

Aristotle's theory of the ideal state



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

ARISTOTLE AND HIS IDEAL STATE(384 BC - 322 BC)

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Aristotle is one such unique philosopher, who has made contributions to innumerable fields like that of physics, biology, mathematics, metaphysics, medicines, theatre, dance and of course politics. Aristotle is known as 'Father of Political Science'. 'Polis' is 'city-state' in Greek. From this, he coined term 'Politics'. He is one of the most celebrated political thinkers as he was the first philosopher who detached philosophy from political science and carved out the latter as an independent discipline. He introduced a systematic study of politics and stated that politics may be devoid of ethics.

Aristotle was born in 384 BC in the Greek town of Stagira. His father, Nicomachus was a physician in the court of Macedonia. Both his parents are known to have died when Aristotle was young. At the age of 17, Aristotle's sister's husband, who was his guardian, sent him to Athens for higher education in Plato's academy. Aristotle proved to be an exemplary scholar and was a close disciple of Plato. Plato died in 347 BC. However, despite being one of the closest disciples of Plato, Aristotle did not become the head of the academy as he had some major differences with respect to Plato's theory. Aristotle stayed in the academy for about 2 decades. After a few years of Plato's death, he left Athens and returned to Macedonia in 338 BC. There he taught Alexander the Great and the Macedonia court rewarded him generously for his services. In 335 BC, Alexander succeeded his father, Phillip II and conquered Athens. Aristotle too returned to Athens and started his own academy called the Lyceum. Aristotle spent most of his time writing,

researching and teaching at his academy. In 323 BC, Alexander died and the people of Athens revolted against the Macedonian rule. Being Alexander's teacher and having had connections with the ruling family of Macedonia, posed a threat to his life in Athens where anti-Macedonian sentiment was at its peak. In order to save himself from prosecution, Aristotle left Athens and went to Chalcis on the island of Euboea. Aristotle breathed his last there in 322 BC.

Aristotle experienced a lot of ups and downs in the political spectrum throughout his life like the fall of Sparta, the rise as well as the fall of Alexander the Great etc. All these happenings around him have affected him and it can be reflected in all his writings

INTRODUCTION

POPULATION AND TERRITORY

As said in the introduction the first material or ingredient to form a perfect or an ideal state is population. The legislator has the power to determine the number and character of citizens and thus, the size and character of the country. According to Aristotle, " Most persons think that a state in order to be happy ought to be large; but even if they are right, they have no idea what is a large and what a small state. For they judge of the size of the city by the number of the inhabitants; whereas they ought to regard not their number, but their power." (1) Hence, Aristotle was clearly of the opinion that the quality of the people which constitute the state matters, rather than their quantity. Thus, more than the physical size of the population, its character is important. Aristotle justifies this by giving the example of Hippocrates who

was a great physician that he was great because of the quality of the work he did and is definitely greater than a man who is just physically taller than him. Also, even if we are to reckon the greatness of a state by the number of inhabitants, not everybody can be included in it, like the slaves and foreigners. Only the members of the state are to be included who form an essential part of it. A very populated state cannot be well governed, as it is difficult to maintain law and order. According to Aristotle, there is a limit to the size of the state just as there is a limit to the size of other things like plants and animals as if any of these are too small or large, they either completely lose their nature or get spoiled. Here he cites an example of a ship. A ship, if only a span long, cannot be a ship at all and the one which is a quarter mile long will still be a ship, but will be bad for sailing. Similarly, if a state is too small, it won't be self-sufficient but if it is too big it would be incapable of having a government that is constitutional. Also, in an over-populated state, it is difficult to identify foreigners who may take advantage of this situation and try and acquire the rights of the citizens. Hence, clearly the largest population should be the one which suffices for the purposes of life.

The territory of the state should be all-producing, so that the state has all things to be in need of nothing, which is called sufficiency. It should enable the residents to live liberally so that they can enjoy leisure. The country should be suitable for receiving fruits and timber and also other products. The city should be situated in regard both to sea and land, so that it is protected on both the sides. Also, import and export can be facilitated through water transport.

Aristotle has a very distinct manner of describing the character of the people of various parts of the world. According to him, people who live in regions with cold climate and in Europe are hard-working but lack intelligence and skill. This is the reason they have the opportunity to enjoy freedom but they have no political organization. On the other hand, the natives of Asia are intelligent but they lack spirit, hence they are always under some foreign rule and are constantly subjugated. However, according to Aristotle, the best is the Hellenic race which is situated between the two regions and has the best of both the regions, i. e. the spirit of the Europeans and the intelligence of the Asians. So this race is free from any foreign rule and is also well-governed.

