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Short Paper 1

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In Book 1 of *Politics*, Aristotle examines the very nature of associations in relation to human beings and society. According to Aristotle, it is in the nature of man to execute all their acts with an aim to achieve something good, in which, therefore, all associations aim at doing something good. The city then is the highest form of association because it includes the interests of all. While analyzing the city as the ultimate association, Aristotle famously states that “the city is prior in the order of nature to the family and the individual, [and that] the reason for this is that the whole is necessarily prior to the part” (Aristotle 167). This quote can be best explicated and understood through examining the nature of association and connecting it to the idea of parts and wholes.

Understanding association is critical to further comprehending how the city is prior in the order of nature to the individual. Aristotle declares that there is a hierarchy of associations, starting at a basic union of those who need each other and/or master and slave, which then evolves into the household, the village, and finally into the city. Thus, the city is the final product of a long line of associations. The whole reason that associations exist in the first place is to achieve some sort of goal. In the case of the city, the goal is to meet every individual’s needs and ultimately help people become virtuous and happy. We usually tend to think of ourselves, the individual, first, and by stating the city is prior to the nature of the family and even the

individual, the obvious question comes up: how would the associations that make up a city even exist without individuals, so wouldn't the individual come first? While a valid question, we have to examine the very nature of association in a different way. Aristotle argues that the “city is prior in the order of nature to the family and the individual” because the city enables or gives rise to the individual (Aristotle 167). For example, the individual would not be able to properly function and exist without a household to properly raise him. This household would not be able to exist without a village in which a handful of other extended family and close friends have designated parts to provide for the household. This village would be nothing without a bigger society or city where they can interact, trade with, and receive technology. Thus, by this definition, the city does come before the individual in the order of nature because the polis generates the individual itself. By understanding this very nature of association, we can understand why Aristotle states the city is prior in the order of nature to the individual.

Additionally, we can also look at the idea of parts and wholes to understand the quote even further. Aristotle argues that “what each thing is when its growth is completed we call the nature of that thing” (Aristotle 167). For example, in our definition of a human, we think of a fully grown one. When something's growth is completed, it is self-sufficient and as argued by Aristotle, the best. We can see the different levels of association mentioned in the previous paragraph as a sort of growth - starting with the individual. Mankind is not self-sufficient but when the associations evolve into a city, this is the final cause which is both self-sufficient and the best. Therefore, it must come prior to the individual, and the whole comes before the part. Furthermore, we can see this through an example Aristotle gives of the human body. Taking a human, if we destroy the entire body, there isn't going to be a foot or hand left, and if there is, it will have no use without the essential function of the human body which is made up of thousands

of intricate interactions between mind, nerves, and countless other body parts. We can compare this to a tree. A tree provides an essential function to the world, its many parts working together to photosynthesize and provide oxygen for all life on the planet. However, without the whole, no singular part of the tree can supply the same function. No leaf, branch, or root can do what the tree as a whole does. Similarly, a city can be seen in the same way. Without a city, the individual is left with no function and is left stranded without a greater society from which they derive their basis from. Anything, whether a plant or animal, gets its essential being from the whole. Without everything working in harmony, the individual part loses all meaning as it is merely an incoherent object wasting away. In all, by scanning the idea of parts and wholes, we can explicate this quote even further and understand Aristotle's perspective.

In closing, through analyzing both the very nature of associations as well as the concepts of parts and wholes, we can better understand Aristotle's quote. In everyday life, when we see a flower, a cat, or even another human, they all exist by nature. In conjunction with an individual, they cannot survive without the complex ecosystems and communities they are a part of. The whole must therefore come before the individual. If we analyze the situation in terms of parts and wholes, a plant must exist for a leaf to function, and similarly, a human must exist for a hand to function. Likewise, if an individual is left stranded he will have the same relation to the whole as does a leaf to a plant - he cannot perform his function. In accordance with Aristotle, if a stranded individual is able to do so, he is either the worst of human beings, a beast, or the best of human beings, a god.

### Work Cited

Cahn, Steven M., editor. *Political Philosophy: The Essential Texts 3rd Edition*. 3rd ed., Oxford UP, 2014.