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GOOD CITIZEN OR PHILOSOPHER RULER?

> *There will be no end to the troubles of states, or indeed, my dear Glaucon, of humanity itself, until philosophers become kings in this world.*
>
> —Plato, *Republic*

> *It is not the nature of the polis to be a unity as some thinkers say that it is, [and] what is said to be the supreme good of the polis is actually its ruin.*
>
> —Aristotle, *Politics*

Despite their differences, Plato and Aristotle agreed on many things.

They both stressed the importance of reason as our guide for understanding and shaping the world. Both believed that our physical world is shaped by certain eternal forms that are more real than matter. The difference was that Plato's Forms existed outside matter, whereas Aristotle's forms were unrealizable without it.

Both shared the typical Greek chauvinism about non-Greeks, treating them as barbarians and unfit for serious study. Both condoned the pedophilia prevalent in upper-class Greek circles and the subordinate role of women. And neither uttered a word of condemnation of slavery. Later Western intellectuals would specifically quote Aristotle in its support.*

But they did clash bitterly over how men should be governed.

Aristotle's politics is like his ethics. It is rooted in real life, the Greek *polis* as he knew it, especially Athens, for which he wrote a description of its constitution that we still have. Aristotle believed

that the goal of political institutions was man's improvement rather than his perfection. He believed the way to do this was by encouraging each individual to realize his potential, rather than force him to submit to a collective order.

By contrast, the most famous Platonic dialogue, the *Republic*, is all about raising that collective order to the highest-pitched perfection. Plato explicitly made the individual's health and happiness dependent on the larger political community.[1] Whereas Aristotle looked to Athens as his basic political model, Plato preferred Sparta, Athens's great rival.

Plato's outspoken admiration for Sparta reveals a lot about his ultimate political agenda. That state's regimented and austere values (Sparta was more of a collection of agricultural villages than an urban city) stood in sharp contrast with sophisticated, freewheeling, commercial Athens. However, Spartans could beat any opponent on the field of battle, even when outnumbered, and no one questioned a Spartan's courage or his word—or dared to.

Spartan citizens were not allowed to use money, practice a trade, make a statue, or write a poem. Neither are Plato's Guardians in the *Republic*. For all its limitations, in his *Republic* and the *Laws*, Sparta was proof to Plato that freedom was a function of solidarity and unity of purpose.[2] Aristotle, by contrast, saw Athens as proof that men can be free only if they are individuals and are allowed to live their lives as they, not others, see fit. "Freedom from any interference of government," rather than submitting to its dictates, no matter how just, is one of Aristotle's hallmarks of a democratic society.[3]

Over the centuries, Aristotle's politics will lead the way for Western advocates of individualism and democracy, including America's Founding Fathers. Plato's communitarian vision points very much in the other direction, with ugly consequences. Yet curiously, both drew their arguments from the same vision of freedom in the Greek *polis*. Their disagreement arose over how to fulfill that ideal—and Western political thinking has been split down the middle ever since.

In this sense, Aristotle's view was more parochial and traditional. If Aristotle saw Athens as a largely positive example of the *polis* ideal, Plato's politics was a biting critique of Athenian democracy. This was not just because it had put his beloved teacher, Socrates, to death. It was a negativism shared by nearly everyone in Greek intellectual circles in the mid–fourth century BCE. Democracy, and the *polis* generally, had proved to be a disappointment. Its troubles were reflected in factional strife and declining economies, plus the weakness of the Greek states in confronting the emerging colossus from the north, the kingdom of Macedonia. As one scholar put it, "The fourth century was suffering from political evils which many of the more thoughtful men of the time regarded as incurable, and the sight of which only too often induced a feeling of pessimism and despair."[4]

Plato's antipathy may have run deeper than that. His stepfather had been heavily involved in Periclean politics. In the house where he had been raised, Plato must have witnessed some of the sordid behind-the-scenes deal making and clubhouse politics that permeate every democracy, even ancient Athens. Having seen how the democratic sausage was made, Plato was in no mood to sit at the feast. Instead, his impulse was to start over, more or less from scratch.

This is what we get when we open the pages of his most important and influential treatise, the *Republic*. It is a blow-by-blow account of what the world might look like if it were run by men of knowledge and virtue instead of ignorant, grasping politicians—that is, if a true philosopher like Socrates came down from the sunlit mountaintop back into the cave and set about straightening out the mess in front of him.

