

CHAPTER V

ARISTOTLE: POLITICAL IDEALS

About the time when Plato was asked by Dion to undertake the venture in Syracuse for the education of the young Dionysius and the improvement of Syracusan government, the greatest of Plato's students joined the Academy. Aristotle was not an Athenian but a native of Stagira in Thrace, where he was born in 384. His father was a physician, which probably contributed to the prevailing interest in biological studies that Aristotle's work shows, and had been attached in that capacity to the Macedonian court. Aristotle was probably attracted to Plato's school in the first place because it was the best place in Greece to carry on advanced studies. Once there, he remained a member of the school as long as Plato lived — a period of twenty years — and his mind received indelibly the impression of Plato's teaching. Every page of his later philosophical writing bears witness to this connection. After Plato's death in 347 Aristotle left Athens and during the next twelve years was variously employed. To this period belongs the first of his independent writing. In 343 he became the instructor of the young prince Alexander of Macedon, but one looks in vain in his political writings for any effect of his Macedonian connection upon his ideas. He seems to have lacked the imagination necessary to see the revolutionary importance of Alexander's conquest of the East, with the consequent mingling of Greek and oriental civilization. The choice of such a policy was directly contrary to everything that he must have taught his royal pupil about politics. In 335 Aristotle opened his own School in Athens, the second of the four great philosophical Schools, and during the next twelve years most of his books were written, though they probably included work begun during the earlier period. Aristotle survived his great pupil by a year; he died in Euboea in 322, after leaving Athens to escape the anti-Macedonian disturbances that followed Alexander's death.

THE NEW SCIENCE OF POLITICS

The Aristotelian writings present a problem very different from that of Plato's Dialogues. His extant works, neglecting fragments of early popular writings, were for the most part not books completed and prepared for publication. They were used in connection with his teaching, though important parts of them were probably written before the Lyceum was opened. In fact, they were not published in their present form until four centuries after his death but remained the property of the School and were doubtless used by later instructors. It seems probable that the twelve years of Aristotle's life as head of the Lyceum were largely occupied in directing a number of extensive projects of research, shared by his students, such as the famous investigation of the constitutional history of a hundred and fifty-eight Greek cities, of which the *Constitution of Athens* (discovered in 1891) is the only surviving example. These researches, of which the study of the constitutions was only one, were mainly historical rather than philosophical; they were genuinely empirical investigations and in the light of them Aristotle from time to time made additions to the body of writings which he already had by him when the School was opened.

The great political treatise which goes by the name of the *Politics* cannot therefore be regarded as a finished book such as Aristotle would have produced had he been writing for a general public. It has been doubted, in fact, whether Aristotle himself arranged it in its existing form or whether it may not have been put together by his editors from several bodies of manuscript.¹ The difficulties lie upon the surface and could hardly be missed by any attentive reader, but the solution of them is another matter. Later editors have shifted the books about in an attempt to improve the order, but no rearrangement of the text will make a unified and finished work of the *Politics*.² Thus Book VII, in

¹ Thus, for example, Ernest Barker (*Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle*, 1906, p. 259) believes that notes of three distinct sets of lectures are combined in the *Politics*, while W. D. Ross (*Aristotle*, 1924, p. 236) calls it a "conflation of five separate treatises."

² References to the books by number mean the order of the manuscript; so many experiments have been tried that, beyond Books I to III, the numbers are very ambiguous. There is a table giving the order in the principal editions in Immisch's Teubner text, p. vii.

which Aristotle takes up the construction of an ideal state, apparently goes on from the end of Book III, while Books IV, V, and VI, dealing with actual and not ideal states, form a group by themselves. For this reason Books VII and VIII are usually put after Book III, and Books IV to VI at the end; yet there is a connection between the discussion of monarchy near the end of Book III and the discussion of oligarchy and democracy in Book IV. So far as the reading of the text goes, there are difficulties in any order, and probably Ross is right when he says that the reader might as well take it as it stands traditionally.

