

## SLAVERY AND CITIZENSHIP IN ARISTOTLE'S *POLITICS*

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Aristotle believes that most people can be enslaved, devoid of injustice, as they are born to be slaves. At the same time, some of them are born free to dominate as masters. Most modern critics have condemned these concepts. The author tries to re-evaluate the concepts of citizenship and slavery in the light of Aristotle's *Politics*, to reveal not only Aristotle's reasoning, but also how his views are interpreted by contemporary philosophers.

**Keywords:** Slavery – Citizenship – Teleology – Aristotle's *Politics*

One is forced to proceed with the disagreeable task of reading and analyzing Aristotle's account of slavery because there is such divergence in the opinions of the expert scholars. If one takes a look at Aristotle's account of slavery, one will notice that on the one hand, Aristotle believes that slavery cannot be demonstrated acceptable on the basis of weak arguments, but, on the other hand, he would indirectly advocate the enslavement of those not slaves by nature. Although scholars disagree about Aristotle's account of slavery, there is one point of consensus: his account is filled with incoherency and inconsistency (Arnhart 1998; Fortenbaugh 1977).

This incoherence found in Aristotle's account of slavery is often attributed to cultural prejudice or interpreted too liberally, whereas what is required is more careful reading and research. Schlaifer (1936) thinks about Aristotle as "an incoherent person [even] in the confines of a single sentence". He also believes that the presence of such blemishes in the presentation of a philosopher only shows the power of ethnocentrism in inducing irrationality. He further believes that Aristotle "only has argument claiming that all barbarians are slaves by nature". Wood (1978, 209-57), Mulgan (1977, 43-44) and Lloyd (1968, 251) identify these same interpretive problems. The presence of incoherency is accepted by Barker (1959, 259-373) and Smith (1983, 119), but they refused to accept the argument concerning ethnocentric irrationality. In fact, they have admirably fought to refute this charge. In their view Aristotle's account of the natural slave is his attempt to demonstrate that no such creature exists. The most powerful analysis has been provided by Bluhm (1980), who argued that Aristotle's intention was to secretly demonstrate the injustice of every kind of slavery by hinting at the fact that the term 'natural slave' is a contradiction. However, it is disturbing to see Bluhm ultimately take up the thesis endorsed by so many others, that Aristotle advocates the enslavement of those who are not slaves by nature (see Strauss 1953, 158-60; Strauss 1964, 22-23; Arendt 1958, 84; Nichols 1983, 171, 176, 182; and Ambler 1987, 405).

A slave is a luxury item that provides the master leisure, and scholars believe it is this provision of leisure that is decisive for Aristotle. However, this view is problematic as well. Although Aristotle finds the leisure that is provided by a slave for his master extremely valuable, he strongly condemns unjust enslavement of those who do not deserve it. He states that “a person who commits this crime can never justify or make up for this sin even by the positive results that he might get from committing this kind of sin” (*Pol.* 1325b5-7; see also *NE* 1142b24-26). In Aristotle’s view the actual and true destination of the human race is simply impossible to achieve through the enslavement of people (Nussbaum 1988).

Despite all of this speculation about Aristotle’s ethnocentrism, it is my view that the hermeneutic problems of his account of natural slavery are due to an incoherent presentation (Dobbs 1994). However, it is also my view that these inconsistencies are only perceived and that they vanish with consideration of Aristotle’s natural teleology. Almost all commentators have read the term “natural” used by Aristotle in a very primitive fashion to mean “native”, and for this reason they assume that the term natural slave (*phusei doulos*) points to a congenital or genetic condition. This paper will argue that this assumption misunderstands the teleological importance of the term *phusei*, used by Aristotle to mean “by nature”. Aristotle’s ostensible incoherence is only apparent. It is introduced into the material by the readers, the same readers who do not appreciate the contextual significance of Aristotle’s teleology. Also, how people mostly fail to understand that Aristotle’s teleology is in accordance with his text creates more misunderstandings and lead the readers to believe that there are inconsistencies while it is therefore the readers’ own mistaken interpretation which leads them to believe that there are inconsistencies (Maritain 1943).

