Polis as the Locus of Human Flourishing in Aristotle's Politics (Bks. I-III)

Francis B. Payo
Sancta Maria Mater et Regina Seminarium/
Collegio dela Purisima Conception

Abstract

This paper introduces a few of Aristotle's insights in view of the political society, a glimpse into his practical genius in the realm of politics. It ventures to capture in Aristotle's *Politics* an apparently dominant theme that somehow weaves together Aristotle's political insights. It is thus an introductory attempt to understand Aristotle's insights by initially taking account of the first three books only of *Politics*, the third containing the core of his political science. Accordingly, the polis as the locus of human flourishing seems to be the dominant theme which brings forth Aristotle's conception of the ideal or good state as one that promotes the pursuit of happiness by its citizens.

Considering a largely negative notion of politics in the Philippines and in many parts of the world, this glimpse at Aristotle's political theory may serve as a corrective by bringing out the positive notion of politics or political life. Perhaps, having discerned that good life is the very goal of politics, and having discerned what good life really is, it may lead us to a more positively fruitful direction in terms of our political life – thus flourishing truly in our lives as human beings in the truest sense of being human. Politics then becomes our greatest means to live our human lives fully, as individuals and as communities. But first, we have to re-think our

notion of political life and re-educate ourselves of political values necessary not only for survival but especially for living a good life as a human community.

Keywords: Aristotle, Polis, Human Flourishing, Politics

Introduction

In our beloved country, the Philippines, and perhaps in many other parts of the world, the notion of politics has been at large negative. To be a politician for Filipinos may convey a derogatory connotation, that is, as one engaging in 'dirty politics'. That is because it has been associated with abuse of power and corruption. Hence, most 'decent' Filipinos would rather not engage in politics, particularly in running for an elected political position. What I offer in this paper is simply a glimpse at a very ancient and positive notion (ideal even) of politics as we find in Aristotle's *Politics*. It may serve as a corrective to balance our negative notion of politics or political life for that matter.

Although considered a very challenging work – that is, puzzling and difficult to penetrate especially for beginners[1] – this paper ventures to capture in *Politics* an apparently dominant theme that somehow weaves together Aristotle's political insights. I owe a lot to May Nichols' commentary and of others in trying to make sense of Aristotle's train of thoughts while reading the *Politics*. This paper is an introductory attempt to understand Aristotle's insights by initially taking account of the first three books only, the third containing "the core of his political science" (Nichols, 1992, p. 53). I agree with Werner Jaeger (1962, p. 263) who describes this third book as determining the "elementary presuppositions of politics."

The *polis* or city as the locus of human flourishing[2] seems to be a dominant theme in the first three books of Aristotle's *Politics*, that is, his conception of the ideal or good state as one that promotes the pursuit of happiness by its citizens (Adler, 1978, p. 201). Aristotle (I, 1252, 5/1966, p. 5) himself announces this at the very beginning of *Politics*:

> Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for mankind always act in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities

> aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.

One could discern from this that Aristotle proposes a polis that is ideal for human flourishing, so that human beings can live a good life. The polis provides the environment and conditions for human beings to reach their highest potential and happiness – to be at their best and to live in the best way possible.[3] Such is the end why a polis exists in the first place. We could also discern from this that the polis is a specific means to a specific end; and "human flourishing" or the good life (virtuous life) is the end we are referring precisely, that is, the happiness of human beings who are the citizens of the polis. According to Taylor (1995), good life is "an aim which, given the social nature of human beings, cannot be achieved except in the context of a political society" (p. 233). On his part, Shields (2007) describes such end as "the orientation of Aristotle's political theory" (pp. 350-ff). One could therefore argue that Aristotle's discussions about the ideal state, ideal commonwealths, and ideal constitutions are but attempts to discern the kind of state that can bring us our highest good. In other words, Aristotle wrestles to highlight both the advantages and disadvantages in existing regimes in order to bring out the best possible city that can promote our highest good. The city (state) is therefore a necessary and an indispensable means to attain our highest end, the good life. In striving to arrive at answers, Aristotle may be said to offer his political theory. Johnson (1990, p. xv) admits that even though "complicated and involved" we can discern Aristotle's political theory in *Politics*, and his theory is a "rich and penetrating" one. Considering then that *Politics* contains Aristotle's political doctrine, we could rightly assume, even at this juncture, that the central theme of *Politics* dwells on Aristotle's theory of the polis that is ideal for human flourishing. This, according to Johnson, is the central political doctrine of Aristotle.