The best hypothesis which has so far been advanced to explain the *Politics* is that by Werner Jaeger³ and while this is not demonstrated, it at least offers a reasonable way of envisaging the development of Aristotle's political philosophy. According to Jaeger the *Politics* as it stands is Aristotle's work and not that of an editor. But the text belongs to two stages and therefore falls into two main strata. There is, in the first place, a work dealing with the ideal state, and with previous theories of it. This includes Book II, an historical study of earlier theories and chiefly notable for the criticism of Plato; Book III, a study of the nature of the state and of citizenship but intended to be introductory to a theory of the ideal state; and Books VII and VIII on the construction of the ideal state. These four books Jaeger assigns to a date not long after Aristotle's departure from Athens following the death of Plato. There is, in the second place, a study of actual states, mainly democracy and oligarchy, together with the causes of their decay and the best means of giving them stability, which makes up Books IV, V, and VI. This Jaeger assigns to a date after the opening of the Lyceum,⁴ supposing that it represents a return to political philosophy after or during the investigation of the hundred and fifty-eight constitutions. Books IV, V, and VI were inserted by Aristotle in the middle of the original draft, and result in enlarging the work on the ideal state into a general treatise on political science. Finally, Jaeger believes, Book I was written last of all as a general introduction to the enlarged treatise, though it was joined hastily and imperfectly to Book II.

³ *Aristoteles* (1923); Eng. trans. by Richard Robinson, 1934, ch. 10.

⁴ Note the reference to the murder of Philip of Macedon in 336; 5, 10; 1311 b 2. He puts the collection of constitutions between 329 and 326.

According to Jaeger's conception, therefore, the *Politics* was intended to form a treatise on a single science, but was never subjected to the rewriting that would have been necessary to bring the parts, written as they were over a period of perhaps fifteen years, into a well-unified form.

If this hypothesis be correct, the *Politics* represents two stages in Aristotle's thought which are distinguished by the distance that he has travelled in emancipating himself from the influence of Plato, or perhaps it would be better to say, in striking out a line of thought and investigation characteristically his own. In the first he still thinks of political philosophy as the construction of an ideal state upon lines already laid down especially in the *Statesman* and the *Laws*. Plato's prevailing ethical interest in the subject still predominates; the good man and the good citizen are one and the same, or at all events they ought to be, and the end of the state is to produce the highest moral type of human being. It is not to be supposed that Aristotle consciously abandoned this point of view, since the treatise on the ideal state was left standing as an important part of the *Politics*. At some date not far removed from the opening of the Lyceum, however, he conceived a science or art of politics on a much larger scale. The new science was to be general; that is, it should deal with actual as well as ideal forms of government and it should teach the art of governing and organizing states of any sort in any desired manner. This new general science of politics, therefore, was not only empirical and descriptive, but even in some respects independent of any ethical purpose, since a statesman might need to be expert in governing even a bad state. The whole science of politics, according to the new idea, included the knowledge both of the political good, relative as well as absolute, and also of political mechanics employed perhaps for an inferior or even a bad end. This enlargement of the definition of political philosophy is Aristotle's most characteristic conception.)

(The description of Aristotle's political theory can therefore be advantageously divided into two parts. The source for the first is Books II, III, VII, and VIII. The questions to be considered here are the relations of his thought to Plato's in his first attempt at an independent philosophy and especially the suggestions, in so far as they can be discerned, that presage the final step which

took him quite beyond Plato. The source for the second is Books IV, V, and VI, and the questions here are his final thoughts on the kinds of government, his conception of the social forces behind political organization and change, and his description of the means with which the statesman has to work. Finally, in the opening chapters of Book I he said his last word about the great philosophical problem upon which both he and Plato had been engaged, the distinction of nature from appearance or convention, and suggested the conception of nature to which his ripest political reflection led him.

