

EXCERPT, TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION,
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III

THE SUBSTANCE AND ARGUMENT OF THE *POLITICS*

§ 1. *The idea of the Polis.* The *Politics*, as its title indicates, is concerned with the *polis*; or to speak more exactly it is concerned with the 160 or so examples of the *polis*, scattered over the Greek mainland and the maritime area of the Greek dispersion, which Aristotle had studied. It presupposes a small Mediterranean world which was a world of 'urbanity' or civic republics (the largest with an area of 1,000 square miles, but many with 100 or less), and which stood, as such, in contrast with the world of 'rurality' in which the nations or *ethnē* lived. There was some notion among the Greeks of a community called 'Hellas', but it was in no sense a political community. Herodotus conceived it as having the four bonds of common blood, common speech, common religious shrines, and common social habits; but he recognized no political bond. Plato, in the argument of his *Republic*, was enough of a Panhellenist to argue for some system of international law, as between *polis* and *polis*, which would mitigate the rigours of their mutual wars; but the very nature of his argument involves the sovereignty of each *polis*. The orator Isocrates preached the unity of Hellenic culture, and advocated a symmarchy of autonomous Hellenic cities united in concord and conquest against the nations around, and especially against the Persians; but he left the cities autonomous. Aristotle himself could say that the Greek stock had the capacity for governing every other people, if only it could once achieve political unity;¹ but though he had been the tutor of Alexander, and remained the friend of Antipater, he never sought to investigate the method by which such unity might be achieved.

The assumption of Aristotle, as of Greek thought generally down to the days of Zeno and the Stoic doctrine of the *cosmopolis*, is that of the small state or civic republic whose citizens know one another personally, and which can be addressed by a single herald and persuaded by a single orator when it is assembled in its 'town meeting'. It is a small and intimate society: it is a church as well as a state: it makes no distinction between the province of the state and that of society; it is, in a word, an integrated system of social ethics, which realizes to the full the capacity of its members, and therefore claims their full allegiance. A limit of size is imposed upon it by its very nature and purpose (as, conversely, the limit of its size has helped to produce its nature and purpose): being

¹ Book VII, c. vii, § 3.

a church and a system of social ethics, it cannot be a Babylon.¹ Small as it is, it is complete in itself: it is 'self-sufficient', in the sense that it meets from its own resources—its own accumulated moral tradition and the physical yield of its own soil and waters—the moral and material needs of its members; and as it does not draw upon others, so it is not conceived as giving, or as bound to give, to others, or as making its own contribution to the general development of Hellas. Whole and complete, with a rounded life of its own, the *polis* rises to a still higher dignity than that of self-sufficiency. It is conceived as 'natural'—as a scheme of life which, granted the nature of man, is inevitable and indefeasible. In this conception of 'nature' (*physis*) we touch a cardinal element in the theory of Aristotle.

§ 2. *The natural character of the Polis.* A distinction between 'nature' and 'convention' (*physis* and *nomos*)—between institutions existing 'by nature' and those which existed 'by convention'—had been drawn by popular teachers in Greece for a century before Aristotle's time. Some of them had regarded the state, in the form of the civic republic, as merely a conventional thing—a thing that might or might not be, and only was because men had agreed, by a contract, that it should be; and some had even argued that it had better not be at all, because it defeated the good old rule and simple plan of 'nature', that the strong man armed should dominate the weak for his own advantage. Such views involved a theory of 'natural rights' and a doctrine of individualism; and a polemic against that theory and doctrine (a polemic already waged by Plato in the teaching of the Academy) is implicit in the beginning of the *Politics* and recurs in the course of its argument.