> My central argument is that through the many twists and turns of Aristotle's writing on the subject of politics one may identify an inner logic which holds the many parts of the *Politics* together, however imperfectly. This inner logic is a development of one fundamental question: what is the essential nature (*ousia*) of the state?(p. xv)

Connected to such fundamental question about the nature of the state are questions about why varieties of state exist, how many varieties there are, and what is the natural order among these varieties. But perhaps the most significant insight I found in Johnson's discussion of Aristotle's nature of the

the polis is how the final cause is at work throughout. We can discern this from the following:

> The evidence of the sensible world is not ignored; the theorist looks at all regimes, even deviant ones. But the sensible evidence is not quite taken only as it is immediately perceived; *it is first refracted through the peculiar lens of the final cause*. Aristotle's political theory is a product of these two distinct and complex impulses working simultaneously. When Aristotle 'sees' nature, he does indeed see, and he reports what he finds. But in reporting he idealizes as well, describing a nature whose ultimate principles are, strictly speaking, beyond observation. It is in this synthesis between direct and mediated observation that one discovers his political theory of the state (Johnson, 1990, p. 12).

And I would say that such final cause of the polis is the good life or a life of virtue, not simply survival or necessity; not only living, but living well. Hence, Nichols (1992) reads Aristotle as saying: "But while the city comes into being for the sake of life... it continues to exist for the sake of the good life" (p. 13). Having said that, this short and introductory inquiry hopes to point out elements that form the *sine qua non* of Aristotle's ideal polis. This attempt is neither exhaustive nor complete considering the richness and complexity of Aristotle's political theory (Taylor, 1995, p. 258; Nichols, p. 1). Rather it attempts to indicate simply and highlight a few significant elements necessary for the polis to be the locus of human flourishing. It must be born in mind, however, that all such elements are geared towards the fulfilment of man's highest end: TO LIVE WELL, otherwise called THE GOOD LIFE.

Why is the Polis the Locus of Human Flourishing?

Human Beings as Political Animals in Need of Others

A point must be emphasized before going any further: that the human flourishing reaches its potential in the political life. Since human beings are political animals by reason of their being rational (Taylor, 1995, p. 238; Nichols, 1992, pp. 13, 83), political life is necessary in human flourishing.[4] In no way can a human individual, left on his own and isolated from others, reach the peak of his potentials. "Implicit in Aristotle's presentation of the human good," according to Nichols (p. 15), "is our need for others, with

whom we share our deliberations, choices, and actions. When Aristotle speaks of the human good as the end of our most authoritative association, he indicates that this good comes to us through association—not in isolation from others..." However, being members of a household is not sufficient for the individuals to fully attain virtue, because it "can be fully attained only within a political community" (Taylor, p. 243 & Nichols, p. 29). It is therefore necessary that we human beings actively participate in political life, with all its conflicts or opposing forces, in order that we can live a good life or that our human flourishing may be maximized, aiming at our highest good. Political life makes this possible for us. An even better way of articulating it is offered by Nichols (pp. 14-15):

> Humanity's attaining its good...is more complex, for that good may be in conflict with what is immediately pleasant... But the political community is the prime association through which we seek the advantageous and the harmful, the just and the unjust... *Politics* is therefore natural—a way in which we fulfil our natural capacity for reason and speech. *Politics* involves argument about advantage and justice, deliberation concerning alternatives, choices among them, and action to attain them.

Considering this political aspect of human nature, the saying, *No man is an island*, is very significant from the perspective of a political theorist like Aristotle.

The Necessity of Living and of Living Well

Aristotle is constantly saying that while the city comes into being for the sake of life, it continues to exist for the sake of the good life (Nichols, 1992, p. 13). And the latter end is nobler and higher than the former (Nichols, p. 27). In a city, while it is necessary to live or survive, it is also necessary to live well or live a good life. These are the dual ends of an ideal city. As Nichols (p. 82) succinctly puts it, "The end of humanity is not merely to live, but to live well." This is explained somewhere else: "Human beings cannot live well unless they are alive, and living well requires a person to accept his dependence on others and his mortality" (Nichols, p. 83).

