Aristotle on Man the Irrational Animal

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I am very happy to be here tonight. I have long admired Hillsdale from afar, but never more than now as we are all called to man the ramparts against the ongoing assault on the culture of the West.

I thank you for inviting me to speak to you about Aristotle. Hardly anyone has a better claim to embodying the culture of the West than does Aristotle. We must never forget that Aristotle, together with his teacher Plato, created the first universities, the Lyceum and the Academy respectively. In so doing, they established a tradition that persists, if only in attenuated form, to the present day—of academic life as an island of reason and sanity in the midst of the sea of irrationality and ignorance that is the common lot of humanity..

This tradition was not established without a struggle. This struggle can be summed up in the iconic event of the death of Socrates. As Cicero says, Socrates was the first to bring philosophy down from the heavens and into the cities of men, to address questions of concern to ordinary human beings, philosophical questions such as the best way of life and the best political order. For this he would pay with his life. But his sacrifice would be world-changing.

The philosophy of Plato and Aristotle is sometimes referred to as classical rationalism. Philosophy so understood is virtually defined by its opposition to tradition, customs and myths—particularly religious myths. As such, it has been taken to accept the premise that human ignorance is remediable, that human reason can withstand the countervailing pull of the human passions, and hence that man can be liberated from the powerful force of myth and religion. It is this understanding that is reflected in Friedrich Nietzsche's early monograph Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks, and taken up subsequently by Martin Heidegger in his notorious project to deconstruct or destroy the "tradition" of western philosophy.

My intention here is to make the case that Aristotle was very far from sharing any such view of human nature.

There are two common misconceptions that stand in the way of coming to grips with Aristotle's relationship to the times in which he lived. The first holds that Aristotle's life was devoted to the intransigent pursuit of philosophic truth about man and the world with little regard for the impact of such a pursuit on others—whether of his own or a later time. The second holds that where he did address matters of concern to ordinary men, his views were essentially conventional. On this understanding, while it is obvious that Aristotle was not a believer in the Olympian gods, his outlook on matters such as slavery, the role of women, and the moral virtues was essentially determined by the values of the aristocratic Greek culture of his day.

These misconceptions are given some color by the literary character of Aristotle's writings. Unlike Plato, whose dialogues are both elusive and openly challenging of conventional wisdom, Aristotle composed (mostly) treatises, writings which if anything seem concerned to accommodate conventional wisdom. This subject is too complex to go into further here. But I think it is safe to say that treatises of his that on the surface seem theoretical and straightforward are in actually frequently guided by a rhetorical intention, and give up their real meaning only with a close reading. Many of you will of course recognize the influence of Leo Strauss here.

I will approach these large issues by reflecting in rather broad terms on my fifty years or so of studying and writing on Aristotle.

My first sustained encounter with Aristotle occurred in the early 1970s in the course of my graduate studies, which focused on the theme of education. The result was my first book, Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle, published in 1982. The following is a quick summary of what emerged from that work, which deals primarily with the last two books of the Politics as well as with Aristotle's Poetics.

--the conviction that Aristotle can be considered the true founder of liberal education. This is meant to distinguish him both from Plato and the ancient rhetorical tradition associated with Isocrates and Cicero, as well as from the medieval construct of the trivium and quadrivium.

--liberal education so understood involves a transmutation of traditional Greek "music" education into one centering on poetry or literature and culminating in a reformed dramatic poetry addressed to mature persons.

--philosophy is quietly but firmly sidelined as integral to liberal education, which however comes to be referred to occasionally as "philosophy" in a looser sense of that word (used conspicuously, for example, by Thucydides in Pericles' funeral oration).

--the traditional (aristocratic) Greek education centered on "music and gymnastic" is comprehensively if quietly critiqued and replaced by one based on an improved understanding of virtue and leisure or the "pastime" (diagoge) pursued in leisure.

