ARISTOTLE'S POLITICS

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INTRODUCTION

THE life of Aristotle, so far as it illustrates this treatise, may be summarized in a few words. He was by birth a Greek, but a native of the small city of Stageira which stood upon the fringe of the Greek world; he was therefore well fitted by his origin to be an impartial, yet sympathetic critic, of the more famous city-states of Greece. In his youth he studied philosophy at Athens under Plato, thus coming at the most impressionable period of his life into close relations with the profoundest thinker whom Greece had yet produced. After the death of Plato (347), he quitted Athens to spend some years in the service of the new race of monarchs whose mission it was to diffuse Greek culture through the East and at the same time to complete the destruction of all that was most valuable and characteristic in the political life of Greece. At the court of Hermias, the obscure tyrant of the obscure city of Atarneus, Aristotle had the opportunity of observing the once great, but then decadent, despotism of Persia, to which he makes some references in the *Politics*. In 343 or 342 he migrated to Macedonia, joined the court of Philip, and acted for three years or so as tutor to the youthful Alexander. The results of his experience in Macedonia, and the drift of the political teaching which he gave to his pupil may perhaps be inferred from the comments which, in several passages of the *Politics*, he passes on monarchies and tyrannies. About the year 335, on the eve of Alexander's great campaigns of conquest, the philosopher turned his back on Macedonia; we may infer from what he says of empires, that while he realized their possible services to civili-

zation, he was still more alive to the dangers, moral and other, which beset the path of a military and aggressive state. His sympathies were with the past, not the future; with Sparta and Athens rather than with Macedon; with Plato rather than with Alexander. Settling down at Athens, he became the leader of a philosophic school, the director of a brilliant academy; but he incurred the odium to which a friend of Macedon was naturally exposed in the city of Demosthenes. In 323, after the death of his pupil and patron, he was driven into exile by a prosecution for impiety which, if he had faced it, would probably have brought upon his head the fate of Socrates. He died in the following year at Chalcis, a Macedonian stronghold. The semi-barbarians, of whose future he doubted, had been more generous to him than the Greeks, whose highest thought it had been his life-work to interpret and to vindicate.

Of his literary work in general this is not the place to speak. It is enough to say that he aimed at expounding in the light of his own philosophic principles all the sciences which were then recognized, and that he followed consistently the method, of which the *Politics* are a conspicuous illustration, of combining induction with deductive reasoning from first principles, and of testing his own conclusions by a comparison with popular opinions and those of other teachers. Encyclopaedic knowledge has never, before or since, gone hand in hand with a logic so masculine or with speculation so profound. But it is in dealing with the moral rather than the natural sciences that he is greatest, most adequately equipped with facts, and most interested in his subject. Of his work in the moral sciences the final results are incorporated in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*. The two treatises are intimately connected. In the *Ethics* he

discusses the nature of individual happiness or well-being; in the *Politics* he treats of the state as one of the chief means through which the individual attains to happiness. The object of the *Politics* is both practical and speculative; to explain the nature of the ideal city in which the end of happiness may be completely realized; to suggest some methods of making existent states more useful to the individual citizen than they were in Aristotle's time, or had been in the past.

Aristotle is not, strictly speaking, the founder of political science. In the age of Pericles, and earlier still, statesmen and philosophers had theorized about the origin of society, the relative merits of various constitutions, and other kindred topics. Though Socrates was more concerned with ethics than with politics, he applied the powerful solvent of his dialectic to many of the political ideas which were fashionable in his day. The conceptions of utility as the ideal which the statesman should pursue, and of scientific knowledge as the indispensable equipment of the statesman, would seem to have had their birth in the Socratic circle. Plato, the pupil of Socrates, not content with developing the suggestions of his master and with giving to the Socratic formulae a deeper meaning, essayed a more systematic discussion of the nature of the state and its right organization. In the *Republic* he describes the state as it would appear if founded and governed by philosophers; in the *Laws* he offered to the statesmen of his age a model more practicable and more nearly related to the experience of the past; a model which the legislator for a new colony might follow without undue violence to Greek prejudices and opinions. Although the views of Plato are sharply, and not always justly, criticized by Aristotle, the influence of the *Republic* and the *Laws* is perceptible in many places of the *Politics* where they are not mentioned.

The *Politics*, in fact, would not be so valuable as they are if they expressed the views of an individual man of genius and nothing more. Here as elsewhere it is not the least of Aristotle's merits that he epitomized the best thoughts of a nation and of a stage in human history. He respected the political thinkers of the past, both the statesmen and the theorists; he was loth to admit that any institution or polity which had stood the test of time could be altogether bad. Hence he appears before us as a mediator in the controversies of his own and the preceding ages. It is his wish to lay bare the grain of truth which exists at the core of every political practice and belief. He interprets even those ideals with which he is least in sympathy. And so we learn from him what the various types of the city-state signified to the Greek mind; we are admitted under his guidance to the penetralia of their political thought.

The history of the Greek city-state we can study for ourselves, with fewer sources of information, it is true, than Aristotle had at his command, but also with a more critical appreciation of their value and a more scientific method of interpretation than was to be learned in Athenian schools of the fourth century. We are too in a better position than Aristotle to see the true place of the city-state in the evolution of society, to appreciate its limitations, to condemn its evils, and to draw the moral from its failure. We know, what he does not appear to have suspected, that the careers of his Macedonian patrons had sealed the death-warrant of the community which he regarded as the highest that human skill was capable of framing. Ampler experience has shown us that slavery is not the indispensable basis of a civilization, nor commerce always degrading to the individual and destructive of national morality. In the modern world we have

before us communities which, in defiance of his prophecies, have become extensive without becoming disunited. By his own methods of induction and comparison we can refute some of the laws which he regarded as immutable.

Still we must start from Aristotle. His account of the city-state may be supplemented and corrected, but not superseded. The governing ideas of any polity are always best expressed by those to whom they stand for the absolute and final truth; and there is no form of polity which the student of political science should study with more care than the city-state. Just because it is comparatively simple, just because it is unlike the states with which we are personally acquainted, it contains the key to many modern problems. Aristotle is the best interpreter of an essential link in the chain of political development.

But he is something more than this, more than a Greek who states the case of Greece. He is also a philosopher and a student of human nature. His views as to the origin and ultimate structure of society, as to the aims of civic life, as to the mutual obligations of the state and the individual, as to the nature of political justice, all have a value which is independent of his historical position. It is often difficult to follow his discussions of these and cognate subjects. His arguments are stated with extreme conciseness, and the train of thought which leads him from one topic to another is often far from clear. But those who have the patience to wrestle with his text will find in it theories of perennial value, and refutations of fallacies which are always re-emerging. Nor is it merely from his more abstract disquisitions that such lessons are to be extracted. While there could be no greater mistake than to apply his criticisms of democracies and aristocracies to modern governments which go by the same names, without stopping to enquire how far the names have changed their