

ARISTOTLE'S CRITICISM OF PLATO'S "PHILOSOPHER KING"

In a passage which is commonly regarded as a fragment of Aristotle's lost work *On Kingship*¹), Themistius relates²): "Plato, even if in all other respects he was divine and deserving our unlimited admiration³), was utterly reckless when he made the statement that evils would never cease for men until either philosophers became kings, or kings became philosophers⁴). This

1) Diogenes Laertius V. 22 (no. 18); *Vita Hesychii (Vita Menagiana, Vita Menagii)* 10 (no. 16); Ptolemy-el-Garib (no. 8). See also Cicero, *Ad Atticum* XII. 40. 2, XIII. 28. 2; *Vita Marciana* 21; Philoponus (*olim Ammonius*), *In Arist. Cat. Comment.*, in: *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, vol. XIII, part 1 (edit. A. Busse, 1898), p. 3, lines 22-24; *Vita Pseudo-ammoniana*, in: V. Rose, *Aristotelis Qui Ferebantur Librorum Fragmenta* (Leipzig, 1886), p. 440, lines 22-24. — While Diogenes Laertius, Hesychius, Philoponus and Pseudoammonius maintain that this work consisted of one book, Ptolemy insists that it contained six books. Frag. 647 Rose; frag. 2 Walzer; frag. 2 Ross. It is presumed that Aristotle wrote the *On Kingship* after leaving the Academy in 348/347 B.C., and perhaps after the death of King Philip of Macedonia in 336. See E. Berti, *La Filosofia del Primo Aristotele* (Padua, 1962), p. 452.

2) Themistius, *Oratio* VIII. 107 D.

3) Aristotle's admiration for Plato can be seen, for instance, in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096 a 12-17, and especially in his elegy, as it is quoted in Olympiodorus, *In Platonis Gorgiam Comment.*, p. 197 (Norwin):

"Coming to the famed plain of Cecropia
He [*scil.*, Aristotle] set up an altar of sacred friendship
For the man [*scil.*, Plato] whom to praise is not lawful for bad men,
Who alone or first of mortals clearly revealed
By his own life and by his own teachings
That a man becomes good and happy at the same time.
Now no one can ever attain to those things again."

A fragment of this elegy, which was probably composed after Aristotle's return to Athens in 335/334 B.C., can also be found in *Vita Marciana* 26. The line, "that a man becomes good and happy at the same time", sounds very much like an echo of Plato, *Laws* 660 E: "The good man, if he is temperate and just, is fortunate and happy".

4) This is an almost literal citation from Plato, *Republic* 473 CD: "Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and philosophic wisdom meet in one . . ., cities will never have rest from their evils, nor will the whole of mankind". See also *ibid.* 501 E ff.

pronouncement of Plato's has been refuted⁵) and has paid its debt to time. We should honor Aristotle, who slightly altered Plato's statement and made his advice truer. Aristotle said that it was not merely unnecessary for a king to be a philosopher, but even distinct disadvantage. What a king should do was to listen to and take the advice of true philosophers. In doing so he would enrich his reign with good deeds and not merely with fine words".

Aristotle's objection to, or "correction" of, Plato's philosopher king is consistent with his realistic – existential – outlook on political life and the practical exigencies of the political community. Although during his association with Plato (367 B.C. – 348/347 B.C.) he undoubtedly adhered to Plato's purely theoretic views on "politics"⁶), in *Politics* 1277 a 16ff, Aristotle begins to stress the fact that "the good ruler must be a wise (practical) man". And *ibid.* at 1287 b 26 ff, he maintains that rulers should avail themselves of the advice of other people – in Plato's opinion a heretical suggestion. In the *Protrepticus*, written about 350 B.C., Aristotle had already pointed out the relation between purely theoretic (Platonic) politics and practical or workable politics which takes into account the *de facto* human condition: "For, just as sight in itself produces or creates nothing – its only assignment is to distinguish or to reveal to us all that can physically be seen – yet it not only enables us to act as it directs, but also assists us greatly in all our actions (for without sight we would be almost completely immobilized) – so it is also evident that although rational knowledge is purely theoretic, we still perform thousands of actions in full conformity with rational knowledge and, in fact, decide upon certain actions and forego others [in keeping with the dictates of practical knowledge]"⁷).

