

Aristotle's World and Our Own

Richard Ostrofsky

(January, 2003)

Insofar as the secular, Western world can be said to share a common ideal of happiness, the good life and the good society, this remains strongly influenced by the vision articulated by Aristotle in his works on ethics and politics. That vision has been influential as well in the Christian and Muslim worlds and, more recently, in India and in the Far East. We could say that its influence is now global, albeit challenged on several fronts: by a spirit of democracy that would reject or modify Aristotle's pervasive elitism; by various religious systems and other ideologies that would reject his fundamental humanism; and by new creeds of skepticism and pluralism that would quarrel with his pretensions to universalism. Accordingly, though his millennial authority is in tatters, Aristotle's thoughts and conclusions remain a natural starting point for any serious thinking about ethics, and especially about (what I would call) political ethics – ethical considerations of liberty vs. fraternal solidarity that arise in the production of public goods.

“The man who reads a few books,” it's been said, “thinks he's cheek by jowl with Aristotle. So be it. We may ask, in which respects (if any) that philosopher's political ideas are still compelling, and in which they stand in need of updating for today's world, so very different yet not so different from the world he knew. My purpose in this essay is to sketch a personal answer to that question, selecting and summarizing what I take to be the philosopher's central points, and then replying as seems appropriate.

The Good is that which all beings value for its own sake. This universal aim of life is happiness (eudaimonia).

The first sentence is a definition; the second, a tautology; but already the tone seems quaint. Knowing what we do of the diversity of human cultures – and of temperaments and life histories within those cultures – it seems implausible that there is any single Good at which all men and women (never mind other beings) aim. But surely everyone, in her own way, just wants to be happy? Well, no. Actually we know lots of people who make themselves and everyone around them miserable. Presumably, Aristotle knew such people too. But he lays great stress on human rationality treating actions as resulting syllogistically¹ from desires and beliefs in tandem: I want such-and-such (major premise). I believe

¹ Through his so-called “pragmatic syllogism.”

that if I do so-and-so, such-and-such will follow (minor premise). Therefore I do so-and-so (conclusion). Fundamentally rational as we are (he would say), we often do bad things due to defective education, bad habits or both.

The idea that we are radically divided and strangers to ourselves, unaware of our own motives, often doing things as if by compulsion against our better judgment is wholly alien to Aristotle's thought, and not one he was prepared to entertain. For us it is a commonplace. Today there is no denying that Aristotle overestimates the role of conscious purpose in human affairs. Both our desires and the consequences of our actions are unknown or, at best, uncertain. We seldom know what we think or feel about something until we try to talk about it. We rarely know what we are going to do until we've done it. On the whole, our lives are more a groping in the darkness than a striving toward the Good. We are improvisers and *bricoleurs*², much more than conscious planners.

Accordingly, what we would ask of ethical philosophy today is not that it help us set the intended destinations of our lives, nor even our specific objectives and purposes from day to day. Few of us envision any grand Purpose (or *telos*, to use Aristotle's term) in our lives; and it is doubtful we should even try to do so. Our day-to-day goals and intentions stem from vague, largely unconscious passions and desires, reconciled as best we can, and mediated by a vague awareness of our actions' likely consequences. Aristotle's pragmatic syllogism describes the process only to a very rough first approximation.

And yet, we are reluctant to agree with Hume, that "Reason is, and ought to be, the slave of the passions"; and, to this extent, Aristotle's ethical thought still holds a place in our thinking. To the extent we hope to subject our desires and passions to any rational critique and discipline – encouraging some, curbing others, reconciling all as best we can – we must begin by agreeing, albeit with one important reservation, that the final *telos* of life is happiness. The reservation is that the Earth's resources are being expended at an alarming rate while its ecological balance is being wrecked. Thus, we face a dilemma Aristotle never had to consider – that the happiness of persons alive today may be incompatible with life itself for generations as yet unborn. But, presumably, the philosopher would say we cannot be truly happy knowing that we are stealing from the future. So the apparent dilemma between Happiness today and Life a hundred years from now could be resolved if people were more worried than they appear to be about the prospects for their children.

Finally though, it must be admitted that neither statesmen nor ordinary persons work from any clear, coherent conception of perfect happiness or

²

This French word, meaning roughly *tinkerer*, is a technical term in post-modern philosophy.

