

Does Aristotle regard the description of an ideal state and the analysis of actual states as distinct or as related subjects of political enquiry?

Aristotle regards the state as a natural entity, which is possessing of a *telos*, that is, an end. This end is assumed to also be the best condition that a state can reach; that being the provision of the capacity to live the good life for the citizens of the state. The ostensible purpose of *The Politics* is to determine whether this goal is being achieved by current states, and how it might best be achieved in the future. The failure of current states to provide these circumstances motivates Aristotle to inquire into the properties of a hypothetical 'ideal state', and relate his findings to existing states. Clearly then, there is at least an academic relationship between the study of existing states and the ideal state to which they are compared. However, for Aristotle I believe that the relationship is far deeper than this, for the *telos* of providing the good life is the same for both ideal and actual states in Aristotle's view. Thus, it seems to me that not only are the studies of ideal and actual states related, they are ultimately identical for Aristotle.

Aristotle clearly intends actual state and the ideal state to be considered simultaneously. This is immediately apparent in the way that the actual constitutions he considers are presented with a view to their defects in the light of an discussion of the ideal state. Aristotle outlines his goals at the very beginning of Book II where he states that "We only undertake this inquiry because all the constitutions which now exist are faulty."<sup>1</sup> This statement illustrates well the thrust of Aristotle's purpose. We see from the outset that Book II is to be no theoretical exercise confined to the limits of hypothesis 'anxious to make a sophistical display', but rather practical purposes underpin Aristotle's link between ideal and actual constitutions. Furthermore, in his discussion of ideal states, Aristotle takes into account a great many practical concerns. His discussion of the value of Common Ownership is particularly interesting to us, as his objections to it as an ideal are almost solely on practical grounds. Aristotle's arguments here lend his discussion a firmly practical grounding, and we see clearly that Aristotle is not willing to allow pleasingly neat theories to supersede actuality in his political thought. Such practical considerations and concerns permeate the whole book, but are particularly prominent in Book II. They offer the best *prima facie* evidence of Aristotle's belief in a practical link between the study of ideal and actual states. We see that Aristotle approaches his study of both in a similar academic way, and reinforces this with a consideration of practical matters.

Academic similarities in the style of investigation are notable, for although inevitable stylistic likeness, the analytical method of study based around an exposure of the weakness of the systems concerned, is a useful illustration of how Aristotle approaches both actual and ideal states in a very similar manner. This is significant inasmuch as we can note the lack of any division in style of discussion between actual and ideal states. Furthermore, Aristotle does not actually separate his discussion of ideal states from actual states with any clear boundaries. Indeed, Book II commences with a consideration of the ideal state and then progresses to consider actual constitutions in the light of this introduction. The way in which Aristotle presents his work suggests that he very much intended his audience to consider actual states in relation to an ideal state, which had itself been understood in the light of the study of existing states. The actual content of Aristotle's work adds far greater weight to this notion, as he explains that the formulation of the idea of an ideal state is useful to weigh the virtues of existing states against. Equally, he informs us that he will consider existing constitutions in order that their flaws might

---

<sup>1</sup> Book ii 11.35

be observed, making an understanding of a perfect state possible. In this way, Aristotle does not separate his study of academic ideal states and actual constitutions and states, rather he regards them as inseparable. As an Aristotelian understanding of either is dependent upon an comprehension of the other, it would be impossible for him to consider them separately. Aristotle presents his explanation of the existence of the state in terms of what we might call ideals. That is, the state is the culmination of man's natural political instinct to seek a self-sufficient life that will permit the achievement of *eudaimonia*. It is in these terms that Aristotle understands the state, for the achievement of the good life is the *telos* of the state, and to understand a thing Aristotle require that you know the end of that thing. Since the end of the state is the achievement of the good life for its citizens, an understanding of this goal is an understanding of the state. Thus, it is not possible for Aristotle to regard an ideal state (that is, one that has reached its *telos*) separately from an existing state, since they share the same basic definition.

