

# Whats best form of political arrangement for aristotle philosophy essay

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Aristotle tries to define what the best form of political arrangement would be, by analysing different existing forms and looking mainly at the means by which they came into being and at what resulted in their downfall.

Throughout his analysis he uses a teleological[1]theory and tries to define everything by its end. Consequently, he tries to determine the best form of political arrangement based on its aim, which according to him should be happiness or virtue[2]. He recognises that a form of political arrangement, with such a pure aim has never existed and that is also not possible to exist and therefore apart from that he also proposes a more realizable form that acknowledges wealth and freedom, while focusing primarily on virtue. He mentions though that this proposed form is infrequent in reality (but not impossible to exist). Aristotle starts his analysis, with the aim of defining the best possible form, by describing the human nature. Would a person be happy if he was the only living person in the world? No. Aristotle says that " man is by nature a political animal"[3], because he is the only amongst the animals that " has the ability to communicate his ideas about justice and the good"[4]; he alone amongst the animals has speech. This allows us to say that human partnerships are natural and so are cities, because they arise from smaller human partnerships, the villages and the households. A city is autarkic[5], meaning that it contains everything that is necessary to live a good life; " it originated for the sake of basic survival, but exists for the sake of living well". Living well requires a life according to virtue since, as Aristotle says " the best way of life both separately for each individual and in common for cities is that accompanied by virtue"; that life will result in happiness, which is the aim of human life. That means that the best form of political

arrangement should care for virtue. Moreover, it means that justice should be very important for every city, since " a city can only foster virtue to the extent that it is just". Virtue, according to Aristotle, is excellence in something specific and the virtue of a man is that, which will lead him to happiness. The virtue of a citizen though has a different meaning and in order to find it we need to define what a citizen is. Being a citizen for Aristotle is not just a legal status; it implies very specific political rights and duties. A citizen is one who has a share in ruling the city, which means that the virtue of a citizen is that which will lead to the preservation of the political arrangement. Therefore, since the aim of the city is to live well or to live according to virtue, the best form of political arrangement is the one where the role of the human being and the role of the citizen coincide. Aristotle also says that carefully defined citizenry, which includes people interested in helping to preserve the political arrangement and excludes people that cannot participate in government, due to either lack of leisure time or natural slavish characteristics (e. g. lack of reason), can be used by the ruler as an aid, in order to sustain the political arrangement. The discussion about the best regime brings out several of Aristotle's main ideas about politics in general and about the political rule. He defines it as rule among those who are " similar in stock and free". He describes six existing forms of political arrangement, three correct, which look to the common advantage and therefore we have political rule and three deviant, which look to the advantage of the rulers and so we do not have political rule, but mastery. The most correct form is kingship, where the regime is ruled by the one with the most deific virtue. According to Aristotle, that is the best form,

because it is less likely for everyone to be " outstanding in virtue" when there is rule by the multitude. Next we have aristocracy where the rulers are the few with the most virtue and then polity, where we have rule by the many. These are the three correct forms of political arrangement and the three deviant ones are democracy, oligarchy and tyranny, the deviant forms of polity, aristocracy and kingship respectively. Based on Aristotle's claim that virtue should be the aim of the city, it becomes apparent that, at least theoretically, kingship should be the best form of political arrangement. However, this contradicts his claims that citizens should rule and be ruled in turn and that they should participate in politics in their leisure. This leads to aristocracy being even better. There is one great issue though and that is that, as Aristotle recognises, there are many factors that need to be considered in order to determine the best form of political arrangement for each particular city. This means that we should try to match a city with its own best form of political arrangement. Trying to match a city with its own best form of political arrangement though, we find out that with kingship and aristocracy we get factional conflicts[6], due to differences in people's beliefs as to what should determine the ruler; many believe that it should be virtue, whereas others believe that it should be wealth. That makes kingship and aristocracy impossible in real life. The generation of these factional conflicts proves to be the discussion about equality and inequality, the discussion about justice and they can indeed be the cause of the downfall of a political arrangement; they should therefore be seriously considered. They also prove that the best form of political arrangement for one city is not necessarily the best for all cities. Aristotle says " so the varieties of the regimes - how many

