

*“Maybe When You’re Older”: An Investigation of Aristotle’s Exclusion of Youth from Philosophy and Political Science*

Despite being a foundational thinker in philosophy, Aristotle holds many views that may be deemed contentious. One such view that the young should not partake in philosophy or political science (1095a1-10). Given his elitist streak found in other works, it is not too surprising that Aristotle holds this view, but it is nonetheless worth investigating. This paper is threefold in its purpose; it serves to explicate Aristotle’s original position on why the young should not do philosophy or political science, provide a thoughtful reply in light of his position, and to explore potential rejoinders from Aristotle’s perspective to this reply.

First, it is essential to present a charitable account of Aristotle’s position. To understand his claim, it is essential to break down how he defines “youth” as well as “political science.” Aristotle delineates between two types of young people who he believes should not engage in philosophy/political science; those who lack experience and those who are immature (or dictated by passions instead of reason). According to Aristotle, an individual must not fall into either category if they are to be a student of either discipline. Experience seems to be the linch-pin that holds Aristotle’s argument together, seeing as he says, “[youth] lack experience of the actions in life which political sciences argues from and about” (1095a1-5). At the risk of overstepping, one may even say that there is a form and content requirement necessary to engage in philosophy and political science. The experience of the individual is the key ingredient of the content, and the ability to address issues rationally is essential to the form of these activities. In short, one must have legitimate material to philosophize or politicize about and also know the methods to do so.

But what does Aristotle mean when he invokes the term “political science”? According to him, political science has three main characteristics: 1. It determines what sciences ought to be studied in cities, who is allowed to study them, and to what extent, 2. It is superior to other highly esteemed sciences such as generalship, rhetoric, household management, etc., and 3. It deploys the sciences below it when necessary to determine when and what actions are to be taken in any given circumstance (1094b1-5). If it is assumed that political sciences requires proficiency (and in many cases, mastery) of generalship, rhetoric, etc., then it becomes more clear why Aristotle assumes his position. To master these various sciences would require years of experience. One could argue that someone who is immature in character would not be capable of mastering the sciences subordinate to political science, let alone political science itself. This is due in part to the fact that rationality, according to Aristotle, is the distinguishing and governing principle by which an individual should live.

Now that Aristotle’s position has been established, an adequate reply can be made. One can agree with Aristotle; the young should not do philosophy if they do not have the cognitive abilities necessary to engage in the higher order thinking philosophy is steeped in, nor if they are still engaged in the process of habituation, since they have not cultivated the virtues necessary to engage in political science. However, there is no shortage of reasons to disagree with Aristotle either. One could argue that the young should do philosophy and that engaging in higher order thinking need not always be coupled with certain types of experience. One could also disagree on the grounds that an individual guided by reason, the proper manifestation of virtue for a human, is capable of engaging in philosophy and/or political science regardless of their age. Despite the many possible avenues available, this last disagreement (concerning reasoning regardless of age

will be pursued so as to gain a better understanding of what motivates Aristotle's position in the first place.

The case for youth studying philosophy may hold up better than the one for political science, however. If lived experiences of a certain kind are necessary to be a suitable candidate for studying political science, there seem to be two possible explanations for Aristotle's argument. One explanation is that lacking the necessary experiences is a definitive characteristic of youth itself, and the other is that lacking necessary experiences is a characteristic that is not essential to, but almost always accompanies youth. In light of this, could argue that individuals are not inherently unsuitable for studying political science because they are young in years. Rather, the society in which Aristotle lives could simply be structured in a way that is not conducive to youth experiencing what he believes to be necessary for competence in studying political science. Perhaps there is nothing intrinsic about youthfulness that prevents the fruitful study of political science. If youth is defined as lacking the particular experiences necessary to be suited for political science, however, then it is clear that youth ought not study the subject.

In the case of philosophy, it can be said that proper command of the methods in which it is done is a sufficient criterion for studying it. In most cases, subject matter in philosophy maps onto the world differently than political science. For example, discussing a priori knowledge, unmoved movers, and first principles does not necessarily rely on empirical experience, whereas the domain of interest for political science as well as its prescriptions are (if done well) always grounded in experience.

Now that a reply has been made, it will be helpful to revisit Aristotle for a potential rejoinder. Even if Aristotle were to accept every aspect of the reply above, there is still plenty of

room for pushback from a pragmatic perspective. Perhaps young people are capable of learning philosophy and political science at a young age, but this may be a rare occurrence, and the benefits of delaying study outweigh the limitations. While a rejoinder for excluding the young from philosophy may not be the strongest, a better case can be made for young people not studying political science.

As hinted at earlier, most contemporary notions of political science are not completely aligned with the Aristotelian one. With the polity and their sciences and activities being contingent on decisions of the politician, the potential for a change in the economic, social, and epistemological landscape based on the decisions of politicians was likely far more immediate than in today's society. Simply put, political science was likely more weighty in Aristotle's time. Aristotle's original concern can also be revisited, even in light of the reply made in this paper. It is obvious that formal learning and experiential learning are both important if one is to engage in political science and do well. Aristotle seems to be concerned about situations in which formal knowledge is present without true experience. Those in a position of power with formal learning but no experiential learning could adversely impact society on a wide scale.

While Aristotle's position on youth not studying philosophy and political science raises plenty of objections, it creates an opportunity to inquire further about the role that experience plays in contextualizing knowledge. Furthermore, it is a reminder that the sciences one engages with are powerful in themselves and can hold great influence depending on how they are deployed. This is why it is important to cultivate character and excellence in young people, as Aristotle desired, so that the study of both philosophy and political science can bring about intrinsic and extrinsic benefits.

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References:

1. Aristotle, Gail Fine, and Terence Irwin. *Aristotle: Introductory Readings*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2009.
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