

Individual Responsibility in Aristotle's Politics

Aristotle conceives of the individual as an entity that is embedded within the polis.

The individual and the polis are reciprocally constructed, in that while citizens (individuals) create and sustain their political institutions, those same entities shape and habituate qualities into the individuals. Both of these elements, the individual subject and the polis itself, are side-by-side properties of what a human is for Aristotle. In his *Politics* the individual is not distinguishable from the society he inhabits. Rather, the human is part of that society and that society is a part of the human.

An important distinction must be made in understanding how Aristotle sees the individual and society. I choose to call them reciprocally defining parts of human nature. To say that the individual and society are “intertwined” to a point of not being able to make a distinction still implies that at their base they stem from different places. In his philosophy, both concepts stem from what he sees as human nature and they develop in tandem. If we understand Aristotle's writings correctly, we cannot write about one of these concepts without also writing about the other.

In modern language it is difficult to comprehend Aristotle's vision of the human in society. Aristotle is easily analyzed using a paradigm that assumes a base difference between the individual and the society. But this method of critique is unproductive in obtaining a grasp of Aristotle's work because its fundamental presumptions are different. In the modern era, our presumptive dichotomy between the sovereign subject as an independently existing entity, and the society as an amalgam of those sovereign subjects is the legacy of Enlightenment thinkers, particularly the social contractarians. The emphasis on the independent individual is exemplified in the contractarians' conception

of the “state of nature.” The work of Hobbes, Rousseau and Locke established a trajectory in thought, and it hardly goes unquestioned, that we represent many different individuals, and as those individuals we make up society.

In this essay I demonstrate that this system of thought is not immutable. On the contrary, Aristotle would not have viewed this dichotomy as legitimate human ontology. In returning to Aristotle, we should endeavor to understand the underlying principles and the provocative ways in which they differ from our assumptions. This is a way to combat dogmatic claims and stubborn philosophy, claiming infallibility. In reading Aristotle, it is easy to question how responsibility can be placed on citizens, while those citizens are not actually individuated. I claim that this pointed question arises from imposing the language of modern thinkers on the work of Aristotle, and such an internal inconsistency does not actually exist in his work.

In Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, he envisions a dystopian state of nature. In his view, the natural state of man is without productive interplay with others. Instead, “the life of man” he says, is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”¹ The passage exemplifies Hobbes’ unwelcoming natural state of man as truly a state of war, “of every man against every man” (Hobbes, 159). Here there is no culture, no society, no agreement, no justice nor injustice, no right nor wrong. It is on the basis of insecurity that Hobbes places his sovereign power, to control human antagonism for mutual safety.

John Locke sees a different state of nature than Hobbes. For him, man’s condition in the natural state is “free, equal, and independent.” Contrasted with Hobbes’ natural state

¹ All excerpt page numbers in this paper from Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau refer to *Modern Political Thought*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2008).

of war, Locke's is a free society, abiding by the law of nature. In both exists interaction, but in different ways. For Hobbes, interaction is violent and hostile, while for Locke it is respectful. The contract that Locke sees arising from it however, is not actually drastically different from Hobbes. It is entered into only for "comfortable, safe, and peaceable living... and a greater security against any, that are not of it" (Locke, 312). Locke and Hobbes theorize divergent states of nature, but the governments that come from them are formed for similar reasons.

Rousseau sees a different state of nature. Rousseau's human is "satisfying his hunger under an oak tree, quenching his thirst at the first stream, finding his bed at the foot of the same tree that supplied his meal; and thus all his needs are satisfied" (Rousseau, 381). This is a scene of tranquility, and the calm is indicative of the perfect freedom that Rousseau sees. In this pre-political stage of development, the natural man has all he needs, and he is happy to have them. He is content with his surroundings and the things that are provided for him in his vicinity. This utopian state is what Rousseau sees as natural for man, and his natural individuality is exemplified in it.

The above three social contractarians are practically identical in one important way: their states of nature all equally assume that a natural man means a man not in politics, and that to discuss the nature of man, he must be removed from society. This is a notion Aristotle would have scoffed at.

In contrast to the modern thinkers' concept of nature as necessarily pre-political, Aristotle sees human nature as a necessarily political condition. This notion is epitomized when he writes, "man is by nature a political animal" (*Politics*, 1253a5). The idea that man's state of nature *is* political is diametrically opposed to the Enlightenment thought.