So not surprisingly, Socrates is the *Republic*'s main character, and on this all-important topic for the first time he speaks to the reader in the first person. He describes to his listeners the outline of an ideal government that, although unrealizable in reality, can serve as a model for implementing future change. "It makes no difference whether it exists now," Socrates says at one point, "or will ever come into being." By studying the laws of an ideal state,

Plato argues, men will learn how to order their lives better in the real ones.[5]

The ten books of the *Republic* are the centerpiece of Plato's vision, both politically and (as the Myth of the Cave shows) philosophically. But there is a kind of prelude in a much earlier dialogue, the *Gorgias*, where he shows us what he saw as the bleak alternatives to his visionary brand of politics. In it Socrates meets a visiting teacher of rhetoric, Gorgias of Leontini. Gorgias preens himself as a teacher of virtue because he teaches men how to speak persuasively on "the most important of human concerns," as he calls it—namely, politics. However, harried by Socrates's polite but relentless questions, Gorgias has to admit that as a political consultant, he is concerned only with presenting a persuasive message, even if that message is evil rather than good.

"On Gorgias's own admission," as A. E. Taylor explains, "oratory is a device by which an ignorant man persuades an audience equally ignorant" as himself, especially in democratic Athens.[6] It is precisely this kind of political circus and its inherent dangers that a true Platonic science of politics strives to rise above, whether it's in Plato's hometown or later in revolutionary Paris or St. Petersburg.

Socrates's other antagonist is the younger and more sinister Callicles. Instead of Gorgias's moral evasion, Callicles offers a chilling version of might makes right. "Philosophy, Socrates, is a pretty toy," he tells the older man dismissively, but the real world is governed by power and power alone. Conventional notions of right and wrong are drawn up by the weaklings who form the majority of mankind in order to bamboozle their stronger betters. The only truly free man is the one strong or ruthless enough to do as he pleases, Callicles concludes.

Still, Callicles is forced to admit under questioning that might makes right *still* presupposes that some people know better how to rule than others. Even a Hitler or a Saddam Hussein has to know how to do *some* things that a wise and just ruler would do, like policing the streets and making sure there is food on the shelves, if only to hold on to his ill-gotten power. Likewise, even an out-and-out hedonist—and Callicles is a proud hedonist—soon realizes that

not everything that gives pleasure is automatically good (smoking crack cocaine, for example).

So, Socrates says, when talking about what's right and wrong, we are still operating in the realm of knowledge. Indeed, he insists, we never left it. What ultimately makes for the good life is not power or money or the pursuit of pleasure, but *knowledge*—knowledge of what harms and what benefits us (for example, knowing that courage is useless if it leads us to risk our lives needlessly); knowledge of what harms or benefits others; knowledge, finally, of good and evil.

"Let us then allow ourselves to be led by the truth … which teaches that the best way to live is to practice righteousness and virtue. And what is true for the individual, his listeners are forced to concede, must be equally true for society.[7]

Moral relativism, nihilism, hedonism: In the *Gorgias*, Socrates takes them all one and demolishes them one by one. It's a spectacular tour de force. What emerges from this demolition is Plato's secure foundation on which a good society can be built: the pursuit of virtue based on knowledge of the good. Politics is as much about applying that knowledge of the good to the state, as a doctor's job is administering medicine to the body. (It's not clear what Aristotle, the doctor's boy, might have thought of this formula the first time he encountered it at the Academy.) And just as "badness of soul is the very greatest evil to which a man is exposed," so true justice consists of using our knowledge to guide men to virtue, so that they do good instead of evil.

"Ought we not then," Socrates concludes, "to set about our treatment of the state and its citizens on this principle, with the idea of making the citizens themselves as good as possible?"[8]

Plato composed the *Gorgias* when he was just beginning to think about alternatives to the politics of his day. The *Republic*, by contrast, was written when Plato was at the height of his powers. It is by far the richest of all his works, with plenty to appeal to many different kinds of readers. It is Plato's masterpiece, and the most influential of his works, with the exception of the *Timaeus*. At the same time, moralists can admire the *Republic* for its rout of

ethical relativism in Book I, where Socrates demolishes the "might makes right" arguments of Thrasymachus (the *Republic*'s updated version of Callicles) and concludes once again that it is better for our soul's sake to suffer wrong than to do wrong.

