This is why Aristotle lays such stress on the role of the state.
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In determining the education of children ‘since the whole city has one end, it is manifest that education should be one and the same for all, and that it should be public, and not private – not as at present, when everyone looks after his own children separately, and gives them separate instruction of the sort which he thinks best’ (viii 1, 1337a21–6). Since it is better to be virtuous than to be vicious, and so virtue is of value, one cannot be happy unless one is virtuous A child who is not educated to see the value in virtuous activity will thus be incapable of achieving the good life. Given that anyone’s primary interest is to be happy, the interests of the child require that its education should not be left entirely to the vagaries of its parents’ evaluative abilities.

Since moral education involves not the inculcation of rules of behaviour but rather the acquisition of evaluative concepts, it needs to be directed by those who already possess those concepts. What is important is that the child learns to act in certain predetermined ways but that he should come to understand the reasons for virtuous actions and recognise when they are relevant to action. Once he has achieved this, habituation will lead him to take pleasure in virtuous activity for its own sake. It is at this point that he will have become a virtuous agent and so be capable of the good life. Aristotle does not think that virtue is either identical with or sufficient for happiness, but it is its central component.

This is why the state, since its purpose is to enable the happiness of its citizens, has a proper interest in shaping their character rather than simply in directing their actions. It is in doing this that it allows them properly to realise their natures, since the distinctive feature of human nature is the capacity for phronesis and thus for virtue. What distinguishes us from other ‘gregarious creatures’ is that we have speech – and ‘the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and the inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and unjust’ (1 2, 1253a14–15).

It is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and of the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state (1253a15–18).

Although the capacity to acquire this sense is indeed natural and innate, its realisation requires participation in an association whose
very ‘principle of order’ is the administration of justice (1253a37–9). Only those who are not capable of virtue have no need of the state – which is why if there were anyone who was actually self-sufficient, he would be either ‘a beast or a god’ (1253a29). Animals are not capable of moral perception and the only activity of the gods is that of the theoretical intellect. Only humans have both social dealings and the ability to regulate their behaviour in accordance with virtue.

For Aristotle, then, the question of how to live well is one which admits of an objective answer and, since the purpose of the state is to enable its citizens to achieve well-being, the best government will be one whose members are best equipped to know how to fulfil that purpose. The role of the government of a state is to act in the interests of the citizens but this need not be the same as acting according to their wishes, since those in power may have a better idea of what is in the interest of the citizens than they do themselves. So, whilst Aristotle is not unsympathetic to allowing ‘the many’ to take executive decisions, this is not because he thinks that each person has the right to participate in the administration of the state but because, although the individuals of the many may not be good men, ‘when they meet together they may be better than the few good men, if regarded not individually but collectively’ (III.11, 1281b1–2). A large collection of individuals may exercise better judgement than a small group, even if the individual members of the latter are each wiser than those of the former. Their claim to authority rests on their collective expertise, however, and not on their forming a majority of the citizenry. When it turns out that ‘a whole family, or some individual, happens to be so pre-eminent in excellence as to surpass all others, then it is just that they should be the royal family and supreme over all, or that this one citizen should be king’ (III.17, 1288a15–19). In practice, however, ‘kings have no marked superiority over their subjects’ (VII.14, 1332b24–5) and so in the ideal state, ‘it is obviously necessary on many grounds that all the citizens alike should take their turn of governing and being governed’ (1332b25–7). This accords with the principle of justice that equals should be treated similarly.

Whether the government of the state is in the hands of one person, a few or the many, its function is the same. That is why