there are and in how many ways they are combined – should not be overlooked", which means that one should consider all the existing regimes, when he tries to determine the best form of political arrangement for a specific city. Since kingship and aristocracy are not viable options, what is the best possible practical regime? Aristotle claims that it is polity, since democracy and oligarchy both base their claim to rule on a mistaken view of equality. Democrats believe that because all are equally free, they are equal in general and oligarchs on the other hand believe that because the poor are unequal in wealth, they are inferior in general. Furthermore, tyranny is the worst regime since it does not allow citizens to rule and be ruled in turn and it also does not aim to the common advantage, but to the advantage of the tyrant, the ruler, as do democracy and oligarchy. Moreover, Aristotle writes that the correct forms of political arrangement tend to degenerate into their respective incorrect forms. Therefore, since each existing form of political arrangement has partial claim to justice and since correct forms tend to degenerate into their respective incorrect forms, we need to mix the different types of political arrangements, in order to mitigate their flaws. Polity is a mixture of democracy and oligarchy and that is the best realizable form of political arrangement because in some cases the multitude needs to rule, such as in judicial decisions, whereas in some other cases rulers should be selected, according to virtue and not according to wealth. Aristotle wants to avoid rule by one man (kingship or tyranny), because that would be apolitical and because he also believes that rule by law should be preeminent, since decisions by human beings can be very easily affected by their feelings and by many other imponderable factors. On the other hand he

says that if there is an outstanding person in virtue it would be irrational not to allow him to rule. Rule by law can also be used by a ruler in order to help him sustain the political arrangement, since law defines the form of political arrangement in the first place. However, there cannot be laws for everything and so law must be enforced by human guardians, who will serve as judges. In order to reduce the already mentioned factional conflicts, Aristotle also suggests that the ruler increase the middling element, or else middle class of people, so that the inequality is reduced, since most factional conflicts originate because of inequality. The middling element also represents the mean<sup>[7]</sup> between the beliefs of the rulers and of those being ruled and it therefore knows both how to rule and to be ruled. Talking about the middling element Aristotle says that " it is the greatest good fortune for those who are engaged in politics to have a middling and sufficient property", since it will most often lead to " the most stable regimes". Finally, Aristotle talks about education and its importance in preserving the political arrangement. He says that citizens should be educated " relative to the regime", but he means that in a different way than most people will understand it, he means education to appreciate the claims of justice that the non-ruling element has. As he writes, " but to the educated relative to the regime is not to do the things that oligarchs or those who want democracy enjoy, but rather the things by which the former will be able to run an oligarchy and the latter to have a regime that is run democratically". But Aristotle also describes education of another sort and not like the one just described. He claims that education should prepare the young for cultivating virtue, and so should be split in four parts: letters, gymnastics, music and drawing. Education should

also prepare non-slaves for spending their lives partly in leisure, since leisure is a time for cultivating virtue. Rulers can use education in order to preserve the political arrangement. After considering all these factors, we can conclude that according to Aristotle the best form of political arrangement is polity, which is a mixture of oligarchy and democracy. Kingship cannot be the best form, even though it is the most correct one[8], since it allows for factional conflicts due to the difficulty of selecting the best ruler[9]. The same holds true for aristocracy. The other three forms of political arrangement described by Aristotle, the democracy, the oligarchy and the tyranny, are considered deviant, because they aim at the advantage of the rulers and not at the common advantage. Polity can be considered the best form of political arrangement for another reason as well; it is, as a mixture, a mean between the claims of the oligarchs and the democrats and some of its advantages are the advantages of the middling element. The fact that polity is the mean between oligarchy and democracy can be seen very clearly when Aristotle describes how polity comes into being, by saying that " there are three defining principles of this combination or mixture", which are "[taking] elements of legislation of each [regime]", "[taking] the mean between the assessments" and " taking some from the oligarchic law and some from the democratic". Consequently, even though the definition of polity does not include the pure pursuit of virtue, as the definition of kingship and aristocracy do, polity itself is defined as a mean and so it takes a virtuous quality in this sense. Finally, in Aristotle's definition of the best form of political arrangement he says that there should be rule by the law and education " relative to the regime", in order to help preserve it. He also

suggests that the ruler increases the middling element, in order to reduce factional conflicts and therefore the possibility of a revolution.