Unit One: Part 2
Aristotle and Contemporary Political Theory

Introduction

Biography of Life and Study: Aristotle was born in 384 B.C. in Stagira in Thrace near Turkey. The father of Aristotle, Nicomachus, was the court physician to, Amyntas, the king of Macedon. It was there that Aristotle at an early age was introduced to the study of biology, involving a structural-functional approach to species types that later influenced his approach to the study of comparative government. At age 17, in 367 B.C., Aristotle left Macedonia to join Plato’s Academy in Athens, where, as a student and then a colleague, he spent the next twenty years in study under Plato. After Plato’s death in 347 B.C., Aristotle in 343 B.C. was invited by Phillip II of Macedonia to look after the education of his 13-year-old son, Alexander. Macedonia under Phillip II, on the northern border of Greece, had already become the base of the later empire of Alexander the Great. As such, Alexander, most interested in imperial conquest, abandoned his study of philosophy under Aristotle at age 20. Aristotle therefore returned to Athens in 335 B.C. to establish his own school for the study of philosophy and politics which he called the Lyceum.

By that time, Athens was under control of Alexander and governed by a Macedonian administrator, Antipater. Aristotle befriended Antipater who acted as a kind of patron of Aristotle’s Lyceum. But this made Aristotle a persona non-grata among native Athenians. When Alexander himself died in 322 B.C., and Antipater was overthrown, the native Athenians sought to put Aristotle on trial for his life on the same type of charge leveled against Socrates, corrupting the moral fiber of the city by challenging the piety of its mythical gods. Unlike Socrates, Aristotle chose to leave Athens “lest the city sin twice against philosophy.” Hence, Aristotle fled to the island of Chalcis in the Aegean Sea where he died 322 B.C. from what was described as “chronic indigestion from acute overwork.”

Aristotle left an extensive written account of his philosophic and political thought developed in his study at Plato’s Academy and his own Lyceum, along extensive scientific thought developed from extensive research in biology, which played an important role in the development of his philosophic and political thought. The whole of Aristotle’s thought is set forth in his Physics, Metaphysics, Nicomachean Ethics and Politics. Our study focuses on Aristotle’s Metaphysics, Nicomachean Ethics, and Politics.

Aristotle’s Metaphysics

Aristotle’s Theory of Forms: Aristotle’s metaphysics, like that of Plato, is based on an underlying theory of Forms. And also like Plato, Aristotle treats the Forms as being valuational, that is, they exist to serve the Good. But Aristotle also goes on to develop a four-causal analysis of the existence of the Forms in a material cause, efficient cause, formal cause, and final cause. The material cause is the “basic stuff” of various things; the efficient cause is the “force of movement” in the development of various things; the formal cause is the “mature stage of development” reached by the force of movement in the development of various things; and the final cause is the “end or goal” of reaching the mature stage of development in the capacity to perform a purposeful outcome.

Thus, an acorn develops into an oak tree to produce new acorns; and the human fetus develops into a human adult to think and choose well. In this, Aristotle’s metaphysics like that of Plato is valuational in regarding the essence of all being as being directed toward the Good. Aristotle does not elaborate on whether the final cause in the Good is a transcendent force as does Plato, or whether it is simply an immanent soul-force (psyche) of animate life. But later Christian philosophy will argue that Aristotelian philosophy implicitly points to the existence of a transcendent Creator God as a self-standing “uncaused cause” as the basis of all causal life development in Aristotle’s metaphysics.
Aristotle’s Ethics

The Nature of Practical Wisdom: Aristotle’s Ethics, following his Metaphysics, is most extensively set out in his Nicomachean Ethics. Drawing on the traditional Greek notion of virtue (arete) as excellence of activity in the pursuit of Good, Aristotle’s Ethics addressed all virtues, including justice, as human happiness (eudemonia) in the use of right reason in pursuit of the Good. As distinguished from the invariable truth-knowledge of mathematics and the physical sciences, Aristotle argued that the truth-knowledge of human moral virtue must be ascertained in the context of practical human circumstances. Such circumstantial truth-knowledge Aristotle identified as “practical wisdom” (phronesis) or what today we would call “situation ethics.”