Admittedly there is some difficulty in using the order of *The Politics* to confirm that Aristotle intended to consider ideal and actual states in succession, as the original order of the books (or of the source material that we have labelled as books) is unknown. However, the similarity in argumentative style cannot be dismissed so easily. Even when speaking about ideals, Aristotle never allows himself to be blinded to practical considerations. Indeed, as we have seen with the matter of common ownership, Aristotle dismisses a principle, however desirable in theory, if it will not be practicable. This is very similar to his examination of actual constitutions, where he picks them apart on the basis on not theoretical concern but of practical difficulty.

Interestingly it is this pragmatism that offers perhaps the best argument to suggest a separation between Aristotle's inquiries into ideal and actual states. Aristotle is more than willing to talk in bluntly practical political terms about the necessities of the state and the retention of power. He will advocate the practical policies of power, even if they might seem to conflict with the general good. This seems to drive a wedge between Aristotle's idealism and his concerns with real states. However, I believe that Aristotle's ardent pragmatism in the face of political actuality does not contradict his dual consideration of ideal and actual states. Aristotle's cynical pragmatism is, as he himself would have recognised, a means to an end, and not an end in itself as the *telos* of the ideal state is. Furthermore, pragmatism is not lacking in Aristotle's view of an ideal state, and he doubtless regards ruthless actions as a necessity on the road to the achievement of the ideal state. Of equal importance in explaining this apparent discrepancy is the style of Aristotle's argument. As a thinker, Aristotle does not shy from extending his argument along lines of logic that might contradict his own view. Aristotle often continues a discussion as though he were holding it with the reader, taking it way beyond the purpose of proving his own view point and exposing new questions for his audience to consider. In this case, I suspect that Aristotle simply does not see the need to reconcile pragmatism with idealism, as that is a long-term problem beyond the terms of his inquiry. However, he does not avoid exposing the matter, and so allows other to consider it as a problem.

Most important in understanding the relationship between actual and ideal states in Aristotle's *Politics* is a realisation of Aristotle's goal. Aristotle seeks to derive an understanding of how best to run a state, bringing it a close as possible to an ideal. This is a practical goal, and the study of ideal states is an intrinsic part of it, as it provides the focus of Aristotle's efforts. *The Politics* sets the comprehension of what makes an ideal state as its broad aim, an aim derived from Aristotle's practical argument that all men desire to live well. Although from a modern point of view this statement of intent can seem to be somewhat vacuous, Aristotle provides the state with practical motives to encourage this end, and he considers the actual customs and laws that best foster it. With this understanding of Aristotle's aims, it is apparent that it would be false for Aristotle to separate his study of actual and ideal states, as their goals are not only related but are

the same. The only distinction that needs by made is one of classification, that is, a study of what makes an ideal state can be conducted on the basis of existing states, but it should remain separate from the study of an actual constitution for the sake of clarity. Such divisions are merely for the purposes of clear argument, and Aristotle does not intend to divide the two into separate academic spheres. Rather, both are intrinsically related as topics of political enquiry for Aristotle seeks to understand what constitutes an ideal state and how it might be brought about based upon knowledge of existing states. Thus, it is not only difficult separate Aristotle's views on ideal and actual states, but also fruitless and meaningless. Aristotle intends his writings on both to be considered in the light of the other. He grounds his study of the ideal state in practical considerations derived from knowledge of actual states, and he examines existing states with a view to the creation of an ideal state.

In conclusion, Aristotle's political enquiry is by its very nature a study of the relationship between actual states and the concept of an ideal state. He separates them only in the manner of point and counter-point. Aristotle does not seek to place a clear divide between what constitutes an ideal state and what forms an actual state. Since he views the state as a natural body, he believes that it shall achieve an ideal form in actuality at some point. Thus, for Aristotle, it is anathema to separate the study of the ideal state from the consideration of actual states.

1750