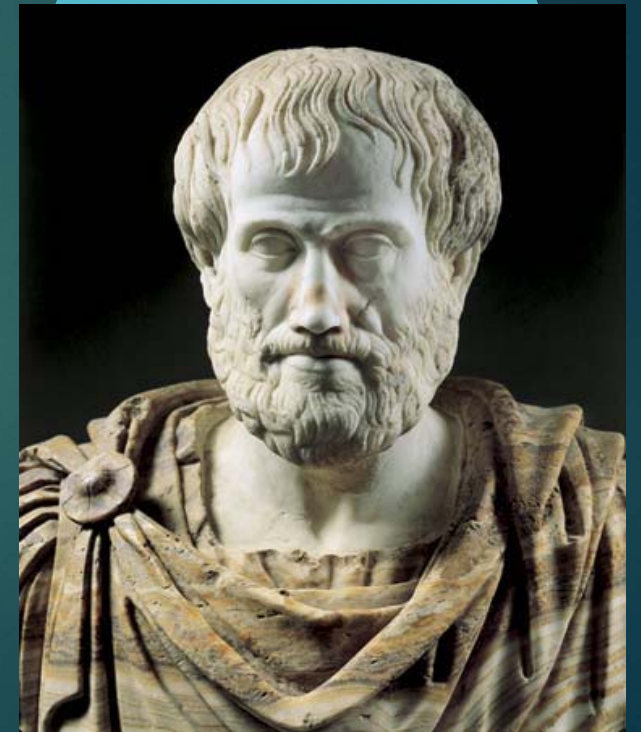
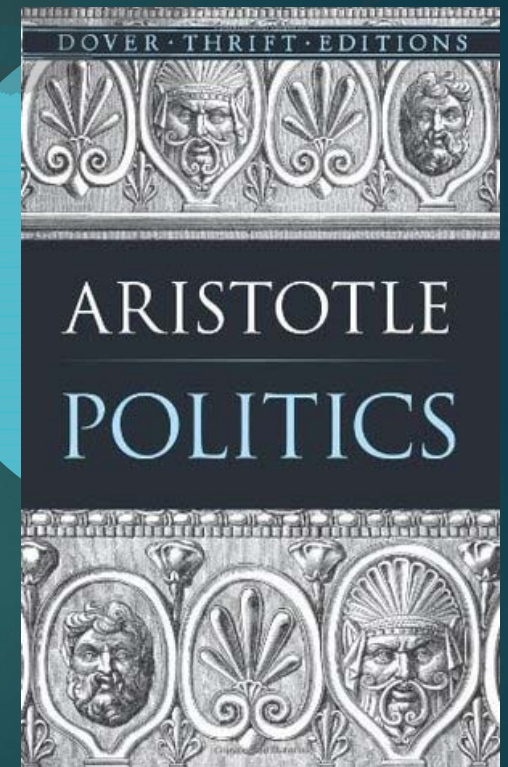


Aristotle's Political Philosophy



Introducing Aristotle and *The Politics*

- ▶ 4th century BCE philosopher.
- ▶ *The Politics* is his most well-known work of political philosophy.
- ▶ Concerned with political notions such as the state, citizenship, types of government, property, justice, equality and education.
- ▶ Aristotle's political theory can be seen as complementary to ethical theory put forward in *Nicomachean Ethics*.



Ethics and teleology

- ▶ *The Politics* can be seen as political theory companion to ethical theory in *Nicomachean Ethics*.
- ▶ At the core of Aristotle's philosophy is ethical view of 'the good life'.
- ▶ Everything has a telos, or purpose.
- ▶ The purpose of humanity is the attainment of Eudaimonia, or happiness.
- ▶ The purpose of the city-state is to assist in the attainment of Eudaimonia.

eudaimonia

(n.) lit. "human flourishing"; a contented state of being happy and healthy and prosperous

pronunciation | "U-de-'mOn-E-a

ENGLISH | ORIGIN: GREEK

Community and the city-state

- ▶ Quasi-historical and natural account of the origins and development of the city-state.
- ❖ Humans combine in pairs for reproduction and self-preservation;
- ❖ Household emerges to meet everyday needs;
- ❖ Households join to form village;
- ❖ Villages join to form complete community.