Ancient Pythagoreans and medieval astronomers were enraptured by his description in Book X of the music of the celestial spheres, with angels guiding the orbits of the seven planets so that each sustains one note in a perfect harmonic scale.[9] Modern historians enjoy pointing out how many features of Plato's ideal republic—its community of property and dormitory living for its Guardians, its ban on all forms of art and poetry (these being, after all, illusions based on illusions)—reflect those of actual Sparta.

Likewise, Socialists can take pleasure in Plato's insistence that the perfect political community must have no private property: the *Republic* is in effect the first Communist state. Feminists can point to the fact that his class of Philosopher Rulers makes no distinction between men and women. "We must pick suitable women to share the life and duties of Guardians with men," Socrates tells his listeners, "since they are capable of it and the natures of men and women are alike."[10]

Meanwhile, Book VII sets forth the original Myth of the Cave, while Book X offers Socrates's dazzling vision of the afterlife drawn from Pythagorean as well as Orphic sources, and heaven as the final dwelling place for the soul's contemplation of the Forms.

One big question about the *Republic* remains. Was it intended as a blueprint for creating the perfect society or (as some have argued) as a blueprint for totalitarianism? It is unlikely its author meant either one. Instead, the *Republic* is Plato's answer to a single question, "What is justice?" meaning, how are we to regulate our dealings with others? A more colloquial way to put it would be "Why should I be good?"

His short answer is that no one is an island unto himself. Our ethical choices, such as whether to suffer wrong rather than to do wrong, all have social consequences. If we live in a society in which people consistently do evil to themselves (like the crack

addict) and to one another, eventually we end up with no society at all. A society that has fallen into this position, as he believed Athens had, is sick, in Plato's sense almost literally so. It desperately needs a doctor to restore it to spiritual health.[11]

Like a medical doctor, the political healer must wield absolute authority, at least at the start. "When one is advising a sick man who is living in a way injurious to his health," Plato asks, "must one not first of all tell him to change his way of life and give him further counsel only if he is willing to obey?"[12] The idealized society he offers us in the *Republic* is in effect Plato's master prescription on which all future real-life cures of social ills should be based.

The first step is establishing a clear division of labor. Plato's ideal republic is divided into three distinct groups. There are the common householders of farmers, tradesmen, blacksmiths, and other craftsmen, who are essential for the services of the city and who make up the majority of the population (we need to remind ourselves that Plato's ideal commonwealth probably numbers no more than five thousand people). Then there would be the Guardians, or soldiers, who are trained to defend the republic from foreign enemies.

Finally, there is the class of Rulers, who are also the city's philosophers, the moral and administrative keepers of the state; the people who make sure everything else in society works. This third class is, not surprisingly, the main focus of the *Republic*. Socrates tells his listeners how the Rulers will use their knowledge (he carefully describes the mental and physical training they will undergo, including a thorough grounding in mathematics) to harmonize the other two parts of society, just as reason keeps the other two elements of the soul (courage and the appetites) in check.

The class of Rulers are above all a class of legislators and lawmakers. Through good laws, even the lowest and least-educated citizens will be able to learn to be just and virtuous, even if they do not understand justice and virtue themselves. In this way, an ideal society and even an ideal people will result—especially since

Plato's plan includes a rudimentary form of eugenics, with the Rulers making sure the best breed with the best.[13]

At this point, Socrates's listeners get a bit skeptical. Does Socrates think such a society could ever be set up in reality? No, Socrates admits, he does not. But at least it can serve as "the ideal pattern" (the word he uses is *paradeigma*, or paradigm), which the more closely any society approximates it, the happier and more virtuous it will become.[14]