THE KINDS OF RULE

True to a custom which he follows in works on other subjects, Aristotle begins his book on the ideal state with a survey of what other writers have written on the subject. The point of greatest interest here is his criticism of Plato, since one would expect to find the key to the differences of which he was conscious between himself and his master. (The result is rather disappointing. So far as the *Republic* is concerned he is emphatic in his objections to the abolition of private property and the family. These objections have already been referred to and nothing further need be said about them. His criticism of the *Laws*, on the other hand, is difficult to interpret. It refers largely to matters of detail and moreover it is sometimes astonishingly inaccurate. This is surprising in view of the fact that, in his construction of the ideal state, almost every subject discussed is suggested by the *Laws* and there are many parallelisms (even verbal) in small points.⁵ Evidently when the passage was written he did not regard it as worth while to analyze the *Laws* and state his dissent from its principles. The tone of his criticism suggests what may be the reason. (Apparently he felt about both Plato's political works, and perhaps about his philosophy in general, that they are brilliant and suggestive but too radical and speculative.) They are, as he says, never commonplace and always original. But the query in his mind seems to be, Are they reliable? The general ground of his dissent is stated in a dryly humorous remark which sums up better than pages of comment the fundamental difference of temper between Aristotle and his master:

⁵ A considerable list of parallels is given by E. Barker, *Greek Political Theory, Plato and his Predecessors* (1925), pp. 380 ff.

Let us remember that we should not disregard the experience of ages; in the multitude of years these things, if they were good, would certainly not have been unknown; for almost everything has been found out, although sometimes they are not put together; in other cases men do not use the knowledge which they have.⁶

In short, Aristotle's is the soberer if less original genius. He feels that too great a departure from common experience probably has a fallacy in it somewhere, even though it appears to be irreproachably logical.

One essential difference between Plato and Aristotle is apparent in all parts of the *Politics* that have to do with the ideal state: what Aristotle calls the ideal state is always Plato's second-best state. The rejection of communism just referred to shows that the ideal state of the *Republic* was never entertained by Aristotle, even as an ideal. His ideal was always constitutional and never despotic rule, even though it were the enlightened despotism of the philosopher-king. Consequently, Aristotle accepted from the start the point of view of the *Laws*, that in any good state the law must be the ultimate sovereign and not any person whatsoever. He accepted this not as a concession to human frailty but as an intrinsic part of good government and therefore as a characteristic of an ideal state. The relation of the constitutional ruler to his subjects is different in kind from any other sort of subjection because it is consistent with both parties remaining free men, and for this reason it requires a degree of moral equality or likeness of kind between them, despite the undoubted differences which must exist.

This distinction between different kinds of rule is so important for Aristotle that he returns to it again and again, and it had evidently been an object of early interest with him.⁷ The authority of a constitutional ruler over his subjects is quite different from that of a master over his slaves, because the slave is presumed to be different in nature, a lower sort of being who is inferior from birth and incapable of ruling himself. Aristotle admits, to be sure, that this is often not true in fact, but at all events it is the theory upon which slavery is justified. For this reason the slave

⁶ *Politics*, 2, 5; 1264 a 1 ff. (Jowett's trans.).

⁷ Cf. *Politics* 3, 6; in 1278 b 31 he refers to his early popular dialogues, while only a few lines before, 1278 b 18, he refers to the discussion of household authority in Book I, though the subject is evidently the same.

is the master's living tool, to be kindly used, but still used for the master's good. Political authority differs also from that which a man exercises over his wife and children, though the latter is certainly for the good of the dependent as well as for that of the father. The failure to distinguish household from political authority (Aristotle regarded as one of Plato's serious errors, since it led him in the *Statesman* to assert that the state is like the family only larger. The child is not an adult and even though he is ruled for his own good, he is still not in a position of equality. The case of the wife is not so clear but apparently Aristotle believed that women were too different in nature from men (though not necessarily inferior) to stand with them on the peculiar footing of equality which alone permits the political relationship. The ideal state, therefore, if not a democracy, at least includes a democratic element. It is "a community of equals, aiming at the best life possible"⁸ and it ceases to be constitutional or genuinely political if the discrepancy between its members is so great that they cease to have the same "virtue."