5) Plato, in *Republic* 497 E, had already admitted that his call for a "philosopher king" would meet with great difficulties, observing that "all great efforts are attended with risks. Everything excellent is difficult". It will be noted that Spinoza likewise concludes his *Ethics* with the admission that "everything excellent is both difficult and rare".

6) This becomes manifest in Aristotle's lost dialogues dealing with "political theory", namely, the *On Justice* and the *Politicus*. See A.-H. Chroust, "Aristotle's *On Justice*: A Lost Dialogue", *The Modern Schoolman*, vol. 43 (1966), pp. 249–263; A.-H. Chroust, "Aristotle's *Politicus*: A Lost Dialogue", *Rheinisches Museum*, vol., 108 no. 4 (1965), pp. 346–353.

7) Jamblichus, *Protrepticus* (edit. H. Pistelli), p. 56, lines 2ff; frag. 13 Walzer; frag. 13 Ross; frag. 51 Düring; frag. 48 Chroust. An echo of this passage from the *Protrepticus* might be seen in *Nicomachean Ethics*

Aristotle's criticism of Plato's theoretic proposition that only philosophers should be kings probably arose from his insight that a good ruler "should avoid impossibilities"⁸) and impracticabilities, such as Plato had indeed advocated in his *Republic*. Determined to abandon the exclusively theoretic (contemplative) approach taken by Plato, Aristotle pursued political knowledge in the realm of historical fact and practical experience. This is clearly indicated in Aristotle's statement: "Our philosophic predecessors have handed down to us the subject of legislation unexamined. Hence, it would be best for us to study this subject ourselves, and in general inquire into the question of what constitutes a constitution, in order to complete, to the best of our abilities, our philosophy of the human nature. First, then, if anything has been said well in detail by earlier thinkers, let us try to review it; then, in the light of the constitutions we have collected [Aristotle alludes here to his *Collection of 158 Constitutions*, note by the author], let us investigate what influences or factors preserve or destroy cities, and what influences or factors preserve or destroy particular kinds of constitutions or institutions, and to what cause it is due that some cities are well administered, while others are badly governed. When these have been studied we shall perhaps be in a better position to see with a comprehensive view which constitution is best, and how each constitution must be arranged, and what laws and customs it must apply, if it is to be at its best"⁹).

It will also be noted that in books IV–VI of the Aristotelian *Politics* the emphasis is decidedly on empirical inquiry. Thus, the ideal though "arrested" city, the single and monolithic political construct envisioned by Plato in the *Republic*,

1144 b 11 ff, where we are told that "a strong body, which moves without sight, stumbles badly".

8) Aristotle, *Politics* 1265 a 17. See also *ibid.* 1325 b 38.

9) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1181 b 12–23. This passage, which is the conclusion of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is not only the "program" for the Aristotelian *Politics*, but is also a "manifesto" fusing ethics and politics into a single empirical science of man. It proclaims Aristotle's intention to devise an ideal political construct (Plato) with a positive, empirical and, hence, workable foundation culled from historical experience. This should also explain why books IV–VI of the *Politics* are replete with historical examples and illustrations, in all likelihood drawn from Aristotle's *Collection of 158 Constitutions*. This *Collection*, it must be borne in mind, was really a comprehensive history of legal, constitutional and political institutions. See also the following note.

no longer constitutes the single paradigm in Aristotle's political thought. The "new statesman" must, according to Aristotle, look with sympathy and understanding at the many actual and possible types of cities and constitutions, and draw upon them as an unbiased observer of political and social reality¹⁰). He will even admit and take into account the fact that different people may disagree about the relative desirability or value of certain goods¹¹). In short, Aristotle intends not only to grasp and develop the fundamental factual conditions on which a particular – working and workable – political society may be grounded¹²), but also to establish the fundamental natural conditions for the existence and healthy survival of political organizations. Hence, he rejects, for instance, Plato's notion (discussed in *Laws* 737 E) that the warrior caste should number 5,000 men,