At this moment, two-thirds into Book V of the *Republic*, an important impulse for Western culture is born—and a clever Greek pun. It is the utopian impulse, after the Greek word *utopia*, which can mean either the best place to live (*eutopia*) or nowhere (*u-topia*), since experience (and Aristotle) will teach us that they are one and the same. Still, in various guises over the centuries, in settings large and small, men and women will try to bring their version of Plato's *Republic* to fruition. Some, like Sir Thomas More (who first coined the term *utopia*) and Sir Francis Bacon, will confine their efforts to paper. Others will take up the task more literally with varying and sometimes hilarious, and sometimes horrifying, results. From New Harmony, Indiana, to Pol Pot's Cambodia, they are all efforts to create a brand-new society according to Plato's basic premise, that through laws based on the highest and most certain knowledge, we can create if not the perfect society, at least a pretty fair copy.[†]

Indeed, without a model of perfection, Socrates affirms, "there is no other road to real happiness, either for society or the individual."[15] Of course, Plato's own formula involves what we would see as excessive regimentation. It abolishes private property and marriage for Rulers and Guardians alike. Instead, the Rulers will decide who will breed with whom, in order to produce the best specimens for each class. Plato dictates what kind of food each class will eat and even what kind of music each group will be allowed to hear (stirring martial music for the Guardians and serene, contemplative tunes for the Rulers).

However, the purpose of all these rules and regulations was to end what Plato saw as the worst aspect of normal Greek politics:

the bitter class conflict and clashes among competing factions. In the average Greek city, rich and poor were literally out for each other's blood, as historian Michael Rostovtzeff has pointed out in his description of what politics was like in one city-state, the home of the philosopher Thales:

> At Miletus the people were at first victorious and murdered the wives and children of the aristocrats: then the aristocrats prevailed and burned their opponents alive, lighting up the open spaces of the city with live torches.[16]

In his stepfather's household, he had seen the typical Athenian politician who sought to exploit rather than end these ancient antagonisms. The mission of Plato's Philosopher Ruler was to end this kind of madness.

On his mother's side he had an ancestor who could serve as his model statesman. This was the legendary legislator Solon, whose laws ended the civil strife that had divided Athens in the sixth century BCE. Solon's reforms, which embodied "his preference for an ordered life, with its careful gradations giving its class its proper place," earned him pride of place among the Seven Wise Men of Greece. They also made Solon the real-life paradigm for Plato's Philosopher Rulers in the *Republic*, where "those we call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy come into the same hands."[17] A truly utopian hope, we might say—but amazingly, Plato got the chance to try it himself in 367 BCE, when he was nearly sixty. Twenty years earlier during his trip to Italy, he had visited Syracuse, Sicily's largest city-state, and made fast friends with the brother of its ruler, a man named Dion. Two decades later Dion invited him to return as political adviser to Syracuse's new ruler, Dion's nephew Dionysius II.

The offer seemed irresistible to Plato. He had just finished the *Republic*, or was nearly finished. What better opportunity to transform his theory into action—to see the principles of law, virtue, and justice he had set forth achieved in reality? "Now is the

time to try," Plato told himself, so he set off by ship for Syracuse, hoping he might be following in the footsteps of his illustrious ancestor Solon.[18]

As soon as he landed and met Dionysius II, however, he learned that legislating perfect justice is not so easy. His friendship with Dion went back twenty years. "I imparted to him my ideas of what was best for men," Plato later tells us in one of his letters, "and he listened with a zeal and attentiveness I had never encountered in any young man."[19] Dion now encouraged Plato to cleanse Syracuse of her luxuries and vices "and put on her the garment of freedom," along with laws to make the citizens orderly and virtuous. Plato may even have contemplated abolishing private property as he had in the *Republic*, or at least imposing limits on wealth. Certainly he hoped to train the young Dionysius to become the kind of conscientious ruler a true Platonic state would need to maintain order: in short, a living Philosopher Ruler.

Plato's hopes were quickly dashed. Dionysius II had every gift except good sense; he was also an incurable alcoholic. He soon lost patience with his two would-be political tutors and threw them out. Stuck in exile in Athens, Dion devoted himself to raising money and troops to liberate his native land and expel Dionysius. Many Academy students joined in, possibly with Plato's encouragement, and sailed with Dion's expedition to Syracuse. Although outnumbered, they managed to topple Dionysius's tyranny. Now it was Dion himself who seemed poised to realize Plato's dreams.

However, as the people of Syracuse soon observed, "we have only exchanged a drunken tyrant for a sober one."[20] Dion proved to be just as corrupt as his unlamented nephew, and eventually he, too, had to be driven out by force.