Aristotle states certain other things which an ideal state must have, such as food, arts, arms etc. It should have a good amount of revenue so that it can take care of its internal needs as well as protect itself from any external aggression. The state should also take care of the religion of the people so that they can practice their respective religion fearlessly. The last and the most important thing is that the authority in the state must have the power to decide what is good and in favor of the public. All these above mentioned things are necessarily to be provided for by the state administration as the state is not a mere aggregate of people but their union, who have come together to fulfill a common purpose of 'well-being'. If any one of the above listed things is lacking in any particular state, then a state cannot be called absolutely self-sufficient. Then it is necessary to frame the structure of the state in such a manner that all the above functions are fulfilled. For example, a state should have farmers to produce food, artists and artisans to promote

art, soldiers to protect the boundaries of the state, the priests to carry out religious practices etc. Thus, it can be observed that Aristotle does not undermine the role of any person in formation of an ideal state and specifies the role that each citizen can play, for the sake of 'good life'.

Aristotle also states the ideal location of the state. In order to ensure good health of its citizens, a state should lie towards the east. States which are covered by the north wind have milder winter which is again, healthier. Hence, the state should be located such that it favors convenient administration as well, in situations of war. There should be abundant springs and fountains in the state and if there is a scarcity of the same, there should be reservoirs which can store water and provide for its citizens in a state of crisis. Aristotle lays great emphasis on providing pure water to the citizens of the state. According to him, of the five elements of nature, the ones which are responsible to keep a person healthy are water and air. He says that the arrangement of houses in the city should be irregular in some parts of the city, because if all the houses are laid systematically in a straight line and in a particular pattern, it would be easy for strangers to find their way through every part of the town, which should not be the case. Hence, some parts should be systematic while some irregular and thus a balance between security and beauty of the state should be well maintained.

HOUSEHOLDS, PROPERTY AND SLAVERY IN THE IDEAL STATE

According to Aristotle, family is the most important and the primary social unit of the society. It is the first institution of society which trains a child in citizenship. Aristotle connects citizenship to a household because it teaches

a person division of labor (economic, social and others) and gives him a sense of understanding of his responsibility towards his family as well as towards the society and the state. A family gives an individual, training for a civilized life. The household takes care of the basic requirements of an individual; be it materialistic, social, emotional or physical need of the person. Thus, a man who lives in a well-managed household has a sense of fulfillment and content will contribute to the good of the society and in turn, the state. Family, thus, is essential for the moral growth and development of an individual.

A state is made up of many households and thus it is important for Aristotle, to study the arrangement of a household in an ideal state. A household is incomplete without slaves, opines Aristotle. There are three relations in a family which are important, that are, that of a husband and wife, the relation of a father and children and thirdly, that of master and slave. The man, husband and the father, rules over both his wife and children respectively, although the manner differs. The man is fitter by nature than the woman hence, the inequality in this relationship never ceases to exist. However, the father rules over his children in a royal and not in a constitutional manner as he does over his wife. With his children, there is a relation of both love and respect. With respect to the third relation, i. e. of master and slave, Aristotle says, " The master is only the master of the slave; he does not belong to him, whereas the slave is not only the slave of his master, but wholly belongs to him." (2). Thus, a slave by nature is a possession of his master, in spite of being a human being. Slaves are a part of property of the individual. Aristotle attaches a lot of importance to possession of property because

according to him, without property, one cannot cultivate values and virtues such as generosity, hospitality, giving alms to the poor and the needy, etc. Property is essential to have a good household. Private property is a source of pleasure as mostly men love money. It is an integral aspect of social economy. Lastly, he opines that possession of private property by individuals is in favor of the state as when people own property; they would not be worried for their subsistence and thus, can actively participate in the political process of the state. When there would be slaves in the house, the master will have a lot of leisure time and according to Aristotle, he who has leisure time can be involved in the formation of an ideal state. He says, "...those who are in a position which places them above toil have stewards who attend to their households, while they occupy themselves with philosophy or with politics." (3) Slavery is justified by Aristotle on two grounds. Firstly, on natural grounds; he says that some people are born without any faculties. However, they have the physical ability to work. This cannot be blamed on human beings as nature has created some people with lesser mental abilities. It is nature which has created men unequal. Nature has differentiated in the bodies of masters and slaves, making one physically strong and the other, although physically weak, but suitable for political life. He says, slaves have no virtues as they do not own property and hence they are not fit to be citizens of the state. Thus, according to Aristotle, some people are born to be slaves. He compares slaves to tamed animals and says that both cater to their needs with the help of their bodies. Secondly, as said before, slaves are an essential 'instrument' of a household. They symbolize prosperity of a particular family.