It is easy to comprehend that slaves are not born but made when one reads Aristotle’s defense of natural slavery in its teleological context and fully understands the term *phusei*. Slavishness so strong that it seems like second nature can be instilled in people through the manipulation of a dysfunctional culture. All freedom of access to the human *telos* is prevented, due to this change in their nature. As a result, protecting the slave’s capacity to share in *telos* solely depends on his this dictatorial partnership. Also, according to Aristotle, a slave can be identified as property, but only if they are not considered a tool of production but a human being who deserves care. Aristotle’s reasoning in this is very understandable (Mulgan 1977).

Therefore, if carefully read, Aristotle’s account of natural slavery appears to be very justly devised and provides us with a solid basis on which to condemn the actions of any tyrannical government, as well as the abuse and cruelty meted out to slaves (Mulgan 1977, 14).

**Aristotle’s philosophy on citizenship and slavery.** Politics I deals with the nature of justice and hierarchy, and is the perfect place to begin exploring Aristotle’s comprehension of politics. Several very important questions have been posed by Aristotle regarding slavery in the context of politics. Scholars, both those who consider Aristotle’s poli-

tics and ethics equivocal and those who find them unproblematic, overlook the real complexity and dynamism (psychological and metaphysical) of his philosophy (Annas 1993, 146).

Aristotle's discussion of the natural slave may include a number of inconsistencies; however, it should not simply be dismissed as an incoherent document (Smith 1991), or labeled as "obvious as well as noncontroversial". It is my view that the vagueness that can be found here and in other natural scientific, ethical and opinionated writings of Aristotle, if properly read, is actually the representation of a human nature that transforms with time.

The essay begins with a consideration of Aristotle's views on the subjects of citizenship and slavery. It then takes these same subjects and treats them in terms of Aristotle's reflections on nature. Finally, it points the way to a different reading of the *Politics* and of Aristotle's attitude toward foreigners (Dobbs 1994).

Aristotle begins *Politics* III by asking who is a citizen and what the nature of a citizen is. Aristotle attempts to determine the advantages that the citizen accrues and who has the right to become one. First, Aristotle considers those things that disqualify one for citizenship. These are blood, birth, and ancestry (*Pol.* 1275b32-34), location, and the capability to sue and to be sued (*Pol.* 1275a7-11). He then considers those attributes that characterize the citizen positively: a citizen is (1) the one who takes interest in and is involved in declaring and judging (*Pol.* 1275a22-23), (2) a person who plays a part in the legal and deliberative offices of a polity (*Pol.* 1275b18-20) and (3) one who rules and is also ruled (*Pol.* 1277b13-16). In Aristotle's view the birth, parentage, place of birth and legal capacity (as it has been statistically qualified) do not demonstrate citizenship. These different elements share one feature – an emphasis on activity. According to Malcolm Schofield (1999, 144-49) the phrase "Sharing in a constitution", qualifies a person for citizenship (*apud* Dobbs 1994).

It seems Aristotle is saying that practicing citizenship makes one a citizen. This is hardly surprising given the centrality of activity in Aristotle's philosophy generally. A "citizen becomes a citizen when he acts like a citizen" (Winthrop 1975, 407).

According to Aristotle, "the end never can be separate from the overall act" (*NE* 1140b6). Though external influences can have an effect on human activities even if they are controlled, one cannot carry out activities in a void. Aristotle has emphasized that there cannot be any citizen *qua* citizen preceding the regime that the citizen is actually a part of (*Pol.* 1275a3-4). 'In order to further explore the idea of citizenship, it is necessary to ask whether one is a citizen of an oligarchy or a democracy. To be a citizen is to be dependent on institutions, as it is the education, laws, and political and social institutes of that specific constitution that determine what can and cannot be shared. A citizen is formed by the contribution of all these institutions (*Pol.* 1275b4).

All this suggests that to be a citizen it takes a complicated combination of creation by political and social institutes, and political activity on the part of the individual. Aristotle also stated at the beginning of his inquiry that "those who became citizens by any accident or who were made citizens otherwise" should be left to one side (*Pol.* 1275a5-7).

This sentence is key, as it tells us the reasoning behind Aristotle rejecting certain things in his inquiry into the nature and identity of the citizen. It is very clear here that those who were included in the category of “made citizens” because of their ancestry, location, birth or parentage, must be excluded (Dobbs 1994).

