

Politics

by Aristotle
(384–322 B.C.)

BOOK I

1

1 Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with
a view to some good; for mankind always act in order to obtain that which they
think good. 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
5 good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.

Some people think that the qualifications of a statesman, king, householder,
and master are the same, and that they differ, not in kind, but only in the number
of their subjects. For example, the ruler over a few is called a master; over more,
the manager of a household; over a still larger number, a statesman or king, as if
10 there were no difference between a great household and a small state. The
distinction which is made between the king and the statesman is as follows: When
the government is personal, the ruler is a king; when, according to the rules of the
political science, the citizens rule and are ruled in turn, then he is called a
statesman.

15 But all this is a mistake; for governments differ in kind, as will be evident to any
one who considers the matter according to the method which has hitherto guided
us. As in other departments of science, so in politics, the compound should always
be resolved into simple elements or least parts of the whole. We must therefore
look at the elements of which the state is composed, in order that we may see in
20 what the different kinds of rule differ from one another, and whether any scientific
result can be attained about each one of them.

2

25 He who thus considers things in their first growth and origin, whether a state or
anything else, will obtain the clearest view of them. In the first place there must
be a union of those who cannot exist without each other; namely, of male and
female, that the race may continue (and this is a union which is formed, not of
deliberate purpose, but because, in common with other animals and with plants,
30 mankind have a natural desire to leave behind them an image of themselves), and
of natural ruler and subject, that both may be preserved. For that which can foresee
by the exercise of mind is by nature intended to be lord and master, and that which
can with its body give effect to such foresight is a subject, and by nature a slave;

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1 hence master and slave have the same interest. Now nature has distinguished
between the female and the slave. For she is not niggardly, like the smith who
fashions the Delphian knife for many uses; she makes each thing for a single use,
and every instrument is best made when intended for one and not for many uses.
5 But among barbarians no distinction is made between women and slaves, because
there is no natural ruler among them: they are a community of slaves, male and
female. Wherefore the poets say,—

It is meet that Hellenes should rule over barbarians;

10 as if they thought that the barbarian and the slave were by nature one.

Out of these two relationships between man and woman, master and slave, the
first thing to arise is the family, and Hesiod is right when he says,—

15 First house and wife and an ox for the plough,

for the ox is the poor man's slave. The family is the association established by
nature for the supply of men's everyday wants, and the members of it are called by
Charondas 'companions of the cupboard,' and by Epimenides the Cretan, 'com-
20 panions of the manger.' But when several families are united, and the association
aims at something more than the supply of daily needs, the first society to be
formed is the village. And the most natural form of the village appears to be that
of a colony from the family, composed of the children and the grandchildren, who
are said to be 'suckled with the same milk.' And this is the reason why Hellenic
25 states were originally governed by kings; because the Hellenes were under royal
rule before they came together, as the barbarians still are. Every family is ruled by
the eldest, and therefore in the colonies of the family the kingly form of
government prevailed because they were of the same blood. As Homer says:

30 Each one gives law to his children and to his wives.

For they lived dispersedly, as was the manner in ancient times. Wherefore men say
that the Gods have a king, because they themselves either are or were in ancient
times under the rule of a king. For they imagine, not only the forms of the Gods,
35 but their ways of life to be like their own.

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
40 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.
Besides, the final cause and end of a thing is the best, and to be self-sufficing is the
end and the best.

1 Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that 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; he is like the

5 Tribeless, lawless, hearthless one.

whom Homer denounces—the natural outcast is forthwith a lover of war; he may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts.

Now, that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious
10 animals is evident. Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended
15 to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state.

Further, the state is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual,
20 since the whole is of necessity prior to the part; for example, if the whole body be destroyed, there will be no foot or hand, except in an equivocal sense, as we might speak of a stone hand, for when destroyed the hand will be no better than that. But things are defined by their working and power; and we ought not to say that they are the same when they no longer have their proper quality, but only that they have
25 the same name. The proof that the state is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole. But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god; he is no part of a state. A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature, and yet
30 he who first founded the state was the greatest of benefactors. For man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all; since armed injustice is the more dangerous, and he is equipped at birth with arms, meant to be used by intelligence and virtue, which he may use for the worst ends. Wherefore, if he have not virtue, he is the most unholy and the
35 most savage of animals, and the most full of lust and gluttony. But justice is the bond of men in states, for the administration of justice, which is the determination of what is just, is the principle of order in political society.

3

40 Seeing then that the state is made up of households, before speaking of the state we must speak of the management of the household. The parts of the household management correspond to the persons who compose the household, and a complete household consists of slaves and freemen. Now we should begin by

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1 examining everything in the fewest possible elements; and the first and fewest
possible parts of a family are master and slave, husband and wife, father and
children. We have therefore to consider what each of these three relations is and
ought to be: I mean the relation of master and servant, the marriage relation (the
5 conjunction of man and wife has no name of its own), and thirdly, the procreative
relation (this also has no proper name). And there is another element of a
household, the so-called art of getting wealth, which, according to some, is
identical with household management, according to others, a principal part of it;
the nature of this art will also have to be considered by us.

