

Feel Like a Natural Human:
The Polis By Nature, and Human Nature in Aristotle's The Politics

by Laura Zax

Intimately tied to Aristotle's famous assertion in The Politics that man is a "political animal" is his claim that this political animal's habitat—the polis—exists "by nature" (1253a). Concluding that the polis is natural, Aristotle does not leave readers with a traditional question about the tension between natural life and political life. Rather, equating the two, Aristotle leads readers to question what it is about man's nature that makes him need politics and what it is about the polis that satisfies this need. Just as nature, which is the source not only of life but also of the mechanisms that sustain life, endows the reindeer with antlers for defense or the mother mammal with milk to sustain her young, nature endows man with the polis for his own self-preservation. Though the traditional picture of survival is a satisfaction of the needs for food, drink, and sex, Aristotle, insisting that the polis fulfills a natural need of man, suggests that man's needs include more than simply the strictly biological ones. Man's physiology demands that he eat and drink. Equally as natural, man's *telos* demands that his life have purpose and meaning.

Nature does not create man self-sufficient; however, nature does create man. Thus, nature is also responsible for the support system that will allow mankind to persevere in the natural world. "It is the work of nature to provide sustenance" (1258a), writes Aristotle, articulating the very scientific observation that nature's design ensures

the survival of nature's creatures. So, because man is not self-sufficient, nature supplies the city. "The city belongs among the things that exist by nature," Aristotle writes, flouting the idea that the polis is man-made (1253a). Nature creates the multitude of mankind *and* their political association so that men, in-and-of themselves insufficient to survive, can survive. For Aristotle, such associations among humans are a natural inevitability. He writes, "There must of necessity be a conjunction of persons who cannot exist without one another: on the one hand, male and female. . . on the other, the naturally ruling and ruled" (1252a). The political relationship of ruler and ruled is, for Aristotle, as fundamental to self-preservation as the sexual relationship of man and woman. By bringing together a conglomeration of complementary humans—man and woman, ruler and ruled—the polis itself "reaches a level of full self-sufficiency" (1252b). In this way, nature, whose purpose is the self-preservation of its creatures, provides the polis, which is so fundamental for the survival of humankind.

Aristotle's natural polis, however, must serve a higher purpose than simply providing for man's basic biological needs. In Aristotle's theory, the biological and reproductive needs of life—those basics traditionally considered the essentials for survival—are accounted for in a much smaller unit of human association: "The household," Aristotle writes, "is the partnership constituted by nature for [the needs of] daily life" (1252b). If this family union, which assures such natural biological musts as procreation and preservation, meets the basic needs of life, the polis must meet higher needs. Nature, then, provides the polis not for mere life but for the good life. "[The city] reaches a level of full self-sufficiency, so to speak; and while coming into being for the sake of living, it exists for the sake of living well," Aristotle writes, articulating the

natural polis' promise not simply of survival but rather of a good survival (1252b). The city grows from a series of narrower human associations, fulfilling needs beyond the biological ones.

By arguing that the polis is no less natural than the household, Aristotle implies that the needs for which the polis provides are no less natural than those for which the household provides. Man's fundamental needs, then, are more complex than his strictly biological ones, for which the household is able to account. To Aristotle, these unique sustenance needs have determined man's lifestyle. He writes, "Differences in sustenance have made the ways of life of animals differ," concluding that man's tendency to live in the polis is indicative of a difference in his sustenance needs (1256a). Thus, man's fundamental needs are not simply those that sustain mere life but also include those that sustain the good life for which the polis provides. The characteristics of a good life for Aristotle illuminate his conception of these larger needs of man. When he asserts that the end of the city is so that man might "liv[e] well," Aristotle walks on ambiguous territory. By "living well" does the great thinker mean living a life that is good in that it is comfortable and happy? Or rather is the phrase "living well" meant to define a life of good actions, of virtuous productivity? Aristotle's diction is deliberately vague because for him there is no distinction between the two; "Acting well and happiness are the same" (1325a), writes Aristotle, who believes that the one leads to the other. "Happiness is a sort of action" (1352a). A life of good actions thus engenders a good, or happy, life. Consequently, the ability to perform good actions, which ensures a life "live[d] well," is included among men's fundamental needs.

The good life can only be actualized in the polis, for it is only in the polis that man can “liv[e] well” by acting well. Such is man’s *telos*: “Acting well is the end,” Aristotle writes unequivocally (1352b). And because, according to Aristotle, “nature makes nothing that is incomplete or purposeless,” it is only natural for man to fulfill his purpose (1256b). Fulfilling his purpose by acting well is among man’s fundamental needs. The polis provides the stage on which man can fulfill his potential for good actions because, as Aristotle writes, “The political partnership must be regarded, therefore, as being for the sake of noble actions, not for the sake of living together” (1281a). Thus, in the polis man achieves purposefulness. Man’s *telos*, his purpose of “living well,” is a function of his actions in society. “Political expertise does not create human beings but makes use of them after receiving them from nature,” Aristotle writes (1258a). Without the polis, on the other hand, man is utterly useless. Aristotle argues, “For if the whole [body] is destroyed there will not be a foot or a hand, unless in the sense that the term is similar (as when one speaks of a hand made of stone), but the thing itself will be defective” (1253a). Aristotle believes that, divorced from its use and purpose, a thing becomes meaningless. Just as a hand without the body for which it works is only as much of a hand as the stone hand of a sculpture, a man without a city is as human—or, rather, as inhuman—as a stone statue. The polis, then, is the habitat in which men can live the good life because it is the forum in which man can fulfill his potential for good actions.