Now one must ask how we can comprehend Aristotle’s apparently far-fetched exclusion of all of the “made citizens”, when he himself has accepted and acknowledged the role played by political and social institutions in the formation of a citizen. Aristotle gives an example of the people who should not be included in the deliberation of the nature of citizen. He explains that those who were made citizens “via the magistrates” should be excluded (*Pol.* 1275b29-30) as well as those who have been made citizens “as a result of a revolution” (*Pol.* 1275b35-36). “The capacity to sue and be sued” is one the qualifications that Aristotle rejects for citizenship. These people are not considered citizens by Aristotle. He thinks that those who were given citizenship by accident (i.e. due to birth, location, parentage) are therefore not actually citizens, as this kind of citizenship is given and not earned (Frank 2004).

Unlike the magisterial edict, treaty or revolution-- which makes the actions of a citizen irrelevant, like an accident-- Aristotle emphasizes that the complete formation of citizens through political and social institutions, laws and education, do not make the citizen’s activity irrelevant; rather they guide and protect it (*Pol.* 1258a22-23). Without a doubt one cannot understand the identity of a citizen without knowing how he or she came into being (Salkever 1990b, 176). Therefore, the identity of a citizen is a product of ‘doing’ and ‘making’, where ‘making’ is actually the shaping that is guided by the education, laws and other institutions, and ‘doing’ is a form of self-making, i.e. citizenly behavior. Force and accident must be put to one side in order to investigate the basis of citizen identity, which is the reciprocal and dynamic relationship between the people, their deeds and their identity (Frank 2004).

It is by their collective activity that the citizens are made citizens (i.e. not just by their individual or particular activities but also by allotment in a constitution) (*Pol.* 1275b4- 6). This collective activity is the basic step that helps in the formation of a citizen, as through collective activities political and social institutions are formed. The importance of collective activity can also be judged by the fact that the institutions are formed by it and in return these institutions form the citizens. Therefore, along with individual activities, collective activities are very important. Democracy is formed in the dynamic tension of participation and institutionalization. It is not formed by popular action or institutions alone. Reading it in this way one finds something pleasantly democratic about the understanding that Aristotle had concerning citizen identity. Participatory, individual self-determination is what citizenship is about (Arendt 1958).

Citizens who share a constitution and through consent form institutions, create, in this manner, more citizens. However, institutions are not a check on individual activity (Arendt 1958).

Not only those who are included in the list of citizens, but also those who have been excluded, should attempt to see why Aristotle believes this. In fact, in many ways it is

more important for the people whom he has excluded to understand. It has nothing to do with the nature of their work (shopkeeper, banker, etc.), but rather, who they are (natives, foreigners, women, etc.). Aristotle has excluded these people because he finds their nature very different from those he has excluded them from. One should disagree with this, and to explain it we must turn to Aristotle's account of slavery in *Politics I* to support the very difficult claim that we are building regarding nature (Arendt 1958).

Aristotle approaches slavery in the same way he opened his account of citizenship. He asks: who is a slave? As before, he asks this question in relation to justice and the appropriate qualifications for citizenship; he rejects ancestry, parentage and convention because in his opinion all these factors do not justify slavery (*Pol.* 1255b2, 15). Similarly, he rejects those who were made slaves by force or accident. If the activity of a citizen (including the methods in which the political and social institutions guide the activities of the citizens, and not those who were given citizenship by force or accident) defines the nature and identity of the citizen, then the nature of the slave should be defined by the definition of slaves (Arendt 1958).

Aristotle states: "the good citizen, good man and the statesman should not learn the tasks that are done by the inferior, as, if they will learn them, then there will not remain any difference between them and the slaves" (*Pol.* 1277b5-7).

One can assume that if the identity of a slave is actually, like the citizen's identity, decided and determined by their prohairetic activity, then there is absolutely no difference between the citizen and slave. If all this is true, then in *Politics I*, Aristotle's account of slavery is actually intended to caution the citizens as well as the slaves concerning their vulnerability in acting and forming their political destinies (Mara 1995, 286, 296; Davis 1996, 22). However, there is one major difference between the citizens and the slaves; the political and social institutions that are formed for the slaves and the citizens are made by the citizens alone. Hence, I have been made a slave by the social and political institutions in whose formation I have played no part in, and, therefore, I am made a slave due to my inaction, in other words, not acting and not helping to form political institutions means that one becomes a slave to them.

Nothing is revealed about the nature of the slaves who have been enslaved by virtue of exclusion from the political and social institutions. There is an interesting study in this regard. Although this kind of system does not reveal anything about the slaves, it does, however, tell us something about the dominant and ruling nature of the citizens who make these social institutions, which according to Aristotle is what triggers the destruction of their society's social fabric (*Pol.* I.7, V.10; 1292a14-38). Therefore, the institutions built for slavery and the practice of slavery as a whole are not only bad for individual citizens but also for the citizen community as a whole (i.e. the polity).