Above, Aristotle means that although we can discuss the condition of a man outside of the polis, this is not the same as discussing the condition of a man in his natural state. The latter is to talk about a man in a polis. In examining human nature, Aristotle is questioning what the human way of being is. Surely, the human way of being is not to be isolated and solitary, whether that life is “brutish” or “free.”

A second essential difference to note is the chronology. Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau all conceive of the state of nature of man as something that is temporally prior to society. They do not claim that their theories ever existed in a literal way, but their thought experiments reveal that the polis has developed *over time* from the individual. Their use of chronology empowers the notion of the natural individual because anything that follows from it depends on the initial condition.

In the beginning of his *Politics*, Aristotle illustrates the polis itself as the original form in society, prior in concept to both the family and the individual. This is so because “the whole is of necessity prior to the part” (*Politics*, 1253a20). He continues to present an analogy of a body and a hand. If the body is destroyed, the hand has no function; the hand only has a purpose in itself as a part of the larger body. A hand, in isolation, may still be called a hand, but the definition of “hand” in this context implies something that is a limb of a body. To define a hand outside of use in a body is to define something else entirely. Aristotle would say that this is what the moderns do when they conceive of human nature. In imagining the human as pre-political by nature, they try to define a part of a whole as entirely separated.

When Aristotle says that the state is prior to the individual, he does not mean chronologically. He traces the development of human association from the individual in

the household, to the village, to the city (*Politics* 1252b15-30). It would be false however, to say that this progression mirrors the moderns. The moderns directly connect chronological development with conceptual, implying that if the state comes from the individual, then nature as a sovereign individual also proceeds. Aristotle does not concede that because the individual may come *before* the polis, human nature is nonpolitical. Rather, because the human way of being, the human function, is as a part of the polis, the development into that polis is itself a natural process toward a natural end.

Natural development into a natural ontology (from the individual to the polis) is an essential pillar of how Aristotle views the dichotomy of individual and society. “If the earlier forms of society are natural, so is the state,” Aristotle contends, “for it is the end of them, and the nature of a thing is its end. For what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature.” Here Aristotle proclaims the inseparable association between man and his surroundings. If man develops from his isolated self into a polis, then that polis is his natural state.

This manner of thinking of human nature may be easier understood if given another example. We would not call the natural state of a human a fetus. The fact that, in developing, a human spends time as a fetus is not evidence that its nature is there. For Aristotle, a fully-grown man is his natural state, not their being in the womb, which is no more than a moment in development. It is true that every child may not live to be a fully-grown adult. However, the misfortune to do so cannot be understood as human nature. The nature of that child is to be a grown adult. Otherwise, to speak of human nature would be to speak to a particular human’s condition.

Aristotle addresses the question of what is a human without a state by looking at the hypothetical being who either has no need, or has no capability, for the state. “He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself,” Aristotle writes, “must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state” (*Politics* 1253a30). These two who do not engage with the state, do so on account of their nature. The beast does not have speech, and thus cannot interact politically. The god lacks nothing and gains nothing from a society, so would not take part. These distinctions suggest that what is between the beast and the god is the natural human, who (also by nature) is able to associate politically and also gains from this association.

It is important that the human gains something from being part of the polis. Later in the *Politics*, Aristotle discusses ostracism as a legitimate form of punishment for those who “predominate too much through their wealth, or the number of their friends, or through any other political influence.” These *agathoi* are ostracized from the city not only for the good of the city (the legislatures are concerned with “equality... above all things”) but also because being expelled to the world outside of the polis is to impose upon them a state of being which is not natural (*Politics* 1284a20). Ironically, this ostracized state appears similar to what the moderns conceive of as natural.

But ostracism is used more expansively than only against powerful members of the society. Aristotle is particularly concerned with its use as it pertains to “someone who is preeminent in excellence” (*Politics* 1284b25). In this scenario, Aristotle is dealing with what he defined at the beginning of the text as a god, who has no need of the polis. This god also has no place in it. The politics that Aristotle conceives of is premised on mutual need and capacity of subjects for that society, and it is from those characteristics that it

develops. To not need it is to not be a human being. Citizens are then justified in expelling that man who exceeds in virtue as to appear godlike in his political excellence.

It is clear that Aristotle sees his polis as beneficial to humankind. Indeed, his polis is more than just the development of the natural human. It is the natural development of human capacities for the welfare of people in that society. This welfare is more than the basic needs and daily wants. Rather, the good that this polis is aimed at is to be self-sufficing in all virtues. This is not possible in the lower developmental forms, such as the village or the isolated individual. Only the polis can be “self-sufficing,” and is the end of the development, “originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of the good life” (*Politics* 1252b30).