The Choice to Rule and be Ruled in View of the City's Dual Ends

The challenge lies in ruling the city in view of its dual ends of living and of living well. It requires a choice on the part of the ruler and the ruled as well. Aristotle understands choice, not as an arbitrary act of will that frees human beings from the contingencies of life, but as "grounded in the options that are available at any given time in what circumstances permit" (Nichols, 1992, p. 36). Nichols continues to underscore that "it is such a choice that defines *human* action...and political life as well. The city is an association of human beings rather than of slaves or animals because its members share lives lived 'according to choice.'" Aristotle, according to Nichols (p. 50), encourages us to make the choice: "Aristotle chooses, and thereby shows others that they too can choose, a different way of life. He shows that cities can aim at the good life as well as life, that political rule is distinct from despotism, and that education in virtue is the prime concern of statesmanship." Aristotle's ideal city is therefore that which aims not only for survival, but also for the good life, and it is a choice we all have to make; keeping the balance in ensuring that we both attain those goals (Nichols, p. 61). Hence, by ensuring such, we promote the highest good for the human community.

What Are the Elements Necessary in an Ideal Polis?

If human beings were to flourish in attaining their highest good, what is necessary to ensure such human flourishing? A direct answer would be: "an ideal state." However, such an ideal state, according to Deininger (2000, p. 95), "aims at providing sufficient external goods to permit the pursuit of virtue and happiness."

In his introduction to his commentary, Nichols (1992, p. 1) remarks about this in another vein: "Aristotle shows how human beings realize their freedom—and fulfil their highest natural capacities—through the activities of citizens and statesmen." In other words, it is through *citizenship* and *statesmanship* that Aristotle locates the possible promotion of our highest good as a political community.

Complexity and Diversity of the Political Community

Aristotle calls the members of his ideal city or the political community

as *citizens* comprising both the majority (considered as beasts) and the few who are of outstanding virtue (considered as gods) (Nichols, 1992, p. 10). What is important here is to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of the citizens. The inclusion of the majority and the few, by reason of their being human, is an initial but crucial acknowledgment of the complexity and "irreducible diversity" (Nichols, p. 41) of those who comprise the city or the political community, for "political life, and therefore virtue, assumes a multiplicity of forms" (Nichols, p. 35). Such diversity or complexity is inherent in human nature (Nichols, p. 42). Thus, Aristotle, continues Nichols, criticizes the political theory "that tries to circumvent diversity for the sake of a more perfect politics" or tries to suppress "the natural diversity of humanity for the sake of a simple and unchanging perfection" (Nichols, p. 51). It is precisely such complex and diverse conditions that political life could flourish the most. Thus, even the contrasting and opposing characteristics of the many and the few serve well to complement for an active and fruitful participation of everyone in the city.[5]

Another way of acknowledging such complexity and diversity is by considering both the homogeneous and heterogeneous or "dissimilar" (Nichols, 1992, p. 11) elements among human beings who comprise the city. The differences among human beings simply account for the city's diversity (Nichols, p. 38). Nichols beautifully captures the indispensability of differences in the city in the following: "The excessive unity that Socrates tries to promote, he [Aristotle] claims, is the wrong goal, for it eliminates the distinctions on which a city flourishes. A city should not be homogeneous, for it is made up 'out of a diversity.' To unify the city completely is to destroy it" (p. 37). Not only the citizens are heterogeneous, but also the statesmen – that is, both the ruled and the rulers – a heterogeneity that "one alone cannot adequately encompass" (Nichols, pp. 78, 83).

Acknowledging such heterogeneous elements is assuming the presence of tensions and conflicts in the city Nichols, 1992, p. 51). But as Aristotle contends, it is precisely with such conflicts that the political life shall flourish.