Plato watched the unfolding of these events from his Academy in Athens. They also made him sadder and wiser. When some of Dion's former friends asked Plato for advice on a future constitution for Syracuse, he gave them far more modest advice than the grandiose vision he had set forth in the *Republic*. It involved a mixed constitution of democratic and monarchical elements, with a warning: "Do not subject Sicily or any other state

to the despotism of men, but to the rule of laws; this at least," he adds timidly, "is my doctrine."[21]

The vision of a perfect commonwealth united in virtue and justice that seemed so dazzling in theory proved much messier in practice. The utopian impulse requires some regard for reality. And thanks to the Syracuse experience, Plato's late political writings like the *Statesman* and the *Laws* make more concessions to reality than his earlier masterwork.

All the same, they are animated by the same beliefs. Good laws will make good men, and the best laws are forged not in the heat of crisis or the give-and-take of ordinary political debate, where men's appetites take over, but through the exercise of knowledge and reason. Self-interest must learn to yield to the common interest; and men must be united if they are to be free. Taken together, that remains Plato's most important political legacy.

Here, the final word belongs to Socrates. "The society we have described," he says in the *Republic*, "can never grow into a reality or see the light of day." Nonetheless, "there will be no end to the troubles of states, or indeed, my dear Glaucon, of humanity itself, until philosophers become kings in this world."[22]

As we might expect, Aristotle's approach is very different. Aristotle's *Politics*, like his *Metaphysics*, turns Plato's system upside down. For Plato, we find our true freedom only when we find our proper place within the political community. Aristotle, by contrast, concludes that community exists to serve the individuals who make it up, not the other way around. Plato's *Republic* celebrates a communitarian ideal based on men's dreams. It will give us Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx, but also Martin Luther King. Aristotle's *Politics*, by contrast, will give us Thomas Aquinas and Thomas Jefferson, as well as Boss Tweed. It marks the birth of a democratic individualism that draws its pragmatic principles from sometimes hard-won experience.

This is because Aristotle's philosopher is always an observer of reality, not the creator of it. Instead of laying out the perfect

blueprint, then turning reluctantly to the real world, Aristotle starts with the real world itself.

When he wrote his *Politics*, which is more a collection of essays than a single treatise, that real world was the Greek city-state. The original *Politics* was accompanied by something like 158 constitutions from actual Greek cities, of which only the Athenian example survives. These constitutions were for Aristotle the biological specimens for his political laboratory. As he had done with the fish and mollusks he had collected, he intended to probe inside to find out how they worked, in order to arrive at a general picture of how *all* political societies worked, or should work.

Political science on Aristotle's terms is about observation and analysis, or induction: very much what goes on in political science departments in universities today. Aristotle knew that a political science on Plato's terms, based on an exact knowledge of how to create the perfect laws, might be a worthy goal. Plato's writings, Aristotle says, "show ingenuity, novelty of view, and a spirit of inquiry."

But perfect laws cannot stand up to the lessons of experience in actual cities and societies, "in which these things [advocated by Plato] would not have gone unnoticed if they had really been good." As with ethics, in Aristotle's politics it is the practice, not the vision, that counts.[23]

Like Plato, Aristotle accepts that the goal of politics is to make the members of the community good. "The end of political science is the highest good; and the chief concern of this science is to endow the citizens with … virtue and the readiness to do fine deeds."[24] However, the way to get there is not from the top down, as in Plato's *Republic* and the *Laws*, but from the bottom up.

Aristotle reveals that the essential building block of every political community must be the individual household, consisting of the citizen and his family (including household slaves). From the household springs every other type of human association, starting with the clan or tribe. The final realization of all *these* associations is the self-governing city-state, the *polis*.

But that community still exists, Aristotle argues, in order to make the householder happy, rather than the other way around. This is why Aristotle describes man, in his most famous phrase, as a "political animal." We are *zoon politikon* by nature, but we join together to realize our own ends as individuals, not to serve the ends of others. In order to do this, men require some freedom from government interference, and in a democracy like Athens, they require equality before the law. In his *Politics* Aristotle set out the essential prerequisites of democratic liberty pretty much as they remain today.[25]

This is why Aristotle becomes so impatient when he turns to the *Republic*. Plato's goal is unity, a laudable one. But Aristotle says that this kind of unity equals the death of the *polis* and freedom. Plato's authoritarian, even arbitrary, rules reduce the community to the outlook of a single household or family, whereas a truly free society requires an aggregate of families and, as he says, "different kinds of men."