Good. We recognize various goods – not wholly compatible – to be sought, and various ills to be avoided; and we often find ourselves having to choose the lesser of two evils. Aristotle knows that most people have to work for reasons that have nothing to do with actualizing their human potential. He does not seem aware that the goods we can pursue are limited, and mutually exclusive. One reason politics is difficult today is that there is no common, coherent vision of the Public Good. Upholding such a vision has become well-nigh impossible.

Happiness is achieved by living an active life in accord with virtue (defined as excellence or right conduct). Politics and ethics include each other. A good person is a good citizen and vice versa. The good polity is one in which this harmony is manifest.

Aristotle can identify happiness with virtuous citizenship because he regards Man as a social animal, inseparable from the context of a specific community and its culture, and because he is speaking to the youth of a governing elite, born to leadership and public office. He does not take sufficient account to what even elites today (let alone the man or woman in the street) would see as a fundamental tension between the demands of private self-interest and public life. The prevailing ethic of our society is one of short or medium-term profit. We may bargain away a small advantage to gain a greater, but when the chips are down we do not really identify with any group larger than ourselves. As Mandeville and Adam Smith taught us, we see the social whole as a resultant of the interplay special and private interests, with constitutional government keeping peace amongst them. We do **not** see these interests as having a duty to co-operate and accommodate one another at significant expense to themselves.

With Aristotle's dictum that Man is a social animal, we can agree to some extent. Anthropology teaches that the Greek *polis* (city-state) is not the only, nor even an altogether desirable social arrangement, but it agrees with the philosopher that a human being without a culture and social context is not fully human. What we know of social psychology suggests that Aristotle was probably correct also in teaching that perfect happiness is only possible to the individual who fulfills herself in leading an active life, fully attuned and contributing to the life of her community, and playing a valued role in its affairs. On the other hand, it is a measure of the difference between his time and ours that we no longer think perfect happiness worth talking about. We think Kant was closer to the mark with his remark that "the human condition is one of unsocial sociability."

Alienation is a fact of modern life as had not been the case in Aristotle's

time, certainly not for the class to which he and his pupils belonged.³ We are not so comfortably absorbed as they were in our cultures and communities and offices. Even the most powerful today have to work very hard to get and stay where they are. And even in office, as individuals we have little direct control of policy, let alone the course of events. Thus, it is scarcely possible for anyone today to feel the personal involvement and responsibility that Aristotle advocates. We are more apt to pursue our ambitions ruthlessly, doing violence to everyone and everything in our path, or else to seize a little happiness where we can find it – on an “enjoy now, pay later” basis. Obviously, neither attitude is compatible with the philosopher’s teaching.

Yet even today, for budding members of a ruling elite, the Aristotelian perspective remains necessary to expand and clarify the concept of self-interest. There is, after all, an important difference between enlightened self-interest and the short-sighted, petty, stupid kind, just as there is an important difference between the successful brigand and the statesman. In turning one into the other – in what political scientists call the *legitimation* of power – the lesson must somehow be learned that extortion is most effective when cloaked with some degree of self-restraint and responsibility. It is just because every governing class has to learn this truth and teach it to its children that Aristotelian ethics remain relevant.

It remains the case, however, that elites are likely to feel a deeper affinity with the elites of other nations than with the masses of their own. With a genteel education, all the more so. At the same time, the pursuit of power amongst the elites themselves can sometimes be ameliorated and channelled to a public advantage, but cannot possibly be abolished. For these reasons, the political realism of the sophists remains at least as perennial as the idealism of Plato and Aristotle. To put it bluntly: Aristotle’s elites feel no distinction between their own interests and those of their communities. We may doubt such complete identification was realistic even in his time, but in ours it is plainly not to be expected.

Right Conduct is a matter of balance – avoidance of deficiency or excess. But this balance cannot be determined once and for all, according to some universal rule. It depends on temperament and circumstance, and must found through the good judgment of the person actually in the situation.

³ As Aristotle wrote, however, the world of autonomous city-states was already passing away – as that philosopher must have been aware despite his hopes to the contrary. His most famous pupil, Alexander of Macedon, played a key role in burying the city-state as a political institution.

This ethical position has been likened to that of a person preparing a bath.⁴ You dip a toe in the water and it feels too hot. Or, you dip a toe in the water and it feels too cool. So you add either hot or cold water until it feels just right. This “just right” temperature will not be the same for everyone, and cannot be prescribed in advance. Ultimately, each person must be judge of what feels right for her.