THE RULE OF LAW

Constitutional rule in the state is closely connected, also, with the question whether it is better to be ruled by the best man or the best laws, since a government which consults the good of its subjects is also government in accordance with law. Accordingly the supremacy of law is accepted by Aristotle as a mark of a good state and not merely as an unfortunate necessity. His argument for this position is that Plato is mistaken when, in the *Statesman*, he makes government by law and government by wise rulers alternatives. Even the wisest ruler cannot dispense with law because the law has an impersonal quality which no man, however good, can attain. The law is "reason unaffected by desire";⁹ and the analogy which Plato was accustomed to draw between politics and medicine is wrong. The political relationship, if it is to permit of freedom, must be of such a kind that the subject does not wholly resign his judgment and his responsibility, and this is possible provided both the ruler and the ruled have a legal status. The "passionless" authority of law does not take the place of a magistrate, but it gives to the magistrate's authority a moral

⁸ 7, 8; 1328 a 36.

⁹ 3, 16; 1287 a 32.

quality which it could not otherwise have. Constitutional rule is consistent with the dignity of the subject, whereas a personal or despotic rule is not. The constitutional ruler, as Aristotle sometimes says, rules over willing subjects; he rules by consent and is quite different from a dictator. The precise moral property which Aristotle means to point out is as elusive as the consent of the governed in modern theories, but no one can doubt its reality.

Constitutional rule as Aristotle understands the expression has three main elements: First, it is rule in the public or general interest as distinguished from a factional or tyrannous rule in the interest of a single class or individual. Second, it is lawful rule in the sense that government is carried on by general regulations and not by arbitrary decrees, and also in the vaguer sense that the government does not flout standing customs and conventions of the constitution. Third, constitutional government means the government of willing subjects as distinguished from a despotism that is supported merely by force. Though these three properties of constitutional rule are clearly mentioned by Aristotle, he nowhere examines them systematically, to find out either if the list is complete or what is the relationship between the three. He was aware that one of the properties might be absent from a government while the others were present; for example, a tyrant may act despotically and yet in the public interest, or a lawful government may be unjustly favorable to one class. But constitutional rule was never really defined by Aristotle.

The emphasis upon constitutional rule is the consequence of taking seriously the suggestion in the *Laws* that law may be regarded not as a makeshift but as an indispensable condition of a moral and civilized life. An introductory passage in the *Politics* was evidently written with one of Plato's remarkable utterances in mind: "Man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all."¹⁰ But this view of law is impossible unless it be supposed that there is a gradual increase of wisdom through the accumulation of experience and that this growing stock of social intelligence is embedded in law and custom. The point is of fundamental philosophical importance because if wisdom and knowledge are the prerogatives of scholars, the experience of the ordinary man never

¹⁰ 1, 2; 1253 a 31 ff. Cf. *Laws*, 874 e.

brings him more than unreliable opinion, and Plato's reasoning is unanswerable. To put the case the other way about, if Plato's philosophy is mistaken in neglecting the experience of the ages, then that experience must represent a genuine growth in knowledge, though this growth registers itself in custom rather than in science and is produced by common sense rather than by learning. Public opinion must be admitted to be not only an unavoidable force but also, up to a point, a justifiable standard in politics.