This is an extremely unconventional reading of the *Politics I*. In order to justify this we will explore the question raised by Aristotle in his discussion of slavery. The question was: who is by nature a slave? This question has also been imported in the political language that has been introduced by Aristotle in *Physics*. He has divided this question into two parts. First, if nature is matter (i.e. the bodies of humans) will we be able to differen-

tiate non-slaves from slaves? Second, if nature is form (i.e. as souls of people) will we be able to distinguish slaves from non-slaves? It has become very clear that nature does not actually differentiate the slave from the non-slave on the basis of physical appearance. Bodies of the masters often belong to the slaves, and the bodies of the slaves are said to belong to the masters (*Pol.* 1254b31). Therefore, nature does not distinguish the material object (i.e. a body) as slave and non-slave.

'The idea of nature as 'form' (soul) is also problematic. If the answer given by Aristotle regarding who is slave by nature in terms of matter and form is filled with loopholes, then it also creates some problems regarding the typical expression of the matter/form differentiation itself. According to Aristotle, slaves are initially merely non-forms of matter, awaiting a mind to come and tell them what to do by imposing orders on them (*Pol.* 1254b15-20). He also states that all living beings, even slaves, are composed of form and matter (*Pol.* 1254a35).

In the light of these statements, how can one understand this sentence: "it is very evident that some men are free by nature, whereas some are slaves, and for these slaves, slavery is just as well as expedient" (*Pol.* 1255a1-2)? In other words, how can one understand Aristotle's defense of natural slavery when it does not parallel his treatment of citizenship? According to Aristotle, both master and slave benefit from their relationship and because of this it can be said that they have a natural relationship (*Pol.* 1255b10). How a master might benefit from a slave is very simple and easily understandable, and so needs no further explanation, but the idea that a person can benefit from being a slave seems very strange. The answer that has emerged so far from Aristotle's treatment of this subject tell us that there are people whose souls are so disordered and so confused that they require someone else to guide them (*Pol.* 1254b16-20). Since Aristotle believed that there is no sure way of telling if someone has a disordered soul, as one cannot read the soul, the best way to assess the state of the soul is to examine a person's activities. Slavery is said to be natural at the point when it forces a person to engage in actions they normally would not do (Frank 2004).

According to many commentators, Aristotle is an embarrassed defender of slavery, or confused about the question regarding slaves, or perhaps just a lunatic (Williams 1993; Waldron 1992; Annas 1996). However, Malcolm Schofield has argued otherwise. He offers a philosophical rationale, founded on Aristotle's practical wisdom, of the ambiguous account of Aristotle's natural slaves (Schofield 1999, 115-40). We would second Schofield. In my opinion, it makes more sense to read Aristotle philosophically than ideologically, as Aristotle's ideological material cannot explain why he would examine slavery so minutely if he took it for granted (Arendt 1961).

Schofield treats "the principles that were used by Aristotle in the derivation of his theories that he made regarding slavery" to be amid the initial principles of philosophy and argues that "to agree about the fact that Aristotle would dialectically ensure his initial principles is one thing, but it is a completely different thing to believe that he is actually arguing with the principles that he has mentioned in *Pol.I*" (Schofield 1999, 215 n. 26). We do not agree with Schofield in this matter. In my opinion, although Aristotle has taken

an alternative to nature, this does not mean that his methods and objectives in *Politics 1* are very different from politics. It is also not of great importance that he has not openly addressed the question concerning nature in his discussion of citizenship in *Politics 3*. It seems to me that the reason why he has once again chosen not to address the question of nature is not because he thinks that nature and politics are two different things, but quite the contrary, that he did not need to return to this topic when the work concluded in *Politics I* (on nature in psychological, metaphysical and scientific writings), continues to be effective and correct throughout his treatises (Arendt 1961).

*Politics I* is dialectical rather than foundational; it tells us as much about nature in terms of politics regarding its working as it tells us about politics in terms of nature. In this interpretation nature is not outside politics, having separate boundaries and providing it with a basic foundation. In fact, nature is actually dependent on ethics and politics, even though both of the former are also dependent on politics. Through the examination and study of Aristotle's account of nature, this strategy for interpreting his philosophy can be justified.

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