It was not only that such a theory and doctrine cut at the roots of tradition and undermined the *mos maiorum* in the Greek civic republic, and thus challenged the whole idea of its system of social ethics, or again that they were allied with a movement of individualism in contemporary life, which led men to concentrate, at the best, on the pursuit of private culture, and impelled them, at the worst, to turn the state into a milch-cow and make it a commercial association for the distribution among its members of dividends which they had never earned. It was also that this theory and doctrine, which identified 'nature' with nothing more than primary instincts and primitive impulses, were entirely opposed to the general philosophy of 'nature' which Aristotle had

¹ Here, and elsewhere in this section, the writer has used some passages from his chapter in the *Cambridge Ancient History* (vol. vi, c. xv) on Greek Political Thought and Theory in the Fourth Century. He wishes to record his gratitude to the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press for their permission to use these passages.

himself developed. Seeing everywhere the growth of an initial potentiality into a final form or end, and seeing in its form or end the essential nature of everything, he applied his general philosophy to man and man's long development, as he struggled upward from the potentiality of primary instincts to the form, or end, or nature, of a political being—a being intended by his potentialities for existence in a *polis*, and a being who achieved his 'nature' in and through such existence. This was the conception which he opposed to the radical views of popular teachers; and it was a conception which made the *polis* entirely and perfectly natural, because it was the natural home of the fully grown and natural man.¹

But this conception does not imply that the state is natural because it has grown. 'It is not growing like a tree . . . that makes man better be', and the growth of man into membership of a state, which makes him better and ensures his moral betterment (and thereby realizes his nature), is not like the growth of a tree. If Aristotle uses the language of growth in the beginning of the *Politics*, and speaks of the growth of the household into the village and of villages into the state, he does not rest his belief in the natural character of political society on the simple fact of such growth. What makes the State natural, in his view, is the fact that, however it came into existence, it is as it stands the satisfaction of an immanent impulse in human nature towards moral perfection—an immanent impulse which drives men upwards, through various forms of society, into the final political form. Indeed it would seem that Aristotle, true to the general Greek conception of politics as a sphere of conscious creation, in which legislators had always been active, believed in the conscious construction of the *polis*. 'There is an immanent impulse in all men towards an association of this order; but the man who first constructed such an association

¹ A brief analysis of the associations of the Greek word *physis* is attempted below, in the course of section IV 4 of this Introduction. An analysis and interpretation of Aristotle's use of the term is given in R. G. Collingwood's posthumous work on *The Idea of Nature*, pp. 80-92. He defines the term, in the sense in which it is used by Aristotle, as meaning 'the essence of things which have a source of movement in themselves' (p. 81). He notes that two notions are here implied. (1) Because there is *movement*, 'nature as such is process, growth, change: the process is a development, i.e. the changing takes forms . . . in which each is the potentiality of its successor' (p. 81). (2) Because the things moving have the source of movement *in themselves*, nature as such is not only change, but self-change: nature is 'characterized not merely by change, but by effort or misis or tendency . . . the seed is pushing its way up through the soil . . . the young animal is working at increasing its size and developing its shape until it reaches the size and shape of an adult' (p. 83).

Dr. Collingwood notes that modern evolutionary philosophers, such as that Whitehead, are frankly accepting 'the ideas of potentiality, misis, and teleology' involved in Aristotle's conception of *physis* (p. 83, and later, pp. 167-70).

was the greatest of benefactors.¹ There is no contradiction in such a sentence; for there is no contradiction between the immanent impulses of human nature and the conscious art which is equally, or even more, a part of the same human nature. Human art may indeed contravene the deepest and best in human nature: it may construct perverted states, based on the pursuit of mere wealth or the lust of mere power; and it may thus defeat the natural human impulse to moral perfection. But equally, and indeed still more, it may help to realize nature.² Nature and convention are not in their essence opposites, but rather complements.

