

Human Nature and Politics

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Polybius and Aristotle share a common belief that humans are political in nature and that the state rises as a result of that trait in order to help humans meet their most essential needs. Polybius, however, believes that the state begins out of a natural need for protection and security, whereas Aristotle argues that the state exists to help humans thrive and achieve excellence. Polybius' understanding of human nature leads him to endorse the Roman constitution as a creator of the stability that humans need, while Aristotle proposes a form of aristocracy where those capable of excellence have the best chance to develop. The basic understanding of the political nature of humans held by Polybius and Aristotle informs their political ideals and leads to key differences in their idea of the best possible state.

The belief that humans have a deeply political nature is an idea that is fundamental in Polybius' *The Histories of Polybius* and Aristotle's *The Politics*. Polybius outlines a cycle that is an "undeviating law of nature" which begins with natural despotism and continues through a cycle of good governance and subsequent decay (Polybius, Hultsch, and Shuckburgh 1974, 446). Despotism becomes kingship and then cycles through regimes of tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and mob rule before returning to despotism. After describing this cycle, Polybius poses the question, "What is the origin then of a constitution, and whence is it produced?" (461). He explains that in the beginning of that cycle humans "would, like animals, herd together; for it is reasonable to suppose that bodily weakness would induce them to seek those of their own kind to herd with" (461). This primal need for protection is what begins the political interaction that is instinctual to humans and is therefore the most important value in government. He uses that understanding of human nature as the basis for his ideal government, an approach that is shared by Aristotle.

Aristotle begins "The Politics" by establishing his belief that "the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal" (Everson 1996, 13). He says that the state is

created as the natural evolution of human interaction. That human interaction comes from the “social instinct... implanted in all men by nature” which helps men to achieve excellence by creating a better life through politics (14). That social and political instinct is vital to human development because “man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all” (14). In other words, what separates men from animals is their political instinct which allows them to thrive and help each other. This is very similar to Polybius’ view that political arrangements start naturally with humans grouping together like animals for protection. In both cases a political arrangement occurs instinctually without any outside influence. Aristotle identifies politics as an essential part of human nature by explaining the social interactions of humans and how they help humans provide for their needs and have a better quality of life.

Polybius and Aristotle both show how their ideal political structure will help humans reach their ideal, however, they differ on what that ideal is. Aristotle explains that thought process by saying, “He who would duly inquire about the best form of a state ought first to determine which is the most eligible life, ... for, ... men may be expected to lead the best life who are governed in the best manner” (Everson 1996, 166). Polybius identifies that ideal as safety and stability which become priorities in his ideal state. He describes his ideal state as one that can “remain long steady like a ship sailing close to the wind” (Polybius, Hultsch, and Shuckburgh 1974, 467). He chooses the Roman constitution for its unparalleled duration and strength which gives humans the best shot at attaining the security they need. On the other hand, Aristotle believes that a human’s greatest need is not just safety, but to achieve excellence or eudaimonia which is his version of the ideal life. “The best life,” he says, “both for individuals and states, is the life of excellence, when excellence has external goods enough for the performance of good actions” (Everson 1996, 170). He proposes a form of aristocracy in

which only those capable of producing excellence will be citizens and will have every opportunity to have their needs met and achieve excellence. Polybius and Aristotle agree that the ideal state helps humans to meet their natural needs, but the difference in their understanding of those human needs lead them to recommend very different political systems.

Polybius values stability and safety, therefore his ideal state provides that for its citizens. That stability can be defined as the length of time that a government stays in power and can defend its citizens. Under that definition, the goal of a government for Polybius is to delay the inevitable governmental cycle of decay for as long as possible. The longer that status is maintained, the longer the people avoid the uncertainty of change and the danger involved in the process of a power struggle in the government. He focuses little on human potential for acting well and is more interested in their survival. With that in mind, Polybius evaluates existing governments and concludes that Rome is the best government for that purpose.

The Roman constitution according to Polybius is the best way to create a stable and safe government. He evaluates existing government styles like kingship, aristocracy, and democracy and sees their tendency to decay into worse forms like tyranny, oligarchy, and mob rule. He follows the thought process of other politicians who “saw all this, and accordingly combined together all the excellence and distinctive features of the best constitutions, that no part should become unduly predominant, and be perverted into its own kindred vice” (Polybius, Hultsch, and Shuckburgh 1974, 467). The Roman constitution has a consul, the senate, and the people which correspond with kingship, aristocracy, and democracy in Polybius’ cycle. Governmental power is split between the three parts so that no one has complete control and “proper equilibrium is maintained by the impulsiveness of one part being checked by its fear of the other” (474). Each part of government has power over and is subject to all other parts which delays the decay until one part finally gains power and the government returns to the cycle and

loses stability. Polybius explains that the Roman government is the longest lasting government with the strongest military that he is aware of. Therefore, following the example of the Roman constitution is the best way for humans to meet their needs of safety and stability. Polybius' choice of government is clearly influenced by his perspective on human nature and its need for protection and stability.

Aristotle created his ideal state on the assumption that humans capable of excellence should have their needs met and that the government would help in that effort. His approach has a much more ambitious and optimistic view of human nature than Polybius'. Aristotle sees the potential for humans to not only survive, but to achieve a life with meaning and happiness which he defines as excellence. This idea comes from the fact that he sees the gift of speech as something that separates humans from animals and allows them to create a state in order to help each other improve. Aristotle says that if humans do not use their intelligence to be better, they become "the most unholy and savage of animals" (Everson 1996, 14). Since the alternative to good government for Aristotle is so destructive, he is much more concerned with human improvement than Polybius, who sees bad government as just another phase in an inevitable cycle. He says that the things required for a man to be able to work towards excellence can be split into three categories: "external goods, goods of the body, and goods of the soul" (166). When citizens' needs are met, they will have the time, resources, and opportunities to seek excellence. They are able to develop courage, justice, and wisdom, to become "highly cultivated in their mind and in their character," as they serve in the government and elsewhere (167). Aristotle carefully designs his government in a way that allows the people he believes to be capable of excellence to spend the most time developing those qualities and do something more meaningful than simply survive.

Aristotle chooses a form of aristocracy as his preferred government because it allows its citizens the opportunities to develop the attributes that lead to excellence. Those who are incapable of excellence such as slaves, barbarians, artisans, and women are not citizens of his state. Positions in the state are given based on merit, and in order to do that Aristotle keeps his ideal state small. He explains that “if citizens are to judge and to distribute offices according to merit, then they must know each other’s characters” which is only possible in a small state (Everson 1996, 173). His state includes warriors, councilors, and priests who are land owners capable of excellence that form the equivalent of an aristocracy. The young men are warriors and the old men are councilors so when the warriors age they replace the older men and have their turn to rule while the older men become priests. The members of this class have their needs provided for as part of the system of government. External goods, goods of the body, and goods of the soul are provided for by the citizens, farmers and artisans, and priests. This situation, Aristotle believes, will offer the best opportunity for citizens to live “the most eligible life” (166).

Polybius and Aristotle carefully outline how their proposed states will help humans reach an ideal based on their respective understandings of human nature. They use the same method for deciding on the ideal state by starting with human political nature and identifying what form of government would best help humans fulfill that nature. They agree that humans have innate political tendencies but disagree on why they have those instincts. The difference between stability and excellence as explanations for human political instincts accounts for the vastly different ideal governments of Rome and aristocracy proposed by the two thinkers.

Bibliography

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