10) Unlike Plato, Aristotle pays a great deal of attention to particular historical and political phenomena and situations. According to him there is no city so hopelessly evil or corrupt that it cannot be restored to some kind of good. This is the meaning of *Politics* 1290b. 25 ff. See also *ibid.* 1288b 21 ff, where Aristotle rejects those one-sided political theorists who concern themselves exclusively with the "ideal (Utopian) city", ignoring the question of how to improve upon an existing city which is in a bad way, without completely "cleaning the canvas". In a truly scientific manner, the Aristotelian statesman studies the many and variable social and political phenomena of a living political society, and like a competent physician he diagnoses the many kinds of political illness and prescribes the proper, that is, sensible cure. See book V of the *Politics*. Hence, he rejects the radical and at times unrealistic and even inhuman methods proposed by Plato to start or maintain the "good city". See A.-H. Chroust, "A Second (and Closer) Look at Plato's Political Philosophy", *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie*, vol. 48, no. 4 (1962), pp. 449–486. – While in the *Republic* Plato assumes an adamant theoretic position, in the *Laws* he moderates some of his earlier radical notions in order to bring his city closer to reality. Hence, it has been claimed that in his *Politics* Aristotle merely continues an evolution already initiated by Plato in his old age. This view is open to debate: Aristotle, it appears, does not merely carry on an already established tradition; he originates a novel approach to the many vexing problems of political philosophy.

11) *Politics* 1323a 35. Hence, it will also be the task of the "new statesman" to balance the different (and conflicting) interests of citizens in a manner which will preserve the social peace within the city. This might be inferred from *Politics* 1323b 7: "External goods have a limit."

12) It must be borne in mind that book VII of the *Politics*, which is part of the "*Urpolitik*" (Jaeger), is still very Platonic in that it treats the "ideal city" by identifying the proper end of the city with the end of the individual. The ultimate end of the individual is actually the city, towards which man is predisposed by nature. See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b 11; 1162a 17; 1169b 18; *Eudemian Ethics* 1242a 22–27; 1245a 11–27; *Politics* 1253a 2; 1253a 30; 1278b 20.

pointing out that it would "require a territory as large as Babylon, or some other huge country, if so many people were to be supported in idleness"¹³). He also insists that since no city exists in splendid isolation, "the legislator ... must never lose sight of the neighboring countries" and, hence, must take appropriate action to prevent hostile invasions¹⁴). And finally, he stresses the practical economic and social aspects of the different constitutions, playing down purely formal classifications¹⁵).

It is also most significant that in book I of the *Politics* Aristotle identifies the "best life" of the city with the "best life" of the individual. Hence, each city has its own irreducible and irreplaceable individuality, which arises from particular circumstances that vary from case to case. Aristotle recognizes only two kinds of life, however: a life of pleasure based on material goods, and a life of practical goodness (virtue)¹⁶). But he does not mention in this connection the purely theoretic or contemplative life so eloquently advocated by Plato. In the new Aristotelian "ideal city", which is always closely affiliated with historical reality and, hence, must forego Plato's notion a "city of philosophers", there is little room for the contemplative, abstract-theoretic life of the Platonic philosopher king, who in fact denies that there could ever be an acceptable accommodation between pure knowledge and practical life, between theoretic construct and existential fact.

Book II of the *Politics* contains criticisms of the earlier authors of political Utopias and a particularly detailed criticism of Plato's Utopian theses – incidentally, the most detailed and sustained criticism of Plato to be found anywhere in the preserved works of Aristotle¹⁷). These criticisms almost always

13) *Politics* 1265a 13 ff.

14) *Ibid.* 1265a 18 ff. See also *ibid.* 1267a 19.

15) *Politics*, book III.

16) *Politics* 1323b 1. – A similar notion can be found in Aristotle's *Protrepticus*: "Neither wealth nor strength nor beauty is of much use to those who have an evil and ill-disposed soul. The more lavishly a man is endowed with these gifts, the more serious and frequent harm they will cause him that possesses them and, at the same time, lacks true wisdom". Frag. 57 Rose; frag. 3 Walzer; frag. 3 Ross; frag. 4 Düring; frag. 4 Chroust. This passage calls to mind *Matthew* 16:26: "For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul". See also *Mark* 8:36; *Luke* 9:25.

