

# Aristotle's state theory



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Aristotle's claim that the state is the highest, most developed form of social organisation is at the centre of one of his major works, 'The Politics'. His theory focuses mainly on the state as a natural progression, and draws upon two central themes; 'the good life' and human beings as 'political animals'. Whilst Aristotle does raise many valid points, he does not convince us that the state is the pinnacle of social organisation.

Although the state may be the highest form of social organisation, Aristotle fails to demonstrate how an active, political life equals a 'good life'.

Aristotle's major use of teleology is another drawback, which limits his argument in many ways. To illustrate these concerns it is important to analyse Aristotle's argument in its entirety and to put it in its context. Also, a critical analysis of his two major themes, that of 'the good life' and man as a 'political animal', will allow us to understand where Aristotle does indeed fail. Aristotle's 'The Politics' encompasses many themes and topics, some of which provide the basis for the state being the highest form of social organisation. Written during the fourth century BC, Aristotle's work forms the basis for many arguments concerning philosophy and is still extensively used today.

Aristotle claims that the state is a natural process, and in order to understand its complexity it is necessary to study the state in its "first growth and origin". It is natural for human beings to live within the state and natural for humans to reach their potential within it. Furthermore, Aristotle also places a strong emphasis on good and evil in his work. The state is a natural process, and therefore it has a natural end, anything that disrupts this process is evil.

Perfection is also important in Aristotle's work, which can be achieved by man within the state. Aristotle's teleological approach is highly important to his argument and reaffirms many of the points he raises. The good life is at the centre of the argument from Aristotle. Aristotle sees the good life as an active, political life, and it is only through this that human beings can achieve their "distinctive potential".

Another important point raised by Aristotle is the assertion that humans are 'political animals'. Humans are given skills such as speech so that they differ from animals, and it is natural for humans to live an active, political life. These themes and assertions are all important in Aristotle's claim that the state is the highest form of social organisation. However, a closer analysis of the above will demonstrate that Aristotle does not address all issues surrounding the topic. Aristotle does not see the state as an original creation, but rather a natural and evolving process which Aristotle sees as having 3 main stages. The first is the household; it serves the needs of its inhabitants and is strictly governed by the husband, who has rule over the wife and slaves.

The household eventually develops into the village, which shares many of the aims of the household, but is more of a community and does more than just secure life. The final stage is of course the state, which has a body of power and is governed by a constitution. The state differs from the former as it does not only secure life, but it ensures a good life and is self sufficient to the needs of man. The state is able to offer happiness to its inhabitants, and it is the goal of the state to ensure a good life. The state is the only social organization that allows humans to reach their distinctive potential.

Whilst the household and family deals with daily needs and the village expands its economy and trade, the state is a natural environment in which human beings can flourish and reach their potential. Viewing that state as an evolving process is the key to Aristotle's claim that the state is the highest form of social organization. Aristotle's close use of teleology is open to much scrutiny, and while one of his strongest devices, it is also one of his weaknesses. By placing teleology in a normative framework, Aristotle cannot not answer all questions regarding his claims.

Aristotle's view of a natural evolving state has come under close scrutiny from many modern thinkers. Theorist Adam Smith is one known critic of Aristotle's work, and has closely scrutinized Aristotle's theory of the evolving state. In his work 'insert', Smith argues that it is simplistic to argue that a state can just evolve. Smith uses the concept of the 'invisible hand' in particular to prove this point. If all citizens within a state are given freedom to buy whatever they choose, and the producers are free to choose selling prices, then a compromise will be made between the two and it will even out. This freedom allows the state to be beneficial to individuals and efficient and not lopsided.

This emphasizes that all these effects will be automatic as individuals are free to make decisions. Aristotle's view, that the state will evolve without serious consequence is too simple, and fails to account for other problems. Social and economic variables in reality are quite troublesome especially within states, and do not simply fall into a sequential category. Indeed, Smith is able to destabilize Aristotle's argument at its most basic teleological level, which also brings the rest of it into question. The 'good life' is another point

raised in Aristotle's work. For Aristotle, this is the goal of all individuals, which can be reached by engaging in an active, political life.

