

ARISTOTLE ON STATE AND GOVERNMENT

Aristotle, the most gifted student of Plato, was born in 384 BC. After the death of his Teacher Plato, he founded an institution in a temple of Lyceum situated in an Athenian suburb called Apollo. The importance of Aristotle in the realm of political science is due to his great work on the science of state called the Politics.

Aristotle's Theory of the Origin of the State

Aristotle opens his "Politics" by stating the obvious fact that the state is a community of some kind. (By state Aristotle has in mind the Greek City-State). Like all other communities, the state must exist for an end, and the end of the state is the highest good of man, which for Aristotle means the life of virtue and contemplation. "But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at the good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good."

In order to discover the nature of the state, and how it differs from other communities, Aristotle analyses it into its component parts and studies it in its historical origin. There are, he says, two basic instincts which are instrumental in bringing people together. The first of these is the reproductive instinct which leads men and women to unite, while the second is that of self-preservation, which causes master and slave to come together for their mutual benefit. "Out of these two relationships...the first thing to arise is the family...The family is the association established by nature for the supply of men's everyday wants." The family, then, is the first stage in the formation of the state.

The second stage is arrived at when "several families are united, and the association aims at something more than the supply of daily needs." Thus is formed the village, which in its most natural form is the union of families of common descent—a sort of patriarchal society.

"When several villages are united in a single complete community, large enough to be nearly or quite self-sufficing, the state comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life. And, therefore, if the earlier forms of society are natural, so is the state, for it is the end of them, and the nature of a thing is its end. For what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature, whether we are speaking of a man, a horse, or a family." This is the third stage where the formation of the state is completed. Thus what differentiates the state from other communities is the fact that it is self-sufficing, and that it enables men to live the good life, whereas the family, for example, is barely sufficient to keep its members alive. The state differs from the family and village in kind, and not merely quantitatively.

For Aristotle, the state is a natural society. He shows how man is impelled by his very nature to form the societies of family, village, and state. Man's natural end is the good life which is to be found only in the state.

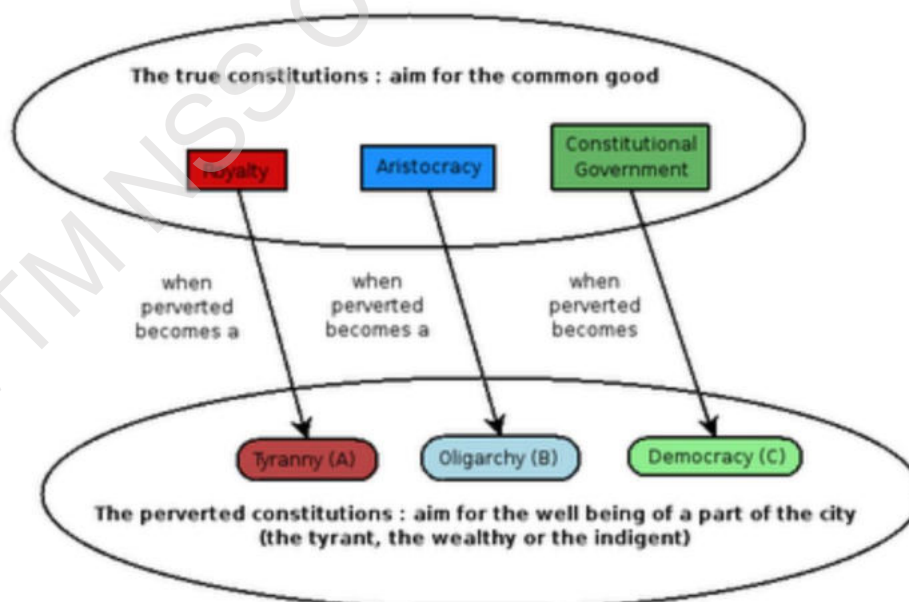
Therefore, the state is a natural society. “Man is by nature a political animal. And he, who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity.” That nature intended man to lead a social life is proven by man’s faculty of speech, which no other animal possesses. Now nature does nothing in vain, from which it follows that men were made to associate with one another.

It is easy to see the superiority of Aristotle’s view. “Aristotle’s account of the origin of Society as a development out of the family is now very generally accepted by sociologists as the only account that harmonizes with recent investigations into the organization of the primitive tribes, which, it is stated, being all instances of arrested development, must now, as social communities, be organized on the same basis as that on which society was formed in its first beginnings.” As Professor Ross points out: “Aristotle did good service to political thought by insisting that the state does not exist merely by convention but is rooted in human nature; that the natural is to be found, in its truest sense, not in the origin of human life but in the goal towards which it moves; that civilized life is not a declension from the life of a hypothetical savage; that the state is not an artificial restriction of liberty but a means of gaining it.”