Attractive as it is, the Aristotelian ethic of balance faces at least three lines of attack. First, it is easier to teach (and simple minds actually prefer) an ethic of righteousness. God’s commandments are absolute. What is required of us is not moderation, but perfect obedience. Transgressions will be punished. Impurity and sin are to be feared, much more than imbalance or disharmony. Second, the ethic of balance may be attacked from the other direction by an ethic of authenticity. “To thine own self be true. . . etc.” “Be natural.” “Be spontaneous.” “In the long run, we are all dead.” “Let it all hang out.” Finally, it must be accepted even by its admirers that the Aristotelian ethic of balanced excellence is profoundly elitist. It is not to be expected that everyone will have the means, the leisure, and the intellect, character and education that it requires. Most people want a moral vision that helps them keep their noses to whichever grindstones they are being held. Christianity was perfect for this. Aristotle offers no consolation to losers.

In each of these ways Aristotle’s thoughts on ethics and the good life may seem not merely obsolete but morally repugnant to a modern reader – so easy to attack that there is little point in doing so. Accordingly, rather than discard them, there is more to be learned by interpreting them loosely and charitably, and using the sensibility behind them to gain some perspective on our current political notions and arrangements.

The Aristotelian emphasis on balance and harmony seems quite similar to the *Taoist* notion of the “True Way” which, in turn, provides a basis for aikido, and all other traditional arts of China and Japan.⁵ An ethic along these general lines is the only way I can see to take the Nietzschean scandal of interpretation in stride – accepting that cognition, necessarily involving some imputation of precedent and pattern, must always be an act of power, while avoiding the intellectual and moral chaos that can result when the authority of official “truth” is overturned. An ethic of righteousness begs the question, “Whose version of righteousness is right?” An unqualified ethic of authenticity leaves no room for judgments of relative wisdom and folly. By contrast, an ethic of balance

⁴ See reference [p 95] in A.E. Taylor’s book on Aristotle.

⁵ At the same time, its focus on articulate knowledge and personal judgment are characteristically Western.

sidesteps the apparent dilemma between dogmatic absolutism and the cognitive solipsism of a complete relativist. It accepts the loss of “truth” – of intellectual certainty – but tries to keep a sense of proportion, taste and judgment. In doing so, it allows for relationships of teaching and suggestion based on hard-won experience – especially on memories of previous disasters. You cannot tell someone else what will be **right** in her particular situation, but you can suggest possibilities and principles that have worked for others in the past, and warn against those that have not worked. Then, ultimately it remains up to the individual whether to follow a well-established path – one known to be safe – or to accept (consciously, cautiously) the risks of non-conformity or real novelty.

Insofar as it accepts that balance and harmony may be found in various ways, working from differing strategies and basic assumptions, an ethic of balance leads to pluralism but not to relativism. It allows for comparisons and value judgments, and for arguments about values. It simply denies, much against the faith of Plato and Aristotle, that such arguments necessarily converge to any single right answer.

The best life for a human being consists in doing what only a human being can do: contemplating the great, the true and the beautiful. The best human life is that of the philosopher.

No feature of Aristotle’s thought seems more absurd, self-serving and arbitrary than his insistence that the best life is the life of philosophical contemplation. Even Aristotle appears to have his problems with this ideal, as it seems at odds with his dictum that the best life is an active one. However, Aristotle would want to say, the statesman, scholar and teacher lead active, socially useful lives in and through their contemplation, so that the contradiction is merely superficial. He can say this because he thinks of statesmen and the rest as men of leisure, gentlemanly amateurs. We think of them as bustling, pre-occupied careerists, as today they are.

The fact is, we no longer put much value on either philosophy or contemplation. Philosophy’s specialty, the critique and analysis of concepts, is just one tool of investigation among many, practised more within each specialized discipline than as a separate field of study. As for contemplation (literally, “spending time with”) no one today has time for anything. Our lives now are so busy and so complicated that time must be minced, measured and rationed, while everything we do is instrumental to something else. Indeed, for the still-dominant Puritan strain in North American society, idleness is a sin. Even leisure has to be busy. Even prayer has to be structured with sermon,

song and formulaic recitation. The idea of emptying one's self that something new may enter, or of spending unstructured time with something to leave it room to speak to us is alien to our temper and to our whole way of life. We look for meaning in all the wrong ways, and then complain that our lives are empty. What could we expect? We never learned the art of focussing on something, opening ourselves to it dispassionately, and allowing it to speak to us – allowing it to say what it wants to say, instead of pestering it with our desires and questions and ambitions.