It is here that Aristotle commits a major flaw in his argument. Whilst it is his belief that the 'good life' is one that is an active, political life, he does not give any real reason for us to believe so. Rather, Aristotle puts in place thin persuasive arguments which attempt to cover obvious deficiencies in his work. Aristotle attempts to cover this can be see is his example of two separate lives; one is the active, political human being, whilst the other is the 'contemplative life' .

He argues that the active, political life is far superior to the former. Aristotle claims 'that he who does nothing cannot do well' ; political action is necessary in order to achieve the 'good life'. He supports this by asserting that such activity is 'just' and 'noble', and essentially argues that happiness equals activity . Aristotle is yet to explain thoroughly why human beings must be politically active; he instead places a weak persuasive example in its place. Although Aristotle places a great deal of emphasis on his ability to use reason, it is difficult to believe Aristotle could so simply describe the 'good life' in such a way.

However, if we were to assume that this was true, we can still find flaws in Aristotle's argument. Aristotle claims happiness can be found in both contemplative and active lives, with the active live securing superior happiness. However, Aristotle also asserts that the contemplative life does not incur activity, and therefore cannot have happiness . This is a contradiction which Aristotle does not account for, and reveals

inconsistencies in his argument. Indeed, Aristotle's failure to demonstrate how the 'good life' can be obtained by human beings means that the state cannot be classed as the highest form of social organization. Much of Aristotle's argument centers on the notion that man is a 'political animal' by nature.

Aristotle claims that man is not only a 'political animal' by nature, but is also 'the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech'. It is this distinction Aristotle uses to display that man is different to other animals, man has a potential to reach in life and 'he alone has any sense of good and evil'. Once again, Aristotle has not completely answered why man is a 'political animal'. Whilst the features he suggests do imply a physical difference, it is largely based on assumptions that are conceptual. Human beings do have the ability of speech, but merely exercising such a skill does not make it a noble pursuit, it does not ensure a 'good life'.

It does give a means for man to take on an active, political life, but it still does not ensure a 'good life'. Aristotle's claims also bring into question his views of good and evil. It is natural that man is a 'political animal', but anything which impedes this natural progression can be considered evil. However, the right of one individual to exercise their rights as a 'political animal' can infringe upon another's.

Simply exercising human capacities, such as a politically active life, does not make you a good human being. It can be seen once again that Aristotle does not fully engage all questions raised, and simply uses persuasive arguments to prove his point rather than strong reasoning. Therefore,

Aristotle does not accurately prove that the state is the highest form of social organization. However, it is unfair to consider Aristotle's whole argument as unfounded. It is important to recognize the time in which Aristotle wrote this work. His work has an aim of protecting political rights, and emphasizing the place of each citizen in society.

Aristotle is correct in saying that the state is the most superior form of social organization; it is his methods of explanation which are most revealing. His use of teleology was for its time considered fair, and it was seen as normative. Many of the criticisms of Aristotle's work have come from more modern perspectives. Many of the concepts and ideas written by Aristotle are original, and were the basis for many other writers.

Indeed, philosopher Miller proposes "that without Aristotle, the basis for many philosophical enquiries are unfounded". Indeed, Aristotle's argument does not convince us that the state is the highest form of social organisation. It does represent an example of the emerging society at that time, but it is not argued thoroughly enough for it to be agreed upon. Aristotle's major theme of nature is too simplistic and leaves out many variables. The state as a natural progression is just a theory and cannot be seriously compared to reality.

The idea of the 'good life' as a active, political life is also unfounded and inconsistent. Man as a 'political animal' also has its problems, which also conflicts with Aristotle's views on good and evil. Finally, Aristotle's central teleological approach and assumptions do not account for many inconsistencies throughout his argument. Therefore, whilst the state may be

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