17) That this part of the *Politics* was written shortly after the year 345 B.C. seems to follow from Aristotle's reference (*Politics* 1272b 20ff)

originate with Aristotle's insistence that Plato's political philosophy is unrealistic, and that Plato's "ideal city" – the city of the philosopher king – is domiciled in an historical vacuum¹⁸). It was probably Aristotle's personal and protracted contacts with such shrewd politicians as Hermias of Atarneus, who for a long time managed to out-manuever the Persians, which gave him a deeper insight into the realities of political, strategic and diplomatic life¹⁹). Since Aristotle stayed with Hermias from about 347 B. C. to about 345/344 B. C.²⁰), it would be fair to surmise that he began to develop his more realistic outlook on politics around the year 345 B. C. or, perhaps, a little later, that is, while he resided at the royal court of Macedonia (from about 343/342 to about 335 B. C.), observing Philip's *Realpolitik* at work²¹).

Assuming that Aristotle's "conversion" from Plato's purely theoretic political thought to a more realistic political

to the invasion of Crete by mercenaries under the leadership of the Phocian Phalaecus in 345 B. C. This incident is mentioned by Aristotle as having occurred quite recently. See W. Jaeger, *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development* (Oxford, 1948), pp. 285–286.

18) See, for instance, *Politics* 1265a 18ff. – Aristotle admits that "the discourses of Socrates [in the Platonic *Republic*] are never commonplace: they always exhibit grace and originality of thought, but perfection in everything can hardly be expected". In short, they fly into the face of historical actuality and, hence, cannot be accepted as being correct.

19) This is reflected in *Politics* 1265a 20; 1267a 19; 1269a 40. See also *ibid.* 1330b 32ff, where Aristotle refutes Plato's suggestion (*Laws* 778D) that towns should not be fortified, but should rely solely on the virtue and proven prowess of their citizens.

20) Diogenes Laertius (Apollodorus) V. 9; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *I Epistola ad Ammaeum* 5.

21) *Ibid.* See also E. Barker, "The Life of Aristotle and the Composition and Structure of the *Politics*", *Classical Review*, vol. 45 (1931), pp. 165–166; P. Moraux, "From the *Protrepticus* to the Dialogue *On Justice*", *Aristotle and Plato in the Mid-Fourth Century* (Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia, vol. XI, Göteborg, 1960), pp. 113–132. Moraux argues that in the interval between the *Protrepticus* (usually dated c. 352–350) and the *On Justice* (tentatively dated by P. Moraux, *op. cit.*, some time after 353/52; by I. Düring, *Aristotle's Protrepticus: An Attempt at Reconstruction* [Göteborg, 1961], pp. 287–288, c. 355; by E. Berti, *La Filosofia del Primo Aristotele* [Padua, 1962], p. 446, in the vicinity of the *Eudemus* [dated c. 353]; and by A.-H. Chroust, "The Probable Dates of Some of Aristotle's Lost Works", *Rivista Critica di Storia della Filosofia*, vol. 22, fasc. 1 (1967), pp. 3–23, between c. 358/57 and c. 352), Aristotle assumed a more realistic attitude towards political actualities. While in the *Protrepticus* the Stagirite still professed an essentially idealistic outlook, in the *On Justice* he took a more realistic position. Naturally, Moraux's thesis hinges on the proper dating of the *On Justice*.

theory began about the year 345 B.C. and received additional impetus during his long association with the Macedonian royal house, it might also be contended that the *On Kingship* was written not much later than 336 B.C., the year in which Alexander succeeded his father Philip to the throne²²⁾ – and perhaps before that date. It is quite possible that Aristotle feared that the young Alexander, whose character he knew only too well, might one day establish himself as a self-appointed, omniscient and god-like ruler in emulation of the Platonic philosopher king who in Plato's opinion is likewise "god-like". Hence Aristotle's wholesome advice to the young and ambitious monarch "that it was not merely unnecessary but a distinct disadvantage for a king to be a philosopher. What a king should do was listen to and take the counsel of true philosophers [that is, of men who possess a balanced knowledge of the facts]. In so doing the monarch would enrich his reign with good deeds and not merely with fine words [as Plato had done]"²³⁾.

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22) This seems to follow from Cicero, *Ad Atticum* XII. 40. 2, where we are told that Aristotle addressed a book to Alexander, "writing about what was honorable for the philosophers and acceptable to the king".

23) See note 2, *supra*.