For Aristotle, diversity is the keynote of the free society, and free exchange lies at its heart. In the true (as opposed to the ideal) political community there must be a diversity of social roles, like the differing arts and crafts and social types we find along the street, from pot makers and carpenters to sea captains and merchants and wealthy landowners. This also entails a diversity of individual talents and abilities and a growing diversity of individual interests. A free society "necessarily requires a difference of capacities among its members," Aristotle writes in Book II, "which enables them to serve as complements to one another, and to attain a higher and better life by the mutual exchange of their different services."[26]

The political character of the citizenry must reflect that same diversity. Instead of one group monopolizing political power—even if that monopoly, as in the case of the *Republic*, is for everyone's good—"the natural equality of all the citizens" in a free state requires human beings to share power and to experience ruling and being ruled in turn. Aristotle's free society is one in which the citizens participate in their government rather than

submit to it. *All* will be rulers in one way or another, at one time or another. "This means some rule, and others are ruled, in turn, as if they had become, for the time being, different persons."[27]

Some citizens will run for office, like the magistrates, or *archons*, chosen annually in Athens. Others will sit in the councils elected by the tribal districts, or *demes*; still others will vote by a simple show of hands in the assembly. All need some role to play, and the job of a constitution is to devise a system for doing that. Because if some lose their turn at ruling and being ruled or are systematically excluded, Aristotle concludes, we all lose out, "which again proves that difference of kinds is essential to the constitution of a *polis*."[28]

The same is true with the economic life of the *polis*. The diversity of crafts and exchanges is what gives it its energy and dynamism; it is what makes the self-governing community self-sufficient. Plato's ban on certain crafts, like statue making or writing poetry, and restrictions on others seemed absurd to Aristotle. However, Aristotle recognized that some will do better at their jobs and professions than others. Diversity of interests means inequality of results, even a division between rich and poor.

That division, and the resulting class conflict that infected all the Greek city-states, is the sign of a free society. It is one reason Aristotle stands so opposed to Plato's communism. Enforcing economic equality is not just a violation of common sense. It also flies in the face of why the *polis* exists at all.[29]

For Aristotle, class conflict is inevitable. He spends nearly half the *Politics* talking about it. But this conflict is not a source of despair, as it was for Plato. Nor is it a sign that political disaster is looming. Instead, Aristotle's science of politics is about learning how to build a harmony out of these competing existing parts through balance and moderation, rather than trying to *impose* order and harmony through rational legislation, as Plato tried to do in his *Republic*.

So the basis of Aristotle's secure and stable order is not the Philosopher Ruler, but the good citizen who participates actively in the political, social, and economic life of his community. He takes his turn in office and in voting; he leads his own life with his

family; and he pursues his own interests at work every day. In his values and orientation, Aristotle's citizen is a true "political animal." To borrow a word that will be freighted with other meanings later on, he is *bourgeois*.

In his daily interactions, he practices that peculiar mixture of prudence and virtue that enables him to hit the mean and keeps his family and his *polis* on an even keel even as it complements the same virtues of his neighbors. He is no visionary or crusader. Aristotle would have little patience with those we call political activists. The good citizen's life is not about achieving one single goal, however laudable, or doing one thing perfectly. It is about doing all things well enough to be a happy man—and be an integral part of a happy free society.

Still, Aristotle holds out for certain principles that were traditional to the Greek *polis*. He still believes that the goal of self-government must be cultivating the good life as defined by our nature, not just self-defense or the protection of property (that will occur to other Aristotelians later).[30] He also believes that justice within the city must be based on what we deserve by our contributions; in other words it must be distributive, meaning the wealthy get more and women and slaves have no political identity.

But in Book III, Aristotle confronts the weightiest issue of all. Plato had raised it in the *Republic:* "Who should rule?" In modern political parlance, this is the issue of sovereignty. In the end, after examining the best constitutions and the conditions on the ground, Aristotle concludes that power belongs best with the people. This may be difficult to achieve, he points out. It may fly in the face of Plato's claim that laws should be made by those who know best.