It is possible to argue, Aristotle says, that in the making of law the collective wisdom of a people is superior to that of even the wisest lawgiver. He develops the argument still farther in connection with his discussion of the political ability of popular assemblies. Men in the mass supplement each other in a singular fashion, so that by one understanding one part of a question and another another part, they all together get around the whole subject. He illustrates this by the assertion (perhaps not quite obvious) that popular taste in the arts is reliable in the long run, while experts make notorious blunders at the moment. To somewhat the same effect is his marked preference for customary as compared with written law. He is even prepared to admit that possibly Plato's plan for abolishing law would be an advantage if only the written law were at stake. But he holds it clearly impossible that the knowledge of the wisest ruler can be better than the customary law. The rigid distinction between nature and convention, with the extreme intellectualism or rationalism to which this distinction had committed Socrates and Plato, was thus broken down by Aristotle. The reason of the statesman in a good state cannot be detached from the reason embodied in the law and custom of the community he rules.

At the same time, Aristotle's political ideal was quite at one with Plato's in setting up an ethical purpose as the chief end of the state. He never changed his opinion on this point, even after he had enlarged his definition of political philosophy to include a practical manual for statesmen who have to do with governments which are very far from ideal. The real purpose of a state ought to include the moral improvement of its citizens, because it ought to be an association of men living together to achieve the best possible life. This is the "idea" or meaning of a state; Aristotle's ultimate effort at a definition turns upon his conviction that the

state alone is "self-sufficing," in the sense that it alone provides all the conditions within which the highest type of moral development can take place. Like Plato, also, Aristotle confined his ideal to the city-state, the small and intimate group in which the life of the state is the social life of its citizens, overlapping the interests of family, of religion, and of friendly personal intercourse. Even in his examination of actual states there is nothing to show that his connection with Philip and Alexander enabled him to perceive the political significance of the Macedonian conquest of the Greek world and of the East. The political failure of the city-state did not, in his eyes, take from it the character of an ideal.

Aristotle's theory of political ideals, therefore, stands upon ground which he had clearly occupied because of his association with Plato. It follows from an effort to adopt and take seriously the chief elements of the theory developed in the *Statesman* and the *Laws*, with such changes as were required to make that theory clear and self-consistent. This applies particularly to the distinctive feature of Plato's later theory, that law must be treated as an indispensable constituent of the state. This being true, it is necessary to take account of the conditions of human nature which make it true. Law must be admitted to include real wisdom, and the accumulation of such wisdom in social custom must be allowed for. And the moral requirements which make law necessary must be incorporated as part of the moral ideals of the state. True political rule must therefore include the factors of subordination to law and of freedom and consent on the part of its subjects. These become factors not of a second-best state but of the ideal state itself.

About Aristotle's ideal state itself not much need be said. In truth his avowed purpose to construct an ideal state never eventuated, and the reader feels that the task was really little to his taste. What he does is to write a book not on an ideal state but upon the ideals of the state. The sketch of an ideal state, begun in Books VII and VIII, was apparently never finished, which is significant, especially if it be correct to suppose that these books belong to the earlier draft of the *Politics*. The good life requires conditions both physical and mental, and it is upon these that Aristotle expends his attention. The list of conditions is derived

from the *Laws*. It includes specifications regarding the population needed, both its amount and character, the territory most suitable in size, nature, and situation. It is not the case that Aristotle always agrees with Plato. He is distinctly more favorable to a situation on or near the sea, for example, but the differences are matters of detail, and the list of relevant conditions is substantially that which Plato had proposed. Aside from physical conditions of the good life, the most important force in molding citizens is, for Aristotle as for Plato, a compulsory system of education. In his general theory of education Aristotle differs from Plato, as might be expected, in allowing greater weight to the formation of good habits. Thus he places habit between nature and reason among the three things which make men virtuous. Such a change was necessary in view of the importance which custom must have in a state subject to law. Aristotle's discussion is wholly devoted to liberal education and shows, far more than Plato's, an actual contempt for the useful. A plan of higher education such as had formed so notable a part of the *Republic* is conspicuous by its absence — an omission which may of course be due to the fact that the book is unfinished. The government of the ideal state also suggests the *Laws*. Property is to be privately owned but used in common. The soil is to be tilled by slaves, and artisans are to be excluded from citizenship on the ground that virtue is impossible for men whose time is consumed in manual labor.