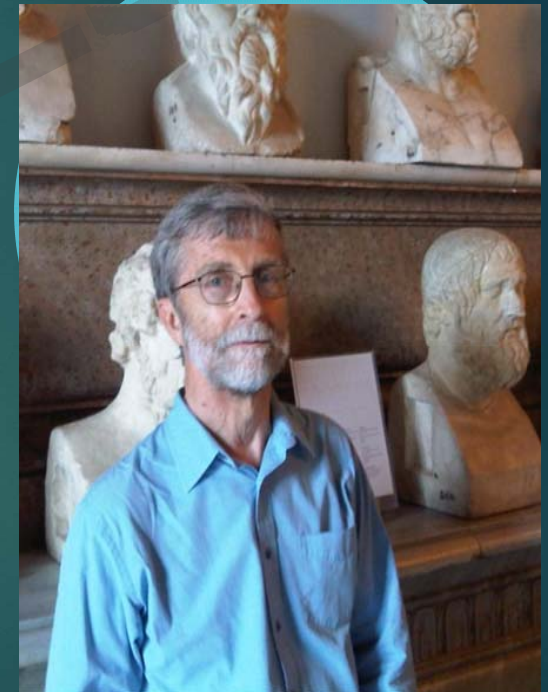


'it comes to be for the sake of life, and exists for the sake of the good life'

(Pol, 1.2.1252b27-30).

Equality and slavery

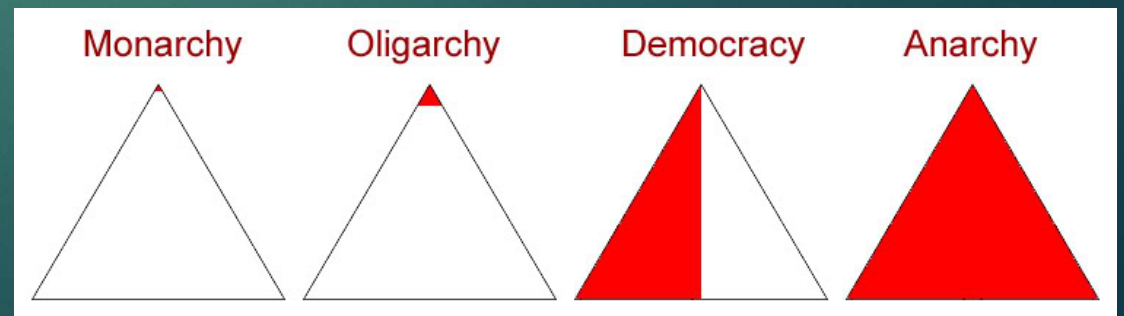
- ▶ How does rule and power work in the city-state? Are some born to rule and some to serve? ‘Yes’, says Aristotle.
- ▶ John McDowell: ‘embarrassing’ view of slavery (McDowell, 1995, p. 201).
- ▶ What does this mean for the attempts to pursue equal rights for all and for our conception of human rights?
- ▶ Armand Marie Leroi: Aristotle mistakenly treats some humans as if they were animals (Leroi, 2014).



John McDowell

Rule and systems of government

- ▶ What does the perception of ruler v ruled mean for government?
- ▶ A city-state must have a ruling element if it is to assist in the pursuit of Eudaimonia. What does this ruling element look like?
- ▶ There are six types of constitution: monarchy, aristocracy, democracy (three fair types), and tyranny, oligarchy, anarchy (three unfair types). **We need a Middle Way.**
- ▶ Ideal constitution is a balanced mix of democracy and oligarchy.
- ▶ Leo Strauss: Can Aristotle's ideal city-state be the same ideal we need today (Pangle, 2006, p. 54)?



Bibliography and further reading

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Aristotle's Political Philosophy

This presentation provides an overview of Aristotle's contributions to political theory, offering a summary of his key ideas, with mention of key critiques and contemporary implications of Aristotle's theories for politics today. Focusing largely on ideas put forward in 'The Politics', I look deeper into Aristotle's key notions of the city-state, systems of government, equality and slavery, and the possible application of these to modern society (Aristotle and Rackham, 1932).

Introducing Aristotle

Aristotle was a prominent 4th century BCE philosopher; a thinker so influential in fact that he is often now referred to as 'The Philosopher'. Educated in Athens under Plato and tutor to Alexander the Great, over his life time Aristotle published works on a wide variety of philosophical subject matter, including political and ethical theory. His work *The Politics* is where the majority of his political theories can be found, including thoughts on the state, citizenship, types of government, property, justice, equality and education. Before exploring these however, it is first important to recognise Aristotle's political theory as a complement to his ethics as put forward in *Nicomachean Ethics*; perhaps Aristotle's most widely cited work (Aristotle and Apostle, 1975).