--liberal education so understood provides the formation of an improved type of aristocrat or "gentleman" (kaloskagathos) distinguished by culture and the higher virtues, rather than by a warrior ethos like that of the (conventionally admired) Spartans.

--the "best regime" of Politics 7, just like that of Plato's Republic, is essentially defined by the rule of an educated class of this sort rather than any particular institutional arrangement; at a practical level, such a class can coexist with others and exercise political and/or cultural power in a "mixed regime."

--also like the Republic, the deepest theme of Politics 7-8 is the culture-struggle, so to speak, waged by the philosophers on behalf of a reformed aristocratic class against Homer and the tragic poets.

--the centerpiece of this is Aristotle's bold if cryptic refashioning of the central experience of tragedy—"catharsis"—here and in the Poetics.

--supporting this analysis is the extended discussion of Poetics 4 in my article "Aristotle's History of Poetry" (1974). This piece is an indirect response to Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy (in fact, I believe, a refutation of it!).

My second sustained encounter with the master occurred during my time translating the Politics in the late 1970s (first published in 1984). Let me summarize briefly what I learned from this.

--important philological issues surround some Aristotelian writings, but particularly the Politics. The core issue is the unity of the work. Thus began my campaign against Werner Jaeger and his pernicious chronological deconstruction of Aristotelian texts.

--while arguing strenuously for the unity of the Politics, I also came to accept the existence of other philological problems so often associated with ancient texts. Here I think I have caused anxiety in some Straussian circles.

--Aristotle's historical setting here came into view for me. I was struck by the lack of scholarly attention to Aristotle's links with the Macedonian royal house and in particular with Philip. (I also came to believe that the tale of Aristotle's tutoring of Alexander the Great is a fable.) Key developments in his life may be best explained by the vicissitudes of Athenian-Macedonian relations.

--an important if oddly neglected issue here is Aristotle's view of Philip's hegemonial role in Greece, or more generally of Macedonian imperialism. His studied silence on these matters (although with one highly important exception) is highly suggestive, as is his unexpected praise of monarchy at the end of Politics 3.

--in any case, it became clear to me that the Politics cannot be understood as a purely theoretical treatise on politics. Rather, it is an exercise in what Aristotle calls "political science"—politike—a term that deliberately blurs the boundary between theoretical reflection and practice.

The theme of Aristotle's "political science" occupied me increasingly thereafter, suggesting the need for a systematic attempt to disentangle the practical message of aspects of Aristotle's writings from the theoretical argument implied or suggested by them. The result was a volume edited by myself and David O'Connor, Essays on the Foundations of Aristotelian Political Science (1991). I will now focus on my chapter in this work, "Aristotle's Anthropology." This highly speculative piece tries to disinter Aristotle's authentic thinking on the nature of man and the character of pre-political society, in relationship both with contemporary anthropology and the state of nature theory of early modern political philosophy. The indispensable beginning point of any such discussion must be a critical assessment of the apparent teaching of the famous first book of the Politics.

Politics 1 purports to present the development of human society from its origins in the family to what appears to be its natural culmination in the polis, the classical Greek "city". The fundamental argument is that this development is driven by man's material needs. The city too comes into being for the sake of "mere life," yet finds its real purpose in securing the "good life." Man is thus "by nature a political animal." The decisive factor seems to be that man is also a "rational animal." Because he possesses speech or reason (logos), man is capable of sharing with other men a common perception of right and wrong, justice and injustice, and

this common bond cements the unity of human sociality in both the family and the city.

--this bare sketch has been made to bear a great deal of weight. It is cited as the most important evidence for Aristotle's so-called teleological understanding of human nature and nature generally. At the extreme, it has been taken to mean that man is naturally inclined toward and destined to develop into a polis-dwelling being. Seen in this light, man's pre-political condition has no real theoretical significance or interest.