For example, the virtue of courage as a final cause of the military defense of the common good in national security always stands as an absolute given, but how to effect such courage as an efficient cause must be variously determined according to differing circumstances. The sacrifice of an entire contingent of 300 Spartans at Thermopylae under Leonidas in 480 B.C. represented extraordinary courage because it saved Athens from the Persian invasion and led to the final victory of Hellas in the Persian War (499-479 B.C.). But unless the victory of Hellas had been on the line it would have been held to have been a policy of senseless slaughter.

Acquiring Practical Wisdom: Unlike Plato, who saw the grasping of the virtue of courage in the introspective thought of philosophic kings, Aristotle believe that the practical wisdom of courage (as well as all the other virtues), because it depended on circumstantial experience, could best be grasped in the collective experience of all citizens of the polis, with their “other selves” as members of given body politic. It was this line of thought that led to Aristotle’s famous declaration that “man is a political animal,” and on this basis Aristotle’s Ethics naturally led into his Politics.

Aristotle’s Politics

Aristotle’s Normative Political Regime: Based on his Ethics, Aristotle was intuitively inclined to call for what he called a “Polity” as political regime based on a formal cause of direct popular rule to reach a final cause of human happiness in the exercise of practical wisdom, derived from the collective experience of the body politic. In this, the regime of polity would be normative in addressing the moral values of practical wisdom, as set forth in the Metaphysics and Ethics, as its goal.

The perspective of a Polity can be said to be the overriding theme of the seven “Books” of Aristotle’s Politics. But within the context of establishing a Polity, Aristotle addresses many other contextual issues that come under the study of political science today. What therefore follows is both Aristotle’s perspective of a Polity and the contextual issues that Aristotle addresses in treating the perspective of a Polity.

Aristotle’s Study of Empirical Regimes: As distinguished from his presentation of a Polity following the conceptual basis of a political philosopher, Aristotle’s Politics also approached governments from an empirical basis of empirical observation as a political scientist. In this, he had the students of his own Lyceum study some 156 different regimes to see how they stacked up against his political-philosophic government of Polity.

The result was an empirical record of a multiplicity of political regimes, which Aristotle broke down into six types of regimes based on a formal-final cause analysis. The six types of regimes were in turn broken down into two general classifications of “correct” and “incorrect” regimes. The correct regimes promoted virtue in the exercise of practical wisdom as the true basis of human happiness; the incorrect regimes promoted vice in self-aggrandizement as a false basis of human happiness. Under “correct regimes” Aristotle listed: monarchy, aristocracy, and polity, as designating rule by one, rule by the few, and rule by the many. Under “incorrect regimes” Aristotle listed: tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy, again designating rule by one, rule by the few, and rule by the many.
**Aristotle on Revolution**: Like Plato, Aristotle observed that the empirical world suffers from a constant state of disorder in *revolutionary change*, often through a violent overthrow of the existing political regime. Aristotle particularly noted that owing to an economic class struggle, oligarchies tended to be overthrown by democracies as in the name of economic leveling which themselves turn into self-interested economic mob rule, leading to the further political transformation into tyrannies as the recourse to preserve public order.

Aristotle went on to argue that the material cause or stuff of such revolutionary change was not just the fact of economic status, but “*attitudes of mind*” promoting revolutionary change in terms of economic status, what today we would call “*revolutionary ideologies.*” For example, democracies hold that political equality as a “*natural right*” of birth entails a corresponding natural right of *economic equality*. Oligarchies, on the other hand, hold that economic inequality as “*natural right*” of talent entails a corresponding natural right of *political inequality*. And *tyrannies* argue that political rule is simply a function of the “law of nature” as the natural right of *raw power*.