CONFLICT OF THE IDEAL AND THE ACTUAL

So far Aristotle's political ideals have been outlined without raising any questions about the discrepancies and difficulties that would be encountered if these ideals were brought into relation with the actual institutions and practices of cities. The ideal is in itself almost as deductive as Plato's and apparently it had been formed by a kind of dialectical analysis of the defects of the earlier theory. But it is obvious that discrepancies with practice and with ends actually pursued in government are much more serious for Aristotle than for Plato. The latter had never supposed that an ideal need be embodied in practice to be valid, and he had never allowed to custom any such claim to wisdom as Aristotle's theory required. If facts fail to square with ideal

truth, Plato could always say, like the mathematician or the mystic, so much the worse for facts. Aristotle, with a heavy obligation to common sense and the wisdom of the ages, is in no position to be so radical. He might be reformist but never revolutionary. The whole bent and bias of his thought must be toward the view that the ideal, while conceded to be an effective force, must still be a force within the actual current of affairs and not dead against it. The wisdom inherent in custom must, so to speak, be a guiding principle that takes advantage of such plasticity as actual conditions include to lift them gradually to a better conformation. This is the view of nature which Aristotle finally evolved as a result of his reflection upon both social and biological problems.

That Aristotle was by no means at peace with this problem, even when he wrote the treatise on the ideal state, is written large in the complexities of Book III, in which the crucial questions of the whole work are discussed. The conclusion of the book shows that it was designed as an introduction to an ideal state. Books VII and VIII, however, show that Aristotle found the carrying out of this project so unsatisfactory that he never completed it, and when the first draft was enlarged, it was not by proceeding with the sketch of the ideal state but by the insertion of Books IV to VI. These are conspicuously realistic in their purpose and tone but carry forward lines of thought that are started in Book III. It is safe to conclude that the construction of an ideal state became less and less congenial to Aristotle's mode of thought as he grew older, and also that he finally found in Book III an introduction to a line of investigation which he had not originally intended to pursue. This conclusion is borne out by the reading of Book III itself. Its complexities are due, in part at least, to the fact that an introduction to the ideal state involves, to Aristotle's mind, a rather extended study of existing kinds of states. Often he is evidently more interested in the empirical study than in the purpose that he had set himself. In short, the reasons which led Aristotle to insert Books IV to VI after Book III were sound, though presumably they were not the reasons which led him to write Book III in the first place. The plan outgrew its original scope, but it grew from interests that were present at the start.

The general nature of the difficulty which Aristotle confronts is

not difficult to see. The political ideal which came to him from Plato presumed that city and citizen are strictly correlative terms. This accounts for three questions which he places at the opening of Book III: What is a state? Who is a citizen? Is the virtue of a good man the same as the virtue of a good citizen? A state is an association of men for the sake of the best moral life. The type of life which a group of men will live in common depends upon what kind of men they are and what ends they design to realize, and reciprocally the end of the state will determine who can be members of it and what kind of life they can individually live. From this point of view a constitution is, as Aristotle says, an arrangement of citizens, or, as he says elsewhere, a kind of life, and a form of government is the expression of the kind of life which the state is designed to foster. The ethical nature of the state not only dominates but, so to speak, completely overlaps its political and legal nature. Thus Aristotle concludes that a state lasts only so long as its form of government endures, since a change in form of government would signify a change in the constitution or the underlying "kind of life" that the citizens are trying to realize. Law, constitution, state, form of government all tend to coalesce, since from a moral point of view they are all equally relative to the purpose which causes the association to exist.