It is in this respect that Aristotle emphasizes that justice must be based on inequality as well as on equality (Nichols, 1992, p. 82). "Human beings must be treated equally insofar as they are equals, and unequally insofar as they are unequals" (Nichols, p. 65). Since the city is composed of equal and unequal citizens and statesmen, equity must be promoted instead of equality. "Political rule, while it is grounded in the similarity between ruler

and ruled, does not mean absolute equality" (Nichols, p. 9; see p. 62). Aristotle promotes equity especially in legislation which can be too particular or too universal. Nichols explains: "Mediating between universal and particular, statesmen must make partial laws more universal through reforming regimes at the same time that they make universal laws more partial through equity" (p. 72).

Sharing of Rule: Requisite to a Life of Virtue

It is indispensable for the advancement and flourishing of political life, according to Aristotle, that the rulers and the ruled take turns in the diverse ways of participating in the political life. Nichols (1992, p. 7) points out that "when human beings participate in political life, ruling and being ruled in turn, they learn truths about human nature and the world in which they live." Aristotle calls that statesmanship or political rule (Nichols, p. 9) where "rulers rule others similar or equal to them and therefore rule and are ruled in turn" (p. 69). Here we see sharing in rule (Nichols, p. 78). But such sharing is regulated by law.

> Rule by human beings is combined with rule by law, which acts as a restraint by ordering the manner in which they share authority. Thus while the laws cover many aspects of a city's life, they do allow for rule or discretion: what remains undetermined by law is left to the rulers, who also correct the laws when 'they hold something to be better than the existing [laws] on the basis of their experience' (Nichols, p. 78).

Aristotle considers statesmanship or political rule as the "most choice worthy way of life in the context of ruling and being ruled," for "the best way of life and the best regime involve political rule"(Nichols, p. 81). Such political rule, as already mentioned, involves sharing in rule, for "the virtuous individual shares his rule with others." Thus, a life of virtue in a city necessarily implies not monopolizing but sharing of rule with others.

From these two fundamental elements necessary in Aristotle's ideal city, one may deduce other requisites or necessary elements that should characterize the city if it were to serve the flourishing of the human community. Such elements may ensue in the process of balancing and moderating the many and the one or few, correcting their respective deficiencies while adopting their positive contribution to political

rule (Nichols, 1992, pp. 65, 66, 81). On one hand the many, in their diversity, have a lot to contribute that they have indeed a just claim to rule, while, on the other hand, "statesmanship is needed to understand the whole city and to unify the diverse interests that the many represent" (Nichols, pp. 66, 67). Thus, as Nichols informs us, "Aristotle attempts to find a place in the city for both the majority of the people and outstanding individuals;" this we find in Book III of the *Politics* (p. 81).

Mutual Dependence of Citizens and Statesmen

Sharing of rule already implies a certain mutual dependence on the part of citizens and statesmen of the city.[6] This is inherent in the nature of the statesmanship or political rule that Aristotle is talking about as a "rule by virtuous individuals that nevertheless requires for its success the participation of the people" (Nichols, 1992, p. 6; also p. 8). In other words, statesmanship is impossible or even unthinkable without citizenship, as if saying that statesmen and citizens are mutually dependent on one another, a mutual dependence grounded on their similarity and differences (Nichols, p. 33). The heterogeneity of the citizens makes the statesmen necessary for the latter to direct the diversity toward common goals. Thus, when statesmen share the rule with the citizens we can consider it as political rule (Nichols, p. 82). Accordingly, the human community would attain its dual ends of not merely living but also living well.

Conclusion

To make the city an ideal locus for human flourishing means a long and arduous journey to take. One such undertaking is in the realm of education. In order that political rule may be established in the city, education is indispensable in the process. The necessity of educating both the rulers and the ruled to become adequate statesmen and citizens respectively cannot be undermined if we take seriously Aristotle's ideal polis. Aristotle provides a guide to action through the education of statesmen (Nichols, 1992, p. 42). In educating both the rulers and the ruled, their deficiencies may be corrected or controlled and their strengths or excellent qualities be promoted. Thus, it is the educated person who may have the overall understanding capable of ruling the city (Nichols, p. 69).