10 Let us first speak of master and slave, looking to the needs of practical life and
also seeking to attain some better theory of their relation than exists at present. For
some are of opinion that the rule of a master is a science, and that the management
of a household, and the mastership of slaves, and the political and royal rule, as I
was saying at the outset, are all the same. Others affirm that the rule of a master
15 over slaves is contrary to nature and that the distinction between slave and freeman
exists by law only, and not by nature; and being an interference with nature is
therefore unjust.

4

20 Property is a part of the household, and the art of acquiring property is a part of
the art of managing the household; for no man can live well, or indeed live at all,
unless he be provided with necessaries. And as in the arts which have a definite
sphere the workers must have their own proper instruments for the accomplish-
25 ment of their work, so it is in the management of a household. Now instruments
are of various sorts; some are living, others lifeless; in the rudder, the pilot of a ship
has a lifeless, in the lookout man, a living instrument; for in the arts the servant
is a kind of instrument. Thus, too, a possession is an instrument for maintaining
life. And so, in the arrangement of the family, a slave is a living possession, and
30 property a number of such instruments; and the servant is himself an instrument
which takes precedence of all other instruments. For if every instrument could
accomplish its own work, obeying or anticipating the will of others, like the statues
of Daedalus, or the tripods of Hephaestus, which, says the poet,

35 of their own accord entered the assembly of the Gods;

if, in like manner, the shuttle would weave and the plectrum touch the lyre without
a hand to guide them, chief workmen would not want servants, nor masters slaves.
Here, however, another distinction must be drawn: the instruments commonly so
40 called are instruments of production, whilst a possession is an instrument of
action. The shuttle, for example, is not only of use; but something else is made by
it, whereas of a garment or of a bed there is only the use. Further, as production
and action are different in kind, and both require instruments, the instruments
which they employ must likewise differ in kind. But life is action and not

1 production, and therefore the slave is the minister of action. Again, a possession
 is spoken of as a part is spoken of; for the part is not only a part of something else,
 but wholly belongs to it; and this is also true of a possession. The master is only
 the master of the slave; he does not belong to him, whereas the slave is not only
 5 the slave of his master, but wholly belongs to him. Hence we see what is the nature
 and office of a slave; he who is by nature not his own but another's man, is by nature
 a slave; and he may be said to be another's man who, being a human being, is also
 a possession. And a possession may be defined as an instrument of action,
 separable from the possessor.

10

5

But is there any one thus intended by nature to be a slave, and for whom such a
 condition is expedient and right, or rather is not all slavery a violation of nature?

15

There is no difficulty in answering this question, on grounds both of reason
 and of fact. For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only
 necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for
 subjection, others for rule.

20

And there are many kinds both of rulers and subjects (and that rule is the better
 which is exercised over better subjects—for example, to rule over men is better
 than to rule over wild beasts; for the work is better which is executed by better
 workmen, and where one man rules and another is ruled, they may be said to have
 a work); for in all things which form a composite whole and which are made up
 of parts, whether continuous or discrete, a distinction between the ruling and the
 25 subject element comes to light. Such a duality exists in living creatures, but not in
 them only; it originates in the constitution of the universe; even in things which
 have no life there is a ruling principle, as in a musical mode. But we are wandering
 from the subject. We will therefore restrict ourselves to the living creature, which,
 in the first place, consists of soul and body: and of these two, the one is by nature
 30 the ruler, and the other the subject. But then we must look for the intentions of
 nature in things which retain their nature, and not in things which are corrupted.
 And therefore we must study the man who is in the most perfect state both of body
 and soul, for in him we shall see the true relation of the two; although in bad or
 corrupted natures the body will often appear to rule over the soul, because they
 35 are in an evil and unnatural condition. At all events we may firstly observe in living
 creatures both a despotical and a constitutional rule; for the soul rules the body
 with a despotical rule, whereas the intellect rules the appetites with a constitu-
 tional and royal rule. And it is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and of
 the mind and the rational element over the passionate, is natural and expedient;
 40 whereas the quality of the two or the rule of the inferior is always hurtful. The same
 holds good of animals in relation to men; for tame animals have a better nature than
 wild, and all tame animals are better off when they are ruled by man; for then they
 are preserved. Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and
 the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all

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1 mankind. Where then there is such a difference as that between soul and body, or
between men and animals (as in the case of those whose business is to use their
body, and who can do nothing better), the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it
is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master.
5 For he who can be, and therefore is, another's, and he who participates in rational
principle enough to apprehend, but not to have, such a principle, is a slave by
nature. Whereas the lower animals cannot even apprehend a principle; they obey
their instincts. And indeed the use made of slaves and of tame animals is not very
different; for both with their bodies minister to the needs of life. Nature would like
10 to distinguish between the bodies of freemen and slaves, making the one strong for
servile labour, the other upright, and although useless for such services, useful for
political life in the arts both of war and peace. But the opposite often happens—
that some have the souls and others have the bodies of freemen. And doubtless if
men differed from one another in the mere forms of their bodies as much as the
15 statues of the Gods do from men, all would acknowledge that the inferior class
should be slaves of the superior. And if this is true of the body, how much more
just that a similar distinction should exist in the soul? But the beauty of the body
is seen, whereas the beauty of the soul is not seen. It is clear, then, that some men
are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both
20 expedient and right.