ARISTOTLE'S FORMS OF GOVERNMENT

Aristotle, a Greek philosopher and student of Plato, classified government into three. They are:

- Government based on rule by the one,
- Government based on rule by the few
- Government based on rule by the many.



Government based on rule by the one.

Monarchy (or royalty) is a form of government in which only a single ruler governs. The monarch rules for the benefit of the people. His concern is for good law, order and social justice.

The perverse form of monarchy is called tyranny. He rules for his own benefits and ego, accumulates wealth and satisfies his lust for power. Such a ruler is not legitimate and the people have the right and the duty to remove him in power.

Government based on rule by the few.

Aristocracy is a form of government where only quite a few people participate in governance. The number ranges from ten to twenty, and they are considered the wisest, the most just and the most honest people in the state. They are more contemplative and careful in their actions. Together, they make governmental decisions.

The perverse form of aristocracy is oligarchy where the few people, again perhaps ten to twenty, collectively take over the power of government not for the welfare of the people, but rather for their own material and vainglory. This form of government is more difficult to be overthrown as compared with tyranny.

Government based on rule by the many.

The best form of government but probably the most difficult to achieve is polity. A polity occurs when all relevant citizens of the state participate in the decision making through open discussion, compromise, and conciliation. Of course, this is only possible in the small city-states that Aristotle knew so well. Again, the characteristics of this government are just; the highest form of wisdom is compromise and conciliation, and government that generally work for the benefit of all.

The perverse form of polity was labelled as democracy. Democracy is a form of government where people would go into the chambers of government not to do social justice but rather seek for their own ends. No one is willing to compromise in order to achieve solutions to problems. This causes a breakdown in the process of government and eventually a collapse of government.

Aristotle held wealth as the deciding factor if a ruler is by more than one man. Aristocracy always degenerates into oligarchy, in which rich persons rule for their own benefit and polity degenerates into democracy in which poor persons rule. Aristotle believes that four elements always struggle for power in a state, i.e., birth, virtue, wealth and liberty. It depends on efficiency of the group in which only determined and efficient persons succeed. Thus Aristotle lays emphasis on economic factors and efficiency and capacity and power of the ruling elite class.

Cycle of Change

Aristotle believes in famous cyclic order according to which Governments are not static but dynamic. Every form of Government changes but changes do not follow any set rule, any fixed manner as history is a very complex phenomenon. His idea of the law of change of government is correct but does not happen with fixed patterns as he suggested. (Monarchy to Democracy)

Criticisms

1. Though Aristotle did not regard democracy as good government, it is considered as best form of government now.

2. His classification is unsuitable to modern age, since he did not foresee the constitutional monarchy, totalitarian, fascist, etc forms of governments.

Over the years, the Aristotle's polity became synonymous with representative government or democracy and his perverse form of polity was renamed as mob rule or anarchy.

MIXED CONSTITUTION

The Best Government: Being a realist, Aristotle painted the picture of best practicable state which can be attained anywhere under every set of circumstances. For this there should be a life of virtue and happiness. Thus he believes that the best and happy life for the state and the individual is having enough external goods for performing good action. He subordinates politics to ethical purposes, and refuted the view that power is good in itself on which politics is conducted. The good law giver should enquire how states may participate in the good life.

While discussing about the best form of government, Aristotle concluded that a political institution must correspond to the character and needs of the people concerned. As such ideal state can be possible only in ideal conditions the best state should be ruled absolutely by virtue. If one man is of pre-eminent virtue, form of state be royalty. But it is difficult to find out a man of pre-eminent virtue or a few selfless men of pre-eminent virtue, he favoured a form of moderate democracy.

Aristotle assumed golden mean as a criterion of goodness besides Plato's theory of virtue. In human beings excess of wealth make people haughty (self-important), arrogant, and submissive while extreme poverty makes people slavish; degrading and submissive and unable to oppose tyranny. In a state where there is extreme poverty and richness, there can be no real state. That is why Aristotle favoured the principle of golden mean to avoid the extremes. The middle class people neither plot against others, nor are they plotted against, and they pass their tenure of life peacefully and give stability to the state. Thus Aristotle preferred the middle class. He believed that stability is the touchstone of the best state. Democracy in which poor dominate is tolerable, is better due to superiority of talent or power but polity is the best and superior to all the rest where the middle class rules.

Aristotle preferred states in the following order: 1. Ideal monarchy, 2. Pure aristocracy, 3. Mixed Aristocracy, 4. Polity, 5. Most moderate democracy, 6. Most moderate oligarchy, 7. Middle or medium varieties of democracy or oligarchy and 8. Tyranny. Aristotle called Polity the best practicable state. He believed that mixed constitution brings stability and harmony. He desired to balance of power to middle class, who may be more intelligent than masses and may not work for the vested interest but keep in view the welfare of masses.