§ 3. *The dominance of the Polis.* The State is therefore natural when, or in so far as, it is an institution for that moral perfection of man to which his whole nature moves. All the features of its life—slavery, private property, the family—are equally justified, and also natural, when, or in so far as, they serve that sovereign end. Plato refuses private property and family life to the guardians of the *Republic*, because he believes that they would interfere with the moral life of the guardians, and therefore with the moral life of the state, and therefore with the true order of nature. Aristotle vindicates for every citizen both private property and family life, and regards them both as institutions belonging to all by the order of nature, because he believes that the moral life of every citizen requires the 'equipment' of private property and the discipline of family life. Plato and Aristotle may differ; but for both there is one end—the end of a moral perfection which can only be attained in the *polis*—and that end is the measure of all things. The end can be ruthless; and it shows its hard edge in Plato's theory. It not only deprives the guardians of property and family life; it also deprives the labouring class of citizenship, a high calling which cannot be followed by men engaged in getting and spending. The end is less ruthless in Aristotle's theory. But it serves to justify slavery, which can afford the citizen leisure for the high purposes of the state; and it excludes from real membership of the state all persons other than those who possess that leisure. The end justifies: the end condemns: the end is sovereign. It is easy to glide into the view that the state and its 'well-being' (in the full Greek sense of that term) are thus made into a higher end to which the individual and his personal development are sacrificed. Generally stated, such a view is erroneous: it involves a return, in another form, of that antithesis between political society and the individual which Plato and Aristotle refuse to recognize. The state (they

believe) exists for the moral development and perfection of its individual members: the fulfilment and perfection of the individual means—and is the only thing which means—the perfection of the state; there is no antithesis. But this is true, after all, only for the man who is citizen and the individual who is a member of the body corporate. The rest *are* sacrificed: they lose the development which comes from citizenship, because citizenship is keyed so high. Rich things have a high price. A lower ideal of citizenship, purchasable at a price which the many can afford to pay, is perhaps a more precious thing than the rare riches of the Platonic and Aristotelian ideal.

A state which is meant for the moral perfection of its members will be an educational institution. Its laws will serve 'to make men good': its offices ideally belong to the men of virtue who have moral discernment: its chief activity will be that of training the young and sustaining the mature in the way of righteousness. That is why we may speak of such a state as really a church: like Calvin's Church it exercises a 'holy discipline'. Political philosophy thus becomes a sort of moral theology.¹ Plato in the *Republic* is the critic of the traditional religion of Greece: in the *Laws* he enunciates the canons of a true religion, and even advocates religious persecution: in both he is the censor of art and poetry and music. Aristotle is less drastic: of religion he hardly treats; but he would exercise a moral censorship of plays and tales, and he would subject music to an ethical control. The 'limit of state-interference' never suggested itself to the Greek philosophers as a problem for their consideration. They seek to regulate the family, and the most intimate matters of family life, no less than art and music. Plato's austerities are famous; but even Aristotle can define the age for marriage and the number of permissible children. Whatever has a moral bearing may come under moral regulation. Neither Plato nor Aristotle allows weight to the fundamental consideration that moral action which is done *ad verba magistris* ceases to be moral. The state should indeed promote morality; but the direct promotion of morality by an act of state-command is the destruction of moral autonomy. The good will is the maker of goodness; and the state can only increase goodness by increasing the freedom of the good will. That is why modern thinkers, bred in the tenets of Plato and Aristotle, would nevertheless substitute the formula of 'removal of hindrances' for the formula of 'administration of stimulus' implied in the teaching of their masters. But after all we do an injustice to the theorists of the city-state if we compare them with the theorists of the great modern state. Their state, we have always to remind

¹ Book I, c. II, § 15.

² 'The purpose of education, like that of art generally, is simply to copy nature by making her deficiencies good': see Book VII, c. XVII, § 15 and note.

¹ On Aristotle's conception of the relation between politics and ethics see Appendix A.

ourselves, was a church as well as a state; and most churches believe in moral guidance and stimulus. Indeed there is a stage of moral growth, when the good will is still in the making, at which it is a great gain to be habituated by precept in right-doing. Any state which undertakes an educational function, like every parent, must recognize the existence of this stage, and must include 'the strengthening of character' in the curriculum of its schools. Yet it is but a stage. The grown man must see and choose his way. Plato and Aristotle perhaps treated their contemporaries too much as if they were 'always children'.