6

But that those who take the opposite view have in a certain way right on their side,
25 may be easily seen. For the words slavery and slave are used in two senses. There
is a slave or slavery by law as well as by nature. The law of which I speak is a sort
of convention—the law by which whatever is taken in war is supposed to belong
to the victors. But this right many jurists impeach, as they would an orator who
brought forward an unconstitutional measure: they detest the notion that, because
30 one man has the power of doing violence and is superior in brute strength, another
shall be his slave and subject. Even among philosophers there is a difference of
opinion. The origin of the dispute, and what makes the views invade each other's
territory, is as follows: in some sense virtue, when furnished with means, has
actually the greatest power of exercising force: and as superior power is only found
35 where there is superior excellence of some kind, power seems to imply virtue, and
the dispute to be simply one about justice (for it is due to one party identifying
justice with goodwill, while the other identifies it with the mere rule of the
stronger). If these views are thus set out separately, the other views have no force
or plausibility against the view that the superior in virtue ought to rule, or be
40 master. Others clinging, as they think, simply to a principle of justice (for law and
custom are a sort of justice), assume that slavery in accordance with the custom
of war is justified by law, but at the same moment they deny this. For what if the
cause of war be unjust? And again, no one would ever say that he is a slave who
is unworthy to be a slave. Were this the case, men of the highest rank would be

1 slaves and the children of slaves if they or their parents chance to have been taken
 captive and sold. Wherefore Hellenes do not like to call Hellenes slaves, but
 confine the term to barbarians. Yet, in using this language, they really mean the
 natural slave of whom we spoke at first, for it must be admitted that some are slaves
 5 everywhere, others nowhere. The same principle applies to nobility. Hellenes
 regard themselves as noble everywhere, and not only in their own country, but
 they deem the barbarians noble only when at home, thereby implying that there
 are two sorts of nobility and freedom, the one absolute, the other relative. The
 Helen of Theodectes says:

10 Who would presume to call me servant who am on both sides sprung
 from the stem of the Gods?

15 What does this mean but that they distinguish freedom and slavery, noble and
 humble birth, by the two principles of good and evil? They think that as men and
 animals beget men and animals, so from good men a good man springs. But this
 is what nature, though she may intend it, cannot always accomplish.

We see then that there is some foundation for this difference of opinion, and
 that all are not either slaves by nature or freemen by nature, and also that there is
 20 in some cases a marked distinction between the two classes, rendering it expedient
 and right for the one to be slaves and the others to be masters: the one practising
 obedience, the others exercising the authority and lordship which nature intended
 them to have. The abuse of this authority is injurious to both; for the interests of
 part and whole, of body and soul, are the same, and the slave is a part of the master,
 25 a living but separated part of his bodily frame. Hence, where the relation of master
 and slave between them is natural they are friends and have a common interest, but
 where it rests merely on law and force the reverse is true.

7

30 The previous remarks are quite enough to show that the rule of a master is not a
 constitutional rule, and that all the different kinds of rule are not as some affirm,
 the same with each other. For there is one rule exercised over subjects who are by
 nature slaves. The rule of a household is a monarchy, for every house is under one
 35 head: whereas constitutional rule is a government of freemen and equals. The
 master is not called a master because he has science, but because he is of a certain
 character, and the same remark applies to the slave and a freeman. Still there may
 be a science for the master and a science for the slave. The science of the slave
 would be such as the man of Syracuse taught, who made money by instructing
 40 slaves in their ordinary duties. And such a knowledge may be carried further, so
 as to include cookery and similar menial arts. For some duties are of the more
 necessary, others of the more honourable sort; as the proverb says, 'slave before
 slave, master before master,' But all such branches of knowledge are servile. There
 is likewise a science of the master, which teaches the use of slaves; for the master

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1 as such is concerned, not with the acquisition, but with the use of them. Yet this
so-called science is not anything great or wonderful; for the master need only know
how to order that which the slave must know how to execute. Hence those who
are in a position which places them above toil have stewards who attend to their
5 households while they occupy themselves with philosophy or with politics. But
the art of acquiring slaves, I mean of justly acquiring them, differs both from the
art of the master and the art of the slave, being a species of hunting or war. Enough
of the distinction between master and slave.