In so far as the object is to formulate an ideal state, this is not an insuperable objection. For such a state would be dominated by the highest possible kind of life, and Plato, at least, had supposed that an understanding of the idea of the good would show what this is. But to arrive at the idea of the good first and then to use this as a standard for criticising and evaluating actual lives and actual states, was just what made Aristotle despair. If, on the other hand, one begins with the observation and description of actual states, distinctions evidently have to be made. The good man and the good citizen cannot be quite identical, as Aristotle points out, except in an ideal state. For unless the purposes of the state are the best possible, their realization will require a kind of life in the citizens which falls below the best possible. In actual states there must be different kinds of citizens with different kinds of "virtue." Similarly, when Aristotle defines the citizen as one who is eligible to take part in the assembly and to serve on juries — a definition based upon Athenian practice — he is obliged

to point out at once that the definition will not fit any but a democratic state. Or again, when he concludes that the identity of the state changes with its form of government, he has to add a warning that the new state is not therefore justified in defaulting the debts and other obligations contracted by the previous state. Distinctions must in practice be made. A constitution is not only a way of life for the citizens but also an organization of officers to carry on public business, and therefore its political aspects cannot be forthwith identified with its ethical purpose. Merely to observe these complexities is to feel a difficulty about the construction of an ideal state to serve as a standard for them all.

A similar sense of the complexities of his problem is apparent when Aristotle passes on to discuss the classification of forms of government. Here he adopts the sixfold classification already used by Plato in the *Statesman*: Having distinguished constitutional from despotic rule by the principle that the former is for the good of all and the latter for the good of the ruling class only, he crosses this division upon the traditional threefold classification and thus gets a group of three true (or constitutional) states — monarchy, aristocracy, and moderate democracy (polity) — and three perverted (or despotic) states — tyranny, oligarchy, and extreme democracy or mob-rule. The only difference between Plato's treatment and Aristotle's — and it appears to be unimportant — is that the former describes his true states as law-abiding while the latter describes them as governed for the general good. In view of his analysis of what constitutional government means, Aristotle must have thought that the two descriptions came to nearly the same thing. No sooner does he complete the sixfold classification, however, than he points out that there are serious difficulties about it. The first of these is that the popular classification by the number of rulers is superficial and does not say, except by accident, what those who use it mean. What everybody means by an oligarchy is a government by the rich, just as a democracy is a government by the poor. It is true that there are many poor and few rich, but this does not make the relative numbers descriptive of the two kinds of state. The essence of the matter is that there are two distinct claims to power, one based upon the rights of property and the other upon the welfare of the greater number of human beings.

CONFLICTING CLAIMS TO POWER

This correction of the formal classification carries Aristotle a long way, for it raises the question, What are the justifiable claims to power in the state? And if there are more than one, how can they be adjusted to each other in such a way as to save them all? Similar questions, as has been said, had already presented themselves to Plato¹¹ These questions, be it noted, do not really concern an ideal state — and Plato had not supposed that they did — but the relative merits of actual states, and the relative claims of various classes in the same state Wisdom and virtue might be said to have an absolute claim to power, at least Plato had thought so and Aristotle did not deny it But this point is academic The dispute is not about a general moral principle but about the way to approximate it in practice Everyone will admit, Aristotle says, that the state ought to realize the largest measure of justice possible and also that justice means some kind of equality But does equality mean that everybody is to count for one and nobody for more than one, as the democrat supposes? Or does it mean that a man with large property-interests and perhaps a good social position and education ought to count for more than one, as the oligarch believes? Granted that government ought to be carried on by wise and virtuous rulers, where must you lodge power to get wisdom and virtue, or at least the best available approximation to them?