--but Aristotle's account begs many questions. Take his remarks about the primitive family. The family consists not only of man and woman but of (an indeterminate number of) slaves. Aristotle says that a woman differs by nature from a slave, but the point is immediately undercut by his gratuitous comment that this is not so among "the barbarians." To say the least, it is not evident that the institution of slavery can exist without the support of a society extending beyond the family.

--but the fundamental problem is that Aristotle obfuscates the primary causal factor in the establishment of cities—namely, security. The polis may or may not be essential in meeting a people's material needs. It is certainly essential for their defense. In fact, the original meaning of polis in Greek is "citadel," as in the Athenian <u>acropolis</u>, literally, the "high citadel."

--slavery and war are linked phenomena. Slaves are acquired in war, and the institution survived because it was underpinned by force exercised by bodies of men larger than the family.

--furthermore, what is the real meaning of the assertion that man is a political animal? Aristotle was perfectly aware that some men, indeed perhaps most men, lived in organized societies other than the polis. The "village" so-called (<u>kome</u>) is a more or less self-sufficient agrarian unit that can be aggregated in larger structures other than the polis—the "tribe" or "nation." What accounts for their different development seems less economic factors than their general security situation.

--it is only at the end of this preliminary account that Aristotle brings us around to reality. Let me quote this key passage: "There is in everyone by nature an impulse toward this sort of community. And yet he who first founded one is responsible for the greatest of goods. For just as man is the best of the animals when

completed, when separated from the law and adjudication he is the worst of all. For injustice is harshest when it is furnished with arms; and man is born naturally possessing arms for the use of prudence or virtue which are nevertheless very susceptible to being used for their opposites. This is why, without virtue, he is the most unholy and the most savage of the animals, and the worst with regard to sex and food."

--the full meaning of this last comment is too often missed: Aristotle refers to incest and cannibalism. Suddenly, the original human family is less "little house on the prairie," so to speak, than Homer's Cyclops—one "without clan or law" who "lords it over his women and children" and dines on visiting strangers. And far from an inevitable evolution, man only escapes such a state, it seems, by the agency of a human "founder." In other words, Aristotle's natural state of man has more in common with the "state of nature" theories of modern thinkers such as Hobbes than generally recognized.

--also notable here is Aristotle's insistence that human reason is a two-edged sword. It introduces a kind of latitude in human behavior that is not found in the other animals, and it provides man a unique kind of "arms" in a struggle for survival or advancement. Reason, in other words, cannot be understood as <u>the</u> mechanism that lifts man from his original state to the political state—a state in which justice controls human passions and men form self-sustaining communities.

--stepping back for a moment from Aristotle, let us consider what the moderns say about the evolution of man from a pre-political condition. The obvious difficulty with the state of nature theories of Hobbes and his successors is the weakness of the mechanism by which they claim to explain that evolution, given their assumption that natural man is a wholly apolitical or asocial animal. Modern anthropological research has shown that any such view is in reality unsustainable.

--anthropologists have two sorts of responses. If they are Marxists, they emphasize natural scarcity and the struggle over material resources. Otherwise, they tend to find the source of human sociality in the family, kinship more broadly, and/or religion. A classic presentation of such a view is Fustel de Coulange's <u>The Ancient City</u>; it remains the dominant one today.

--but what alternative might there be? Let me cut to the chase. I believe the explanatory mechanism underlying Aristotle's account consists of two separate though related parts. The first is what I will call leadership; the second, solidarity.

And what links the two is the passion or part of the soul that Aristotle, following Plato, calls "spiritedness" (thymos).

--there appears to have been considerable discussion of the question of human origins in philosophical circles in Aristotle's day, though unfortunately little of it survives. Two well-known passages, in Plato's Laws and Polybius' history of Rome (the latter drawing apparently on "Plato and certain other philosophers"), offer similar accounts of the reemergence of human society following devastating world-wide floods. Both accounts emphasize the role of extraordinary ("charismatic" is the equivalent term in contemporary social science) leaders rather than the pressure of material needs. This sort of analysis comports well, by the way, with the portrayal by anthropologists of so-called "big men" and "chieftains" in pre-political societies. I believe it reflects Aristotle's own view. It may be noted that two of Aristotle's students (Theophrastus and Dicaearchus) are said to have written treatises about early or pre-political Greece.