Aristotle's discursive style of contemplation will not be to everyone's taste – nor is there any reason why it should be. And, these days, without effort and some sacrifice, it is hard to make time for any kind of contemplation – philosophical or otherwise. But we have a real problem today of *digesting* the knowledge that has been acquired, and that we are continuing to acquire; and here discursive contemplation would be of benefit.

Digestion is an apt metaphor. The problem is to break down and recombine the knowledge we acquire and make it part of ourselves. It is not so much a question of learning to apply knowledge, as of allowing it to work in us – deepening our understanding of the nature of things, and of life's possibilities. The whole spectrum of competing values and a vast amount of specialized knowledge need to be processed in this manner; and philosophy, understood as discursive contemplation, is the tradition of doing so.

The state's business is to educate its citizens, and enable them to lead the good life – the best life of which each is capable.

In Aristotle's view, the polity is not a mere compact for the convenience of its sovereign individuals. Rather it pre-exists each individual life, and provides a matrix and context for each life. Accordingly, the polity has both a right and a duty of moral education.

We accept this view in part, but have our problems with it. Actually, on this point there is a contradiction in our thinking: On one hand, we expect the state to provide a public school system, defend the moral climate of an open society, and contribute toward a whole range of cultural values. In special interest groups, we constantly articulate new public goods and press for government action to provide them. Demands for anti-smoking legislation might be a case in point. But, on the other hand, we also demand that the state remain neutral on significant questions of value. The ideas (and constitutional guarantees) of free speech, freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state require a hands-off policy in just those areas of education that Aristotle would have considered most important.

Few notions are more frightening today than that of the state as an agency for the improvement of morals. We fear totalitarian power and value our civil liberties and our privacy. And yet the moral vacuum of a market society is frightening as well. On the whole, therefore, I think our ambivalence about the state's role as moral preceptor is a good thing. I feel this ambivalence myself, and think it widely shared despite the clamour for more intervention or more freedom on specific issues.

The crucial point, I think, is that the state today is a different kind of entity from Aristotle's *polis*. We have no expectation that those who actually govern are persons of superior moral fibre. Indeed, we have learned from Machiavelli to regard demands for moral purity in statesmen as naive. Aristotle's rulers are in the business of determining wise policy. Our are in the very different business of brokering competing interests while keeping a firm grip on the levers of power.

There is a need for wisdom and deliberation in public affairs such as is cultivated in the study of philosophy.

Plato and Aristotle to the contrary, politics as we have known it is not about wisdom and philosophical analysis of public issues, but about horse-trading, concentration of support and the diffusion and neutralization of discontent. Politicians and executives sometimes want the philosopher's help in articulating ethical issues and key distinctions in certain areas of public policy but, for the most part, have to deal with coalitions that have already made up their minds. They deal in wish lists, costs and soothing rhetoric. Primarily, they deal in power. Rational deliberation and argument play a rather modest role in public affairs.

But this is no longer good enough. Society has become too complex, and private power far too concentrated for government by "The Invisible Hand." The explosive growth of the state in the last century was a response to urgent public issues, many of which continue to deteriorate for want of effective governance. The managerial state is here to stay. Almost no one questions that public policy is needed, or that some conscious governance is needed to keep this society from tearing itself apart. Current debate is about specific areas and details of policy and regulation.

We can certainly agree with Aristotle that wise policy is needed, but how to arrive at it is not an easy question. "Men and nations have been known to

behave wisely, after they have exhausted all the alternatives.”⁶ Aristotle could hope to achieve wise policies by cultivating the wisdom and public spirit of his governing elites. The Christians knew that such a blessing would not occur without divine intervention. We look to procedural guarantees and to the structure of organizations, but are aware how readily these may be corrupted. The design of political institutions for competent, accountable deliberation of great public issues remains an unsolved problem.

⁶ This remark is attributed to Abba Eban.

The ideal constitution is some form of compromise between oligopoly and democracy.

Aristotle seems to have this about right: To this day, we remain justly afraid both of arrogant techno-plutocracy on one hand, but of mob rule on the other. Our idea of good government is that it be competent (and therefore entrusted to an elite), but also accountable – controlled by the needs of society and by its own need for the people’s meaningful consent. We agree with Aristotle that pure democracy – for example, government by plebiscite – is to be avoided because it lacks stability and competence. We agree that pure oligarchy is undesirable because of its unresponsiveness to needs and interests other than its own. Institutions that would realize an ideal compromise continue to elude us, but republican governments on the American, British or other model have worked not too badly. At least we have by now a pretty clear idea of the evils to avoid.