**Aristotle as a Political Scientist**: Unlike Plato when drawing on the perfect Form of Justice, Aristotle was prepared to prescribe for the best *practical form* of government as “practical wisdom” under all types of circumstances. Thus, when circumstances did not exist in body politque that sought the explication of moral virtue in practical wisdom, Aristotle was prepared to prescribe for a regime that could at least preserve public order to satisfy the naturalistic quest for pure physical survival.

Aristotle’s best case scenario for pure physical survival in constitutional engineering was to prescribe for a regime of “mixed government.” Public order could be effectively secured when revolutionary states of mind calling for democratic and oligarchic rule could be *neutralized* by a *countervailing two-house branch* of public policy-making. Representation in one house would be based on the universal principle of popular democracy; representation in the other house would be based on the qualification of wealth and talent. All laws would have to be passed by both houses producing a compromise package of public policy-making acceptable to the democratic many and the oligarchic few.

But if the body politic would not accept such a compromise of mixed government, Aristotle was even willing to prescribe for *tyranny* as the worst case scenario to avoid revolutionary disorder. In fact, Aristotle’s prescriptive model represented a *handbook* of modern political tyrants. Aristotle called for the tyrant to establish secret agents in all suspected conspiratorial organizations, and to forbid all public meetings lest they turn into mass demonstrations of public protests, and finally for the tyrant to enshrine himself as the teacher of genius in a “cult of personality.”

**Aristotle on a Regime of “Polity”**: Aristotle was clearly not happy with having to prescribe for a regime of tyranny, but as a political scientist he believed he had to prescribe for the best outcome of the material cause of the status and mindset of the body politque at hand. His hope was that the political scientist might be able to prescribe for the best regime to promote the *moral virtue of practical wisdom* by drawing on a proper material cause at hand. This could be accomplished by any of the three “correct regimes.” A singular monarch or an aristocracy would be suitable material as distinguished by their personal quest for practical wisdom as a philosophical elite within the contest of Platonic philosopher-king rule. But instead, Aristotle looked most favorably on a regime of “*Polity.*”

A regime of Polity would be based on the best material cause of a *broad middle class*. A broad middle class would include the element of *numbers not divided by economic class conflict*. At the same time, all its middle class would be possessed of a *proper education* to provide for *maximum collective discourse* on the virtue of practical wisdom. And finally, they would be accustomed to *both ruling and obeying*, unlike the arrogant rich or the obsequious poor. A regime of Polity would therefore be anchored in the best material cause to provide for both stable public order and moral virtue. The only issue was to find the right type of body political politque to answer to the proper material cause of a Polity. From his empirical study of the existing body politques, Aristotle found very few that were constituted of the broad middle class required for the proper material cause
of a regime of Polity. In was only under modern political development theory that the idea on construction of such a broad middle class was to be advanced.

Aristotle and Modern Development Theory

Sun Yat-sen and Post-Colonial China: Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925) was the first to set forth the rationale and program of modern development theory in his famous “three people’s principles” of nationalism, livelihood, and democracy. The term “three people’s principles,” rendered in Chinese as Kuomintang, became the official name of the Chinese Nationalist Party from the 1920’s to the 1950’s under Chiang Kai-shek claiming to be the legacy of Sun Yat-sen’s thought.

Sun Yat-sen himself as a Chinese youth studied at Harvard University and was profoundly influenced by Aristotle’s notion of Polity. He saw a regime of Polity as being the only answer to establishing political and economic well-being in China under the virtue of practical wisdom. But to achieve this the material cause of the body politique in China would have to be transformed from an obsequious peasant society suffering under the rule of “warlordism” following the fall of the Manchus Dynasty in 1911. Beyond establishing a new universal national mindset in abolishing the political remnants of western colonialism, Sun argued that China would have to go through a period of harsh economic development — what today we called “forced industrialism” — to reach the necessary economic productivity to sustain a broad highly educated middle class society that could foster collective political dialogue on practical moral virtue.