When the question is put in this way Aristotle immediately perceives that a relative question requires a relative answer He shows easily enough that wealth has no absolute moral claim to power, for the state is not a trading company or a contract, as Lycophron the Sophist had said It is easy to show also that counting everybody for one is at most a convenient fiction But on the other hand, can it be said that property has no rights? Aristotle was convinced that Plato's venture in that direction had proved disastrous, and in any case, as he points out, a plundering democracy is no more honest than an exploiting oligarchy Property has moral consequences and for this reason is too important to be left entirely out of the picture by anyone who is trying to be realistic Good birth, good education, good associations, leisure

¹¹ *Laws*, 690 a ff

— and these go in some degree with wealth — are not negligible as claims to political influence. The democrat also has something to say relatively for his claim. The number of persons affected surely is a moral consideration in estimating political consequences, and moreover a sober public opinion, Aristotle is convinced, often is right where professedly wise persons are wrong. The upshot of the discussion is that there are objections against every claim to power that can be advanced and also that all the usual claims have a certain amount of merit. It is hard to see just how this conclusion can advance the construction of an ideal state, but it is also obvious that Aristotle has treated a perennial dispute in political ethics with incomparable common sense. In fact, this examination of the conflicting claims of democracy and oligarchy led Aristotle later to lay aside the search for an ideal state and to take up the more modest problem of the best form of government attainable by most states.

The conclusion that no class has an absolute claim to power re-enforces the principle that the law must be supreme, since its impersonal authority is less subject to passion than men can claim to be. But Aristotle recognizes that even this, one of his most deeply-held convictions, cannot be asserted quite absolutely. For the law is relative to the constitution and consequently a bad state will be likely to have bad laws. Legality itself then is only a relative guarantee of goodness, better than force or personal power, but quite possibly bad. A good state must be ruled according to law but this is not the same as saying that a state ruled according to law is good.

Apparently Aristotle believed that monarchy and aristocracy alone have any claim to be regarded as ideal states. He has very little to say about aristocracy but he treats monarchy at some length. It is precisely this discussion of a supposedly ideal state that shows clearest how little he has to say on the subject and connects most clearly with the quite realistic rediscussion of democracy and oligarchy placed in Book IV. The monarchy ought theoretically to be the best form of government if it be assumed that a wise and virtuous king can be found. Plato's philosopher-king would come nearest to having an absolute claim to his power. But then, he would be a god among men. To allow other men to make law for a mortal god would be ridiculous and to ostracize

him would not be quite just. The only alternative is to allow him to rule. And yet Aristotle is not perfectly certain that even such a man has an indefeasible right to rule. So much importance does he attach to the equality which ought to exist between citizens of the same state that he questions whether even perfect virtue would be an exception. The problem of equality concerns every form of government, good as well as perverted. Still, Aristotle is willing to admit that monarchy would be suitable for a society in which one family was far superior to all others in virtue and political skill. The truth is that the ideal monarchy is for Aristotle perfectly academic. Except for the authority of Plato he probably would never have mentioned it. He remarks that monarchy according to law is not really a constitution at all, and if this be taken literally, the fact that good government must recognize the supremacy of law really puts the monarchy out of consideration as a true form of government. A monarchy of the ideal type would belong to domestic rather than political rule. Nothing but his acceptance of Plato's sixfold classification brings it into consideration.

When Aristotle turns to an examination of existing monarchies he drops the consideration of an ideal state entirely. Two legal forms of monarchy he knows, the Spartan kingship and the dictatorship, but neither of these is a constitution, and two kinds of monarchical constitution, the Oriental monarchy and the monarchy of the heroic age. The latter, of course, is conjectural and really outside Aristotle's experience. The Oriental monarchy is more truly a form of tyranny, though it is lawful after a barbarian fashion, since Asiatics are slaves by nature and do not object to despotic government. Substantially, therefore, actual monarchy, as Aristotle knows it, is equivalent to such government as that of Persia. However, the significance of this discussion is less in what he says about monarchy than in the fact that he distinguishes the different kinds. Evidently the sixfold classification of states had already lost its meaning for him as compared with an empirical study of the actual working of governments. It was precisely at this point that he took up again the examination of oligarchy and democracy — that is to say, Greek forms of government — in Book IV.

The reasons should now be clear why Aristotle's political ideals