The polis is man’s natural habitat not simply because of a characteristic of man—his *telos* of “living well” and his natural need to fulfill that *telos*—but also because of a characteristic of the city that allows man to live well by acting well there. This crucial

feature of the city is its systems of adjudication, or the judgment provided not only by the laws of the polis but also by the eyes of man's fellow citizens in the polis. "For adjudication is an arrangement of the political partnership, and adjudication is judgment as to what is just," writes Aristotle, illuminating his belief that "justice is a thing belonging to the city" (1253a). In a discussion about the relationship between those who execute the laws (the ruling) and those upon whom laws are imposed (the ruled), Aristotle uses an apt musical comparison that, when analyzed, illuminates how the political order of a city puts man into meaningful context. "From all of nature...there is a sort of rule, for example in a harmony" Aristotle writes (1254a). Just as each individual note on a keyboard does not intrinsically have what in music is called a "quality"—for instance, the quality of being major or the quality of being minor—so, too, does a man, on his own, lack all distinctive quality. Rather, a note takes on a quality when played in the context of other notes. Similarly, the presence of other men gives identity to the individual man. The adjudication found in the city, the social order or "rule" of society, puts man into meaningful context. Any characteristic a man may possess is neutral—is neither good nor bad nor directed toward some *telos*—until the presence of another gives a man's characteristics context and meaning. Aristotle astutely articulates this belief when he writes, "There is a ruling and a serving courage" (1260a). A ruler cannot be a ruler without a subject, nor a servant a servant without a master. The presence of the subject renders the ruler's courage "ruling" courage just as the presence of a master renders the servant's courage "serving," giving purpose to the neutral quality "courage." Man's actions, then, can be neither good nor bad—man's life lived neither well nor badly—until they can be judged to be good or bad within the context of the city. Man's

purpose is a relative thing and thus can only be achieved in the presence of others in the polis.

Just as man's ability to be judged is a function of the city, so too is man's ability to form meaningful judgments dependent on the polis. Aristotle believes that this ability to make qualitative judgments defines man's humanity because "[Man] alone has a perception of good and bad and just and unjust" (1253a). When he writes, "Speech serves to reveal the advantageous and hence also the just and the unjust," Aristotle designates speech as the tool by which men make judgments (1253a). Thus, speech is the property of humans that defines their humanity. Interestingly, speech inherently includes a relationship between more than one person, implying, as speech does, a listener.

Speech without an audience is senseless babble. The very quality that Aristotle asserts enables man's ability to make value judgments and thus the very quality that defines our humanity demands the presence of another in order to be meaningful. Man's natural ability to speak is indicative of man's natural need to produce something meaningful—a need that requires the polis.

Though the term "political animal" may sound harsh to modern readers, Aristotle's critique is, in fact, of the naked man. Through his analysis of man in the city he indirectly paints a critical picture of the apolitical man, of man "apolis-ized." Aristotle's logic about man in the polis suggests that man is insufficient to fulfill his potential outside of the polis. The defining quality of man's natural insufficiency is his purposelessness when divorced from the community of others. Aristotle indirectly presents a pessimistic view of human nature—one in which man will not lead a good life in either sense, will be neither virtuously productive nor happy, without "adjudication" to

guide him. But Aristotle does not stop at the implication that the apolitical man is useless, is a statue, without the city. Outside of the city and its adjudication, man's actions are no longer guaranteed of being "good"; however, rather than assuming man's actions outside of the city are neutral, Aristotle articulates man's potential to be downright bad. While it is easy to glorify the polis by rationalizing that the judgment of a city inspires man to use his powers productively, it is also easy to critique man by envisioning him without the city. Aristotle does just that, writing, "For just as man is the best of the animals when completed, when separated from law and adjudication he is the worst of all" (1253a). Articulating a keen sense of man's potential for bad, Aristotle continues, "For injustice is harshest when it is furnished with arms; and man is born naturally possessing arms for the use of prudence and virtue which are nevertheless very susceptible to being used for their opposites" (1253a). Yet what is so fundamentally different about Aristotle's theory from the theories of many of his predecessors and successors is his argument that this ignoble man is *not* the natural man. Optimistic, Aristotle writes that the arms man possesses are naturally for prudence and virtue, for good uses. When divorced from the polis—from purposeful action and meaningful speech—man is *not* in his natural state, is not man at all.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *The Politics*. Trans. Carnes Lord. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.