§ 4. *The ideal Polis and the criticism of actual states.* If these are the general principles of politics which Aristotle assumes, we can readily see that they will naturally tend to the construction of an ideal state, in which such principles, nowhere purely exhibited in actual life, will find their realization for thought. The building of such ideals, whether on the quasi-antiquarian lines which we find in Xenophon, or on the bolder and freer lines traced by the imagination of Plato, was a staple of Greek political speculation. It accorded with an artistic temper, which loved to shape material into a perfect form, and would even, in the sphere of politics, assume a perfect material (in the sense of a population ideal in disposition, endowed with an ideal territory, and distributed on an ideal social system) in order that it might be the more susceptible of receiving an ideal form. It accorded, too, with the experience of a people accustomed to the formation of new colonial cities, on which the 'oecist' and legislator might freely stamp an abiding mark. Aristotle records, in the second book of the *Politics*, the plans and schemes of previous builders of ideal states: in the seventh and eighth he sketches the plan and scheme of his own ideal. But his ideal state is a torso; and the profundity and the influence of Aristotle's thought are rather to be traced in his enunciation of general principles than in his picture of their realization. He is the master of definition and classification; and it is the terse Aristotelian formula which has always influenced thought.

But ideals will also serve as judges and measuring-rods for the actual. The Greek states of the fourth century came to judgement before the bar of Plato's and Aristotle's ideals. Plato in the *Republic* first constructed his ideal, and then in the later books showed why, and in what degree, actual states were a corruption of that ideal. Aristotle seems to follow a reverse procedure when, early in the *Politics*, he examines actual states in order that their merits and their defects may throw light on the requirements of an ideal state; but he too uses ideal principles to criticize and classify actual states.

These results seem to follow from the application of the ideal as a touchstone to the actual—first, an elucidation of the principles on which offices should be assigned, and constitutions should therefore be constructed (for 'a constitution is a mode of assignment of offices'); secondly, a classification and a grading of actual constitutions; and, finally, a criticism of that democratic constitution, which in the fourth century had become general, and which, in the populous states of his day, Aristotle regarded as inevitable.

The assignment of office, we are told, must follow the principle of distributive justice. To each the state must assign its awards in proportion to the contribution which each has made to the state; and in estimating the contribution of each we must look to the end of the state, and measure the contribution to that end. Logically, this would seem to mean the enthronement of the virtuous, or an ethical aristocracy: in the last resort, it would involve the enthronement, if he can be found, of the one man of supreme virtue, or an absolute and 'divine' monarchy. Practically, Aristotle recognizes that there are various contributions which, directly or indirectly, tend to the realization of the end. Besides virtue, there is wealth, which is necessary to the end in so far as perfect virtue requires a material equipment; and besides wealth there is 'freedom'—freedom not only in the sense of free birth, but also in the sense of liberty from that dependence on others, and that absorption in mechanical toil, which distract men from the free pursuit of virtue. This is one of the lines along which Aristotle moves to the theory of the mixed constitution, which recognizes various contributions and thus admits various classes to office.

A classification of constitutions readily follows on this line of speculation: its terms, traced already in the speculation of the fifth century, and deepened and broadened by Plato in the *Politics*, are firmly established by Aristotle in the third book of the *Politics*. The criticism of the democratic constitution follows in its turn. It has abandoned 'proportionate' for 'absolute' equality: it awards the same honour and the same standing to each and every citizen. It is based on recognition of one contribution, and one only—that of 'freedom'; and that contribution is by no means the highest or weightiest. Nor is this all. Not content with the freedom which means a voice for all in the collective control of common affairs, it has added a freedom which means the absence of control, the surrender of moral discipline, and the random life of chance desires. But this is anarchy: it is the negation of the city-state as it was conceived by Plato and Aristotle. It is this fact rather than aristocratic leanings—it is a dislike of what they regard as anarchy,