So we see that Aristotle’s polis is necessarily a part of human nature because it is through political interaction that virtue can be achieved. The question is raised however, how does the polis lend itself to the enhancement of virtue? Aristotle provides an answer to this in *Nicomachean Ethics*. “The end of politics,” he writes, “is the best of ends; and the main concern of politics is to engender a certain character in the citizens and to make them good and disposed to perform noble actions” (*NE* 1099b30). Aristotle is saying that the end that is achieved through the activity of politics is the process of shaping the citizens of the polis in which it takes place. That is to say, politics is inwardly focused – its goal is to form good citizens who in turn continue to shape a good constitution.

It is important for Aristotle to establish a moral virtue among citizens, and this is an element of the ultimate goal of politics. “Moral virtue,” he asserts, “is formed by habit” (*NE* 1103a15). In this, Aristotle points to the fact that it is *habit* that forms moral virtue, not learning. Moral virtue in his polity requires repeated habits over years to be

transformed into actual virtues. This passage also embodies his notion that virtues are not ingrained in humans as an element of their birth. Instead, virtue is something that must be inculcated into human beings, and this must be done by society. Aristotle demonstrates this when he states “none of the moral virtues is implanted in us by nature.” That does not mean that they are unnatural, because “we are by nature equipped with the ability to receive them” (*NE* 1103a20, 1103a25). So the polis is the institution that forms to develop the *capacity* to receive virtue.

This is where the Aristotelian notion of human nature and politics becomes problematized. “We must thus conclude that virtue or excellence is a characteristic involving choice,” he declares, “and that it consists in observing the mean relative to us, a mean which is defined by a rational principle, such as a man of practical wisdom would use to determine it” (*NE* 1006a). In this passage, Aristotle acknowledges that in his vision of society, the onus for virtue ultimately rests upon the individual in that society. If that “virtue or excellence” actually does depend on choice, then it seems that in his politics there must be a distinction that establishes an individual who chooses.

Aristotle’s notion of the naturally political animal and the natural polis seems to be at odds with the concept of freedom. If there is no human being in abstraction, then on what basis can freedom be established? In this context, “freedom” is conceived of as the ability to make a choice, unimpeded by coercion. If all institutions of a polity are engaged in shaping the citizens, does it matter that those citizens also shape the polity in turn? These questions lead to the difficulty of conceiving of an individual that is both embedded in society, and yet is also explicitly responsible for *choosing* to take part in the habituation of virtue.

The problem of individual freedom and a habituated society is also seen in Jill Frank's piece *Citizens, Slaves, and Foreigners: Aristotle on Human Nature*. Frank's thesis is that Aristotle's concept of human nature is not only necessarily political, but is also flexible and dynamic. She wants to detach the idea of nature from the idea of necessity. The backdrop she is writing on is a nature, whether Aristotelian or Enlightenment-influenced, which is thought of as what is necessarily part of a being's existence. That is to say that nature is the characteristics that cannot be changed, that are immutable. She refutes this idea, arguing that Aristotle's nature is actually something that is temporally affected by the actions of people surrounding a subject and within a polis.²

Frank's project, in its essence, is about responsibility. When she disconnects nature from necessity, she also takes away the moral authority normally associated with what is nature, and the corresponding abnormality of what is unnatural. She asserts that Aristotle approaches nature,

as a question for politics. He thereby divests nature of the moral authority usually granted to it... placing authority in those who establish the hierarchies of politics, namely, rulers and citizens, renders them accountable for those hierarchies. (Frank, 92)

Her reading of Aristotle is one that ensures that citizens are wholly responsible for injustices such as slavery. These injustices are actually created politically, through political interaction, rather than constructs given by an abstract nature.

Her argument also depends on the concept of *prohairesis* activity. This is the fundamentally human activity of choosing one option and not another. Writing about the significance of *prohairesis* activity, Frank states, "The choices that initiate the actions

² Jill Frank, "Citizens, Slaves, and Foreigners: Aristotle on Human Nature," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (Feb. 2004), pp. 91-104.

people undertake are determined by their habits, which reflect who they have been and therefore who they are” (Frank, 96). In this passage, Frank is illustrating the exact habituation that Aristotle lays out in the *Politics* and *Nichomachean Ethics*. By her analysis, the habituation of society is the source of the choices we make. Inversely, the choices we make also indicate the habits that we have inherited.