Another important thing to note about political rule in an ideal city is

its cognizance of the past. In learning from the past, one is able to enrich the present and future ways of living in the city insofar as it promotes human flourishing or good life. That is why Aristotle's statesmanship is "both old and new, for it brings together what is good in the past as it has not hitherto been brought together" (Nichols, 1992, p. 48). This requires some degree of flexibility or openness to development in a variety of directions. But whatever directions may be taken, action or experience, along with circumstances of time and place, serves as the test for political thought (Nichols, pp. 54, 42). Whatever attempts we make to ensure that our city serves our purposes, let us always keep in mind that our attempts must serve not only living, but living well for that is the essence of human flourishing. This is the thread that weaves together Aristotle's complex political theory. However, as Adler (1978, p. 126) points out, the ideal city (state or government) can only give its citizens external conditions that enable and encourage them to try to live well. It ultimately depends on the choices of the citizens for them to live virtuous lives. Having said that, if his theory serves well in guiding us to attain our highest human potential and happiness through a life of virtue in a polis, then Aristotle has not labored in vain.

Considering a largely negative notion of politics in the Philippines and in many parts of the world, this glimpse at Aristotle's political theory may serve as a corrective by bringing out the positive notion of politics or political life. Perhaps, having discerned that good life is the very goal of politics, and having discerned what good life really is, it may lead us to a more positively fruitful direction in terms of our political life – thus flourishing truly in our lives as human beings in the truest sense of being human. Politics then becomes our greatest means to live our human lives fully, as individuals and as communities. But first, we have to rethink our notion of political life and re-educate ourselves of political values necessary not only for survival but especially for living a good life as a human community.

Notes

[1] Mortimer J. Adler (1978, p. 191) admits the difficulty in reading Aristotle's works, particularly for beginners: "Aristotle's books are much too difficult for beginners. Even in the best translations, much of what is said remains obscure. The translators use many words that are unfamiliar, words that we do not use in our everyday speech. Though some of the Greek words that Aristotle himself used were words that his fellow Greeks used, he gave them

special meanings." Such perspective is shared by Curtis N. Johnson (1990, p. xv), but applying it in particular to *Politics*: "Aristotle's *Politics* is a notoriously difficult work to make sense of... few would dispute that after all is said and done it remains a most puzzling and difficult work to penetrate."

[2] I have adopted this term (human flourishing) from Christopher Shields (2007), taken to mean as "an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue" (p. 373).

[3] Nichols (1992) summarizes Aristotle's point quite well: "The city, which is the most authoritative association and embraces all the others, aims at the most authoritative or highest good (1252a1-7)." She quotes from W. D. Ross: "The state offers a more adequate field than its predecessors... to moral activity, a more varied set of relations in which the virtues may be exercised. And it gives more scope for intellectual activity;... each is more fully stimulated by the impact of mind upon mind"; (pp. 238. 14, 17).

[4] See a relevant discussion on *phronesis* by Taylor (1995, p. 241).

[5] Such complementarity of the many and the few stands out in Aristotle's articulation of both their excellence and deficiency, of their capabilities or lack thereof (Nichols, 1992, pp. 58-ff).

[6] Nichols mentions mutual dependence in relation to liberalism: "liberalism may yet prove superior to its critics unless they understand—and accept—the mutual dependence of citizens and statesmen" (p. 12).

References

Adler, M.J. (1978). *Aristotle for everybody: Difficult thought made easy*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. And London: Collier Macmillan Publishers.

Aristotle (1966). *Politica*. (B. Jowett, Trans.). revised edition. Translated into English under the editorship of W. D. Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Barnes, J. (Ed.) (1995). *Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*. USA: Cambridge University Press.

Deininger, W. (2000). Politics. In J. K. Roth (Ed.), *World philosophers and their works* (Vol. 1). Pasadena, California / Hackensack, New Jersey: Salem Press, Inc.

Jaeger, W. (1962). *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the history of his development*. (R. Robinson, Trans.). London: Oxford University Press.

Johnson, C.N. (1990). *Aristotle's theory of the state*. Hong Kong: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Nichols, M.P. (1992). *Citizens and statesmen*. U.S.A.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Shields, C. (2007). Aristotle. London and New York: Routledge – Taylor & Francis Group.

C.C.W. Taylor, C.C.W. (1995). Politics. In J. Barnes (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle.* USA: Cambridge University Press, 1995),