Thus, Aristotle concludes by saying, “ Thus it is clear that household management attends more to men than to the acquisition of inanimate things, and to human excellence more than to the excellence of property which we call wealth, and to the virtue of freemen more than to the virtue of slaves.” (4) He says that slave lacks any sort of deliberative faculty, a woman does have some but she has no authority and also the child has, but it's not mature enough to harness them.

CITIZENSHIP IN THE IDEAL STATE

The criteria for citizenship in different forms of governments vary according to their nature. For example, a person who can be a citizen in a democratic setup may not be eligible to be a citizen of an oligarchy. However, here, it is better to consider and talk about the citizens of a democratic state, because this is the system in which citizens are acknowledged the most than in any other system of governance.

According to Aristotle, the citizenship of a person of a particular state is not determined by his mere residence in that state, because a slave or a foreigner too are residents of the same state, but this does not give them the right of citizenship, for there are other criteria to determine the same. Also, the legal status of a person cannot be the criterion because even a foreigner can acquire a right to sue a resident of that state or can be sued by a resident, merely under some provisions of a treaty. Hence, just being under the jurisdiction of any particular state, according to Aristotle, cannot make one a citizen of that state. A person who is exiled from the state will cease to be a citizen of the state. A person, who has the authority to participate in the

judicial administration of the state, is termed as a citizen of that state. He should be able to take part in the process of administration of justice and legislation as a member of the deliberative assembly which can enable him to be a citizen. Hence, it can be observed that all those people who are permitted to take part in the political process of that state, for example, casting a vote or contesting elections, and all those who are eligible to be the members of the executive or the legislative branch of the government can be termed as citizens. With respect to who 'ought' to be citizens, Aristotle opines that all those who are trained and are capable of becoming either the ruler or the ruled, ought to be citizens. Further, he says that all those people who have property and leisure can be citizens as a person devoid of possession of any property, does not need any security from the state. Thus he would not be interested in the affairs of the state, so he would not bother to work for the betterment of the state. Also, a person who does not have property lacks experience in management skills as he is not accustomed to managing any kind of property. Such a person, according to Aristotle, cannot be expected to actively participate in the political affairs of the state and thus, in turn cannot 'manage' the state.

However, despite all these criteria, practically a citizen is one whose both parents have been citizens. Some say, two or more ancestors. This is the shortest and the most practical definition, but some raise an objection to this questioning, how their ancestors became citizens. But it can be said, if their ancestors participated in the governmental process, that had to be citizens. It is also difficult to determine those who become citizens after a revolution. Here, the doubt is not about who is a citizen, but it is about who ought to be

a citizen. As it was mentioned previously, a citizen of a particular government might not be eligible to be a citizen of some other form of government.

It is said that the one who has never learned to obey, can never be a good commander. Both are different, but a good citizen should have the capacity of both-he should be aware of governing like a free man and should know obedience like a free man. These are virtues of a good citizen.

The next point in citizenship of ideal state is that whether a good man and a good citizen are the same. This is explained by Aristotle by citing the example of a sailor. Sailors perform different functions like those of rowers, pilots, look-out men etc. Because they all have different functions, their virtues too differ. However, they all are described by one common definition, because they all have the same goal of safety in navigation. Aristotle compares sailors to citizens. Just like the former, citizens too differ from one another, but 'salvation of the community' (5) is their common aspiration. In numerous forms of governments, no single virtue is a perfect virtue of a good citizen. But it is assumed that good man is one with a single perfect virtue. Thus, a good man may not necessarily be a good citizen and vice versa.

The next point in citizenship is that can mechanics be termed as citizens. Aristotle admits that not all those who are necessary for the functioning of the ideal state can be deemed as citizens of that state. For example, children cannot be termed as citizens of the state even though they are an integral part of the state as they do not participate in any political process. Under

some governments, mechanics and laborers will not be citizens while under other, they might be included. Aristotle opines that the best form of government will not accept mechanics, laborers who he names as servants of the community, as they do not hold virtues of good citizens.