--the second factor I call "solidarity" for the sake of convenience. This is not an Aristotelian term, though it is interesting that its equivalent in Arabic (asabiyya) is a central concept in the Aristotelian-flavored historical sociology of Ibn Khaldoun in the fourteenth century. The key text is the famous passage in Politics 7 where Aristotle discusses the cultural differences between Greeks and their barbarian neighbors. The Greek "nation" is distinguished from others by a combination of culture ("discursive thought and art," he calls it) and "spiritedness." For this reason it both "remains free and governs itself in the best manner, and at the same time is capable of ruling all, should it obtain a single regime." For, he adds, referring to the Guardians of Plato's Republic, "it is spiritedness that creates solidarity [to philetikon, literally, "the element productive of friendship"]. What is ruling and what is free in everyone stems from this capacity: spiritedness Is a thing expert at ruling and indomitable."

--what at first sight looks like a tip of the hat to Greek chauvinism is more complex, and indeed disturbing. Aristotle indicates that spiritedness is the source both of the human impulse to rule and of the human impulse to resist rule in the interests of freedom or human dignity; it underlies man's aggressiveness as well as his resistance to the aggression of others.

--spiritedness is the root of political society in a double sense. On the one hand, it is the source of the bond of solidarity that unites human beings in groups larger than the household and causes them to seek to defend and preserve such groups.

On the other, it provides the fundamental impetus (in the form of the desire for honor or glory) leading to rule or domination, both within the group and relative to outsiders. As for the Greeks, it is difficult not to sense in this a premonition of Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persian Empire. There is little reason to suppose Aristotle would have welcomed this project.

--Aristotle goes out of his way to note that the Greeks differ among themselves in this matter as well. He is certainly thinking in particular of the Spartans. Sparta lay before Aristotle's eyes as the exemplar of a city organized and trained for war and based on domination of a large (and restive) slave population.

--war is not a conspicuous theme in the writings of Aristotle (or for that matter Plato), but both were plainly sensitive to the problem of war and its implications for the pursuit of the best life. In his fundamental discussion of the best way of life at the beginning of Politics 7, Aristotle makes quite clear that for men in society an orientation to war, conquest and the rule of other men is in some way natural—but also that it needs to be resisted, contained or repressed.

--Aristotle's brief account of "spiritedness" in this context is revealing. He makes it clear that spiritedness has both positive and negative effects, and that it is not universally present, or present to the same degree, in human beings and human societies. A central purpose of the treatment of education in Politics 7-8 is to provide an alternative version of traditional Greek education oriented toward the pursuits of peace and leisure rather than war.

--it is therefore a fundamental error to assume that Aristotle simply adopts conventional Greek attitudes toward war or the manly virtues associated with it—any more than he accepts conventional Greek attitudes toward slavery or women. The new philosophic orientation represented by Plato and Aristotle has to be understood rather as a radical "transvaluation of values" of contemporary Greek culture, to borrow the formulation of Nietzsche.

--at the same time, it is also clear that Aristotle is not interested in a direct confrontation between philosophy and what Nietzsche would have called the tragic culture of his time. This is because he was convinced that reason alone is too fragile a pillar on which to base political life.

Finally, then, we return to the issue of the proper interpretation of Aristotelian texts. In fact, it is not difficult to see that the discussion of Politics 1 is guided by an overall rhetorical intention. Like Plato in the Republic, Aristotle begins his

famous treatise on politics by attempting to establish what the conventional wisdom of the day tended to deny—that the polis or political life generally can be grounded in justice or reason, rather than on force or "the advantage of the stronger".