

Contrast and communion of the political thought of homer and aristotle



Odysseus and Aristotle, as expressed in the Iliad (Homer) and The Politics, respectively, hold irreconcilable views regarding government; Aristotle would have doubtlessly condemned the former's beating of Thersites. To Aristotle, this act embodies the dystopia that is found in a perverse government, while the Achaeans, ironically enough, praise it as "far the best thing [Odysseus] has ever accomplished" (II, 274-5). One of Aristotle's most famous thoughts, and the foundation of many of his political beliefs, is that "man is by nature a political animal" (I, 1253a, 2). The implications of this statement can be applied to Odysseus' act: if Thersites were to remain silent, he would be denying his very nature as a 'political animal', as well as the political inclinations and sentiments that pertain to such a being. Aristotle solidifies his support of Thersites later in the text, when he states that "Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal who has the gift of speech" (I, 1253a, 9-10). It is this same gift of speech for which Thersites is degraded. Odysseus flaunts his disregard for such liberties in lines 246-256 (Book II): "Fluent orator though you be, Thersites, your words are ill-considered...you argue nothing but scandal." In the mind of Aristotle, it is this same scandal that would provide the richness of debate that correlates with the richness of a fulfilled, politically inclined lifestyle. Furthermore, Aristotle claims that those without such a polis are in fact barbaric: "either a bad man or above humanity; he is like the tribeless, lawless, hearthless one" (I, 1253a, 2-4). Interestingly enough, this exact idea is expressed in the Iliad. Once Thersites is denied the liberty of free debate, he becomes markedly less civilized, reduced to a pseudo-barbaric, animalistic state in which fear and pain are expressed without words: "a round tear dropped from him...and he sat down, frightened, in pain, and

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looking helplessly about wiped off the tear-drops” (II, 66-69). Aristotle, with his ideals of human reason and political freedom, would have been sickened to witness such a display. On a larger scale, however, Aristotle rejects the Achaean’s system of government itself. Their straightforward system is summed up by Odysseus: “ Lordship for many is no good thing. Let there be one ruler, one king, to whom [Zeus] gives the scepter and right of judgment” (II, 204-6). Aristotle views this authority not as the divine-right monarchy Homer describes it as, but as a bastardized kingship: a tyranny. Aristotle’s definition of a monarchy is “ which one rules...which regards the common interest” (III, 1279a, 34); a tyranny is “ a kind of monarchy which has in view the interest of the monarch only” (III, 1279b, 5). It is such “ private interest” that causes the natural form of the kingship to turn perverse; Aristotle thus sees the entire system of rule of the Greek army unjust, as it is essentially manipulated by Agamemnon’s private interest. The philosopher would have maintained a third objection, however. Opposed to opulence and ‘unnatural acquisition,’ he is in agreement with Thersites when the soldier criticizes Agamemnon’s extravagance, including “ shelters filled with bronze” (II, 226) and “ plenty of the choicest women” (II, 227). While Aristotle condones the acquisition of wealth in order to run an orderly household, he considers it contemptible to accumulate money for its own sake. He argues that “ the greatest crimes are caused by excess and not by necessity” (II, 1267a, 14). This striking statement applies not only to the monetary excesses of Agamemnon, but to the Trojan War itself: one could very easily make the argument that this war is both unnecessary and excessive. Even greater parallels are reached as Aristotle goes on to claim, “ Men do not become tyrants in order that they may not suffer cold” (II, 1267a, 15); Agamemnon is

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not fighting the war out of human necessity, but out of human greed, which Aristotle also attacks: “ And the avarice of mankind is insatiable” (II, 1267a, 1-2). It is precisely such excess of enjoyment which Thersites accuses Agamemnon of indulging in – on this topic, the minds of Thersites and Aristotle are in flawless accord. There are several concepts expressed in The Politics that might tempt one to imagine that Aristotle’s arguments in fact support the beating of Thersites. The most prevalent of these apparent contradictions is Aristotle’s model of the master and slave: “ there is a marked distinction between the two classes,” he claims, “ rendering it expedient and right for one to be slaves and others to be masters” (I, 1255b, 6-7). Using this example, one may apply the role of slave to Thersites, and the role of master to Agamemnon; the two men are quite obviously from ‘ two classes’. This distinction, however, is not what Aristotle intends; he proceeds to clarify that those “ who can be...another’s, and who participates in reason enough to apprehend, but not to have, is a slave by nature” (I, 1254b, 21-23). Disregarding the injustice inherent in this statement when viewed from a modern perspective, one can clearly see that Aristotle would not consider Thersites fit for slavery – he clearly possesses reason and has the potential to be “ useful for political life in the arts both of war and peace” (I, 1254b, 30-31). The second objection comes from Aristotle’s definition of the citizen. He poses the question, “ Is he only a true citizen who has a share of office, or is the mechanic to be included?” (III, 1277b, 34-36) This query could be applied to the average warrior: Aristotle claims that only those with enough leisure time for politics should be allowed to practice them. Clearly, the average warrior has little to no leisure time. The solution to this paradox is that the society in which these soldiers function is different from Aristotle’s <https://assignbuster.com/contrast-and-communion-of-the-political-thought-of-homer-and-aristotle/>

proposed ideal; not one individual has time to study and debate political concepts. Because they are all functioning in a faux-society, as warriors, Aristotle's arguments must be adjusted slightly to allow for such 'mechanics' to be included in political discourse; they are all essentially laborers, as even the leader himself 'works' full days. The only requirement left to be fulfilled is the ability to debate and reason, both of which Thersites owns in abundance. The two both seem to invest in the idea that "the good is justice, in other words, the common interest" (III, 1282b, 17). Thersites himself, in fact, could pose rather seamlessly as a character model for Aristotle's ideas. The two parallel personalities condemn both tyrannical rule and extravagance, and protect, explicitly or implicitly, the qualities they deem most important: political discourse and reason.