Until such a developmental end-goal was reached, China would have to be governed by an authoritarian leadership of single-party rule of the Kuomintang. When Chiang Kai-shek was driven from the Chinese Mainland in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party claimed the mantel of Sun Yat-sen’s Kuomintang single-party rule as it still does today.

The Kuomintang Model and Third-World Development: With the complete fall of western colonialism throughout the third-world, beginning in the late 1950s, the Kuomintang model of single-party rule to promote forced industrialization as a developmental stage to reaching a broad middle-class as the proper material cause of a Polity of full-fledged democracy became an established model for many third-world countries. Examples of such tutelary rule included Gamal Nasser in Egypt, Sekou Toure in Guinea, Ben Bella in Algeria, Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia, and Achmad Sukarno in Indonesia. Most of the regimes fell before counterforces, although a few like that of Anwar Sadat in Egypt from 1970-1981 proved to quite successful. More recent failures have been witnessed in the “Arab Springtime” of 2011, which led to the ouster of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muammar Qadafi in Libya, and Zine Ben Ali in Tunisia.

Third-world development policy remains a prominent consideration for American foreign policy today. Such theorists as Jeanne Kirkpatrick, a political science professor at Georgetown University and American ambassador to the United Nations under President Ronald Reagan, holds that an extensive period of single-party rule should be seen as a practical necessity to reach the political-economic requirement of a broad middle class for a regime of stable political democracy. While other government officials such as Richard Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz under President George W. Bush have supported “regime change” in third-world countries not seen as being in line with American foreign policy aims.

Seymour Lipset and Western Political Development: Seymour Lipset, a professor of political science at Harvard University in his classic work, The Political Man: The Social Basis of Politics (1960), approached western political development in a similar perspective to Sun Yat-sen. Lipset argues that the evolution of cabinet government in Great Britain in the 19th and 20th centuries exhibited a successful Aristotelian material cause analysis for a Polity in the Western World. While Great Britain was the first country in the Western World to embark upon a period of forced industrialization in the 19th century, her upper aristocratic House of Lords held the power of an absolute veto over the elected body of the House of Commons until 1918. Then, when the United Kingdom had
already completed her industrial take-off period of economic austerity resulting in a broad middle class, the legislative authority of the House of Lords was reduced to that of a “suspensive veto” by the Parliament Act of 1918, which also provided for universal male voting enfranchisement for the House of Commons (extended to women as well in 1928).

By way of contrast, the French Revolution of 1789, without a broad middle class and the capacity to carry on collective discourse on practical wisdom of the moral virtue of justice, sought an immediate sweeping change to popular democracy in the constitution of the First Republic of 1993. This, in turn, led to more than a century-and-a-half of civil discord involving monarchy, nobility, bourgeoisie, peasantry, and the industrial working class. Thus, from 1789 to 1958 France transitioned to eleven different political regimes, most often involving civil violence. (See later, Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France, 1790).

**American Exceptionalism:** Some argue that the United States stands as an exception to the Aristotelian material cause analysis because stable government rule under universal male enfranchisement already existed under Jacksonian democracy in the 1830s, before its forced industrialization which only began in the late 19th century. But others argue that such “American exceptionalism” was only due to the fact that the poverty-laden early American industrial working class was mainly comprised of an immigrant population always facing the threat of deportation for “political radicalism.”

By the time that the immigrant industrial working class population gained citizenship, the United States had already passed its period of forced industrialization and the industrial working-class population was well on its way to a middle-class status, especially after gaining the right to strike under New Deal legislation and universal compulsory formal education. (cf. the current outbreak of “populist nativism”).

**Questions for Reflection**

1. How would you distinguish Aristotle’s teleology of the “forms” from that of Plato?
2. What three types of regimes did Aristotle view as “correct regimes” and what three types as “incorrect regime” and why?
3. In what sense was Aristotle a “political scientist” as well as a political philosopher?
4. How can it be said that the third-world development theory of Sun Yat-sen is based on an Aristotelian material cause analysis? And how can it also be said that it was also modeled in the development of democracy in Great Britain?