Frank’s piece effectively detaches Aristotle’s human nature from the idea of necessity. She shows that if a human is naturally political, then that human not only naturally associates with others, but through that association, he collectively affects the nature of himself and others. But her analysis still runs into a problem with its emphasis on individual responsibility. She sees the citizen as responsible for the institutions that he is a part of shaping, but she also admits that the choices that citizen makes are a result of the habits he has had indoctrinated into him. This is the same rut that appears in Aristotle’s *Ethics* when he states that despite social habituation, the onus for virtue is on the choice of a citizen. Frank’s effort to disengage nature with necessity and make it politically constituted does nothing to solve the antinomy between an individual exercising *prohairesis*, and a society whose function it is to form the habits of virtue and the good life.

I believe that the anxiety that stems from this antinomy is the result of imposing inappropriate language on the works of Aristotle. The responsibility for hierarchies that Frank wants to establish, and the responsibility that Aristotle explicitly places on virtue, only does not make sense if we conceive of the individual as a fundamentally different unit from the society it is embedded in. This dichotomy, which presumes a fundamental disconnect in the nature of the two entities, is derived from the Enlightenment concepts

of the sovereign individual. This subject, without burden and without society, is what existed in the state of nature, and is brought under the yoke of government, away from his natural state. It is irrelevant whether that state of nature was the ultimate freedom or a state of pandemonium: the moderns agreed it was a prepolitical state in which the natural being existed only under the auspices of individual sovereignty.

When we question the texts of Aristotle, trying to find the exact location of the line between the free individual able to make a choice and a society that created that individual, we are looking for a sovereign subject that Aristotle would not have said existed. We are looking for a person who was not invented in political theory until almost two thousand years after Aristotle's work. This is an improper way to critique Aristotle's work because it does not allow for his philosophy to be defined on its own terms. If we implant the language of Hobbes, Rousseau and Locke into the work of Aristotle, we learn nothing new about both schools of thought, and we subject Aristotle's writings to a system of thought that is not applicable. The sovereign subject and society dichotomy is not applicable because it is based on different primary assumptions. For Aristotle, human nature is a dynamic, politically constituted property, while for the moderns it is a hypothetical necessity of human existence that precludes political interaction.

In regulating the terms of conversation between Aristotle and the moderns, the critique of individual responsibility becomes an irrelevant point. The antinomy between freedom of choice and action (*prohairetic* activity) and habituating society is only inconsistent when that individual and the society are defined as separate entities. In a close reading of Aristotle, it appears that the individual citizen and the society he exists within are not separable concepts. To speak of one is necessarily to also speak of the

other. Similarly, to define one is necessarily to also define the other. This reciprocity is epitomized by the fact that for Aristotle, the polis is a part of the nature of the development of man, rather than a distinct concept.

If we accept Aristotle's evaluation of human nature, then the responsibility of the citizen to choose virtue is no longer a problem. It is not a responsibility of choice that is placed solely on the citizen: rather it is a choice that depends on a society. The society is accountable for the choices that citizens make, and the citizens are in turn accountable for how the society shapes its citizens' choices. We only encounter difficulty in this cycle if we consider it a cycle between two distinct things. Similarly, the accountability for hierarchies, which is developed in Frank's reading of Aristotle, is only problematic if the weight lies on individual action. Rather, Frank's reading implies that collective action is responsible for the hierarchies of our society. It is conceded that this collective action is the amalgamation of different individual actions, but these are not sovereign actions in themselves. They are a part of the collective *prohairesis*, which is what is responsible for the hierarchies that create "nature."

The modern thinkers and Aristotle nevertheless do have something in common. Each thinker grapples with the question of how we view ourselves in our political society. It is unsurprising that the question gets raised within that society, where are we as individuals, and where is the society that we make up? Despite Aristotle's assertion that to be a human is to be in a polis, he still seems to think of individuals as an entity as well. Perhaps, even if these two are intertwined to a point of mutual definition, the concept of one as distinct from the other is nevertheless useful for our politics. It is possible that conceiving of a sovereign citizen, even if it does not exist in abstraction, can be a useful

way to understand the role that each citizen plays in a polis. Ultimately, it may be that the individual is something that is, by nature, conceptually irretrievable.