Ethics and teleology

Aristotle stood by the view that politics and ethics are inseparable (Yu, 2007 p. 20). At the core of his ethics is the view that everything in the universe has a telos, which can be translated as end or purpose. This is the reason for a things existence. In the same way that a knife is made to cut or a chair is made to support, humans exist to achieve Eudaimonia, or

happiness. This is a type of happiness that encompasses human well-being and flourishing and the attainment of a good life. And this is where Aristotle's politics comes in. The goal or telos of the city-state, or civilized community, is to allow for the attainment of Eudaimonia. Therefore, we can deduce that Aristotle's goal in *The Politics* is to explain how the city-state can assist in the pursuit of Eudaimonia, and what the ideal city-state for this pursuit is. IN order to do this, Aristotle first provides a natural and quasi-historical account of the origins and development of the city-state.

Community and the city-state

According to Aristotle, the city-state develops as follows (Aristotle and Rackham, 1932):

1. Two instinctual drives compelled humans to combine in pairs; the male and the female joined in order to reproduce and the master and slave joined for self-preservation.
2. The household came about in order to meet every day needs
3. Individual households joined in order to meet growing needs. This created the village
4. Several villages join together to form a complete community. This is the city-state.

According to Aristotle 'it comes to be for the sake of life, and exists for the sake of the good life' (Aristotle and Rackham, 1.2.1252b27-30).

The city-state constructed here is different from other communities because 'it is self-sufficient and...it enables men to live the good life, whereas the family, for example, is barely sufficient to keep its members alive' (Zarri, 1948, p. 2). From this natural account of the city-state, some important claims can be made about the natural state of humanity and our relationships. The most important of these for Aristotle's politics is the relationship between master and slave.

Equality and slavery

How does rule and power work in the city-state? Aristotle mentions that master and slave come together in order to fulfil the pursuit of self-preservation. Are some then intended by nature to rule and other intended by nature to serve? Aristotle's answer is a simple yes. In fact, he proposed a theory of natural slavery, which goes so far as to suggest that natural slaves do not possess autonomous rationality (Aristotle and Rackham, 1932, 1.5, 1254b20-23). This has not best pleased modern philosophers. For example, John McDowell considers it an 'embarrassing feature of Aristotle's thinking' (McDowell, 1995, p. 201). The master rules the household, which slaves are a part of, because he is of a certain character. The slaves are ruled because they are of a certain character, not unlike Nietzsche's theory of master-slave morality in the *Genealogy of Morals*. (Nietzsche and Smith, 1996). This theory of natural slavery causes problems for modern philosophy and politics which tend to argue towards a theory of natural right; that all men are created equal (Dobbs, 1994, pp. 69-94). A harsh modern critic is Armand Marie Leroi, who equates Aristotle's view of natural slaves with the modern view of animals (Leroi, 2014).

Putting aside the problems with Aristotle's view of master and slave natures for modern politics and human rights, we can now look at what Aristotle deems to be the ideal system of government, which is found largely within Book Three of *The Politics*.

Rule and systems of government

In Book Three, Aristotle ponders upon the nature of the citizen and the nature of the state. As expected from his conception of natural slaves, Aristotle asserts a principle of rulership; that

whenever 'a thing is established out of a number of things and becomes a single common thing, there always appears in it a ruler and ruled' (Aristotle and Rackham, 1932, 1254a28-32). A city-state equipped to assist in the pursuit of Eudaimonia must have a ruling element. In the remainder of his work, Aristotle turns to look at the variety of political institutions that existed at the time of writing. He identifies six types of constitution. Three are fair; monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. Three are unfair; tyranny, oligarchy, anarchy. He sees the problems prevalent in Greek democracy; namely the wide gap between rich and poor, and thus argues for the creation of a strong, balanced middle class. Given his recognition of the need for strong rulers over natural slaves, Aristotle argues that the ideal constitution is a mix of democracy and oligarchy; a middle way. His preference is thus for an elitist power and direct regime which can control those who need to be ruled, thus allowing for both masters and slaves to properly pursue Eudaimonia.

The main objection to Aristotle's way of thinking here, particularly in relation to modern political theory, is the fact that his preference for elitism is clearly driven by his perception of democracy in his day. Leo Strauss refers to it as an 'anti-democratic prejudice' (Strauss cited in Pangle, 2006, p. 54). The democracy we see today is far different from the democracy that existed in Aristotle's society, and thus Aristotle's criticism of gaps between social classes may no longer be as influential in driving politics today. Can Aristotle's ideal city-state be said to be the same ideal required today for the achievement of Eudaimonia for the modern citizen?

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