But "there is this to be said about the Many," Aristotle remarks. "Each of them by himself may not be of [much] quality; but when they all come together it is possible they may surpass—collectively and as a body, not individually—the quality of the few best."[31] Those who argue that only experts know best are wrong. In politics, as in house building, the best judge of what works is the user, not the maker. Aristotle's support for the rule of the people, backed by "rightly constitutional laws" that must be ultimately

sovereign, becomes a crucial legacy for the future of the West. Democracy on the Athenian model may not be ideal, Aristotle says, but it may be the best we can hope for.[32]

By the time we close the last pages of the *Politics*, we realize we are standing on the brink of two different ways of thinking about governing human beings. Politics on Plato's terms becomes *prescriptive*, a series of formulae for shaping man and society into what they should be rather than accepting things as they are. Politics on Aristotle's terms will be largely *descriptive*, in which the more we discover about human nature, the more we recognize our powerlessness to effect real change.

Ironically, that point was rammed home by Aristotle's own experience with real-life politics when he became tutor to Philip of Macedon's son Alexander.

Plato was sixty when he took his stab at high politics. Aristotle was about forty. He was not yet famous, and his own views were still developing. Despite his urban bias, Aristotle was not indifferent to the heroic, even Homeric, virtues this headstrong virile athletic youth seemed to represent. He may even have hoped that he could turn the sixteen-year-old Alexander into a real-life version of his "great-souled man" outlined in the *Ethics*.

Alexander and Aristotle were together for four years. When they parted company, it was as if they had never met. "Men who are utterly superior" to others, Aristotle says at one point in the *Politics*, are "a law unto themselves."[33] Perhaps the one thing Alexander got out of his lessons with Aristotle was the sense of natural Greek superiority to other barbarian races, and that if Greeks ever truly unified, they could crush anyone, even the Persian Empire. Alexander, of course, proceeded to do just that. But this was a chauvinist view he could have learned from almost any Greek writer in the mid–fourth century BCE, even Plato.

As for Aristotle, his links to Alexander and the royal family certainly did not hurt his career. He and the regent Alexander left behind in Greece, Antipater, seem to have been on fairly intimate terms.[34] Aristotle's nephew and disciple, Callisthenes, actually went with Alexander on his conquests. But in the end, Alexander

remained the same ruthless barbarian his father had been. Teaching him had been like petting a lion in the zoo, Aristotle learned. It is better to take your hand out of the bars too soon rather than too late. Alexander eventually turned on Callisthenes and had him executed on trumped-up treason charges. Faced with the decision to defend his nephew against Alexander's unjust attacks, Aristotle thought it wiser to do and say nothing.

It is an instructive story. Since World War II, political theorists have been all too aware of the dangers of Plato's approach to politics, of reaching too high and too fast to make our utopian hopes a reality. ‡ The Philosopher Ruler can turn out to be Cambodia's Pol Pot or the Ayatollah Khomeini.

But there are dangers inherent in Aristotle's approach as well. They involve an acceptance of the status quo that can shade into timidity, and rationalizing injustices with a casual shrug of "that's the way things are." Aristotle's philosophy emphasizes the necessity of change, even progress. Yet paradoxically, his insistence on being the detached observer, on analyzing rather than influencing events, winds up providing the excuse for institutional inertia and apathy. This is what happened when his influence grew too strong in the universities of medieval Europe and when scholars turned to Aristotle to justify appalling episodes like the slave trade and the conquest of the New World.§

The necessary antidote to Aristotelian indifference appears, appropriately enough, in Plato's *Republic*. There he lists the qualities he most esteems in the Guardians of his imaginary state, one of which is *thymos*. It is not an easy word to translate. Most commentators describe it as spirit or courage. For Plato, it is the natural ally of reason rather than the appetites.[35]

We can also translate *thymos* as righteous anger, the burning indignation we feel at the sight of a parent abusing a helpless child, or any wrongdoing and injustice. *Thymos* is the fire that burns in the heart of the activist, the reformer, the revolutionary, and the intellectual rebel. All the truly great reformers had it: Mohandas Gandhi, Emmeline Pankhurst, William Wilberforce, Bishop Desmond Tutu. It's what distinguishes a Martin Luther from

an Erasmus; a Rousseau from a Voltaire; a Martin Luther King from a Booker T. Washington; and a Lenin from a Kerensky. It's a quality that can land us all in trouble; but sometimes it also springs us out of servitude.