Two obvious problems remain to be solved. First is the problem of deliberation, already mentioned. 21st century states and society as a whole – surely no less than any multinational corporation comprise a vast, tightly integrated, delicately balanced system, in need of far-sighted, professional management. Complex issues must be considered and handled. Wise decisions must be taken and implemented. Wise laws must be passed, explained and enforced. To be sure, we believe that politics and philosophy are entirely different disciplines calling for very different temperaments; and we are more inclined to put our hopes on a political messiah than on a philosopher-king. But Plato and Aristotle were surely correct that wisdom is needed in the governing process, as we see today more starkly than they could possibly have seen. Kleptocratic politics, imperial and nationalistic politics, ethnocentric *revanchist* politics, porkbarrel you-scratch-my-back-and-I’ll-scratch-yours politics will end by wrecking civilization and poisoning the Earth.

The second, problem we see today is that of political consent. Electoral democracy as we know it is a step in the right direction, which falls well short of its own ideal of “government with the consent of the governed.” For it is a well-established principle of law that valid consent must be both free and competent. A contract signed under coercion is not a valid contract. Advertising may shade the truth must stop short of blatant deceit. Sexual favours obtained with the help of drugs or alcohol may be considered rape – as will sex with minors considered too young to give a valid consent. Admittedly, there are grey areas where the law upholds a contract to which consent is less than perfect.

The idea that legitimate government requires consent of the governed derives from the “Social Contract” theory of John Locke. A hint of its central

idea – freedom of conscience and *voluntary* submission to authority – can already be found in a remark of Queen Elizabeth to Phillip II of Spain: “I cannot understand why your majesty will not allow his subjects to go to hell in their own way!” Once it was accepted that subjects need not necessarily follow the religion of their prince but had a right to choose their own forms of worship, some idea that political allegiance itself required a basic consent was only a matter of time.

But this notion would have seemed strange to Aristotle, who saw nothing wrong with outright slavery provided the master’s authority was derived from superior wisdom and virtue. At the same time, he insisted, the master’s right to rule entails a corresponding duty of care and moral education. The justification for Aristotelian slavery is that in a properly governed household, the slave is actually better off than he could be as a free man! What Aristotle is really defending then is not so much chattel slavery as a quasi-feudal system of estate and household management characterized by loyalty and self-interested obedience in exchange for protection and paternalistic benevolence. Europe actually ran along such lines for more than a thousand years. The central idea was that political elites were to treat their subjects about the same way that we treat children – subjecting them to a wholesome discipline for their own good.

The modern world rejected this way of thinking. Today, the right to be wrong – the right to take risks, and either prosper or go broke and ask for a bailout – is the most cherished of political rights. Classical liberals insisted, somewhat hypocritically, that “No man is good enough to be another man’s master. Their reservations on this score – notably regarding coloured races and women – are still being fought through and worked through today. More important for this essay is that their central idea – of a society comprised of fully autonomous, self-interested agents freely contracting with and against each other – was better suited to the 18th century than to the 21st. Today that idea is visibly breaking down. We don’t know when or exactly how; we certainly don’t know what will take its place. But we can see that radical changes are happening everywhere, and that fresh political thinking is urgently needed – fresher than the political thinking that Aristotle provided as his world was breaking down – with the help of Alexander of Macedon, his most famous pupil.

Over-all, what we still draw from Socrates, Plato and Aristotle is our reluctance to dismiss the phrase “political ethics” as mere oxymoron. Despite Machiavelli, despite Hobbes, despite the political catastrophes of the last hundred years we retain an Aristotelian notion that the spiritual liberty of the individual and the needs of her community not only should, but **can** be reconciled. There must be a way to manage our affairs so that the free self-actualization of each person is consistent with and contributes toward the

requirements of the state as a whole – which, in turn, has as its central mission to enable and facilitate the free self-actualization of each person.

“Lots of luck!” we snicker with the sophist and cynic. Yet what we continue to take from Aristotle, and from the Socratic lineage as a whole, is its belief in ultimate harmony between the whole and its parts – and, closely related, its obsession with the problem of justice, and with the role of reason in recognizing and agreeing to what is just. The project may be hopeless, calling for citizens who are wiser and more public-spirited than we know ourselves to be. But we cannot let go of it; and it remains central to our political thinking.