More than once in history, Aristotle's writings will offer a pretext around which brutal practices like slavery and imperialism, and narrow-minded and rigid orthodoxies, will be justified or built. And more than once in history, it will take a renegade Platonist to knock them down.

From politics and ethics to theories of knowledge and nature, then, the battle lines between Plato and Aristotle were drawn. They would strengthen and intensify, as disciples and admirers took over the struggle. The best would borrow from both, but none could evade the fact that Greek, and then Western, thought was now set on a double, rather than a single, track. And it would move in directions and toward places neither Plato nor Aristotle could ever have imagined.

In 335–34, Aristotle returned to Athens. He was now the foremost living philosopher in Greece. He had not seen the city since Plato's death. As he walked the streets, however, he would have wandered past the Academy, where he had spent most of his young adulthood. The man who had squeezed him out as director, Plato's nephew Speusippus, was dead. But the members had chosen as his successor a man who was just as opposed to Aristotle's theories as Speusippus had been. So Aristotle decided it was time to found his own school.

The place he found for it was on the eastern side of town, in some rented buildings close to a grove sacred to the god Apollo Lykeius. Later, when he had some buildings of his own constructed on the site, the name stuck. The Lyceum was Aristotle's answer to the Academy and its mirror image. There was a large garden and a temple dedicated to the Nine Muses, or museum, just as there was in the Academy. There were also lecture rooms, large billboards on which were mounted maps of Greece and the world, and a room

set aside for a growing collection of books and scrolls (as far as we know, the first formal library in the ancient world).

There were also rooms with tables for collecting and dissecting biological specimens. As we would expect, Aristotle made sure his Lyceum students had a thorough training in the natural sciences. His student Theophrastus's *History of Plants* and Aristotle's own *History of Animals* were the fruits of the Lyceum laboratory. Aristotle also created the first real medical school, which became famous all across Greece. Aristotle deserves the title of father of medicine as least as much as Hippocrates does.

Aristotle lectured regularly just as his teacher Plato had, usually on the more difficult philosophical topics in the mornings and on rhetoric and dialectic in the afternoons. Most of what survive as Aristotle's writings were probably lecture notes preserved by his listeners. And since Aristotle liked to walk as he talked, with his pupils following behind and on either side of him, the students of the Lyceum became known as the "wanderers," or *peripatetikoi*—the Peripatetics.

The productive routine of the Lyceum and Aristotle's last years was shattered by a single event: the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE. Overnight, it turned the Greek world upside down. Those who had been out of favor as opponents of Macedonian rule were in; those who had collaborated or benefited from the Alexandrian order found themselves in danger. Aristotle himself fled Athens for Chalcis in Euboea, where his mother had owned property and where in his last years he was able to find some shelter from the storms around him.

One of his last pieces of writing that survives is his will. It mentions which sister will take custody of his son and daughter and which gets the house and garden. He names which slaves are to be set free and asks that money be set aside for a modest memorial statue to Zeus. He never mentions the Lyceum or his old students and friends. It is, as his biographer Werner Jaeger pointed out, the will of a lonely man.[36]

He passed on in his sixty-second year, in 322, a year after Alexander, his most famous pupil. Aristotle died alone and

isolated, almost in disgrace. Even Delphi had stripped him of the honors it had heaped on him during his lifetime. Although his portrait bust remained in the museum of the school he had founded, his own writings sat in the Lyceum's library for nearly a century, largely forgotten.

All the same, under his former pupil Theophrastus the Lyceum was about to take on a life of its own. Its work and the patient inquiries of its Peripatetics would spread far beyond the interests of its founder, even as Plato's Academy did. In fact, the clash between Plato and Aristotle's legacies was just beginning.

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* See chapter 25.

† It is said that, after the Koran, Plato's *Republic* was the favorite book of the founder of Iran's Islamic republic, the Ayatollah Khomeini.

‡ The centerpiece of this critique is Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, which was first published in 1945 but which Popper began writing the day Nazi Germany occupied Austria in the *Anschluss* of 1938. For more on this, see chapter 29.

§ See chapter 25.