Should the Government be your Friend? A Critique of Aristotelian Politics and Friendship

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Man is a communal animal. He naturally forms social groups with his fellow man for survival, prosperity, and mutual benefit; the family, neighborhood, and nation-state are all designed with these ends in mind. Any rung on the societal ladder, from the marriage relationship to the sovereign state, may be called dysfunctional and inept if it fails to promote the betterment of its members. Aristotle, along with other prominent ancient philosophers, explicitly argued that providing the good life for its citizens is not only the state's primary reason for existence, but was also a realization dependent on the state's existence; man could not achieve the good life without the aid of government under his theory. Upon reflection, however, a paradox seems to emerge in the modern age. Over the course of the past two centuries, the vast majority of the planet's inhabited regions have undergone a strong nationalistic transformation, yet man's happiness has arguably decreased. Beginning in Europe and North America in the late eighteenth century, nationalistic fever eventually diffused across Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Presently, areas in Africa and Eastern Europe continue to be hotbeds of ethnic, religious, and economic nationalistic conflicts. In the modern age, the power players are states, not individuals or groups.

If one examines this recent trend and the misfortune still suffered by humanity, the failure of the modern state to give its citizens an adequate opportunity to live the good life becomes transparent. Despite the emergence of "enlightened" national governments, strengthening of national borders, and increased governmental involvement in the individual's life, more human lives have been lost in wars, political purges, and man-made natural disasters within the last two hundred years than in the rest of human history combined. This leads to the question: does Aristotle's conception of the ideal state have the actual capacity to aid its citizens in attaining the good life? I will argue that, although his ideal state does provide a valuable, arguably necessary, framework for attaining the good life, it did not have the ability to see this task to completion in ancient Greece and has an even smaller chance of accomplishing it in the modern age. Aristotle's political theory, coupled with his theory of friendship, indicate that the family and other societal groupings, not the state, must be relied upon for man to find the good life.

If one is to determine the state's ability to provide each citizen with the best life, one needs first to establish criteria for a good life. According to Aristotle, the ultimate aim in every man's life is the attainment of "the good."[1] All human activities have this goal as their end, and it is the only end that is sought as an end in itself, rather than as a means to some other end.[2] In his dialectic search for a definition of "the good," Aristotle writes that, "both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness."[3] Thus, living well, for Aristotle, is synonymous with being happy. Happiness, though, is a

highly ambiguous state of being and different readers will discern various interpretations. For Aristotle, two fundamental components constitute this life of happiness. First, external goods are necessary to satisfy man's basic needs, thus freeing him from menial tasks and giving him time to pursue a contemplative life.[4] Second, one must develop virtue by imitating virtuous role models, habitually integrating their moral actions into his life.[5]

Living a virtuous life is not a task for the individual alone; for Aristotle, achieving the good life is a communal effort. Ample evidence exists in Aristotle's writings to support this conclusion. In his search for a "master art" that delineates the requirements for living the good life, Aristotle concludes that politics "appears to be of this nature," because it "uses the rest of the sciences, and…legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to abstain from."[6] Additionally, in his *Politics*, Aristotle claims that, while man's singular quest for the good life is valiant, he is greatly aided by having companions and friends to help him. The state, because it is the conglomeration of all possible friends, "aims at good in a greater degree than any other [entity]," and must play an integral role in finding the good life.[7]

Also supporting this thesis is the philosopher's stance on friendship's importance. While he admits that it is possible for man to attain the good life alone, it would seem strange to imagine "the supremely happy man a solitary [man]," as friends are regarded as the "greatest of all external goods."[8] By "friends", the reader is not to assume that one's casual acquaintances are instrumental in achieving the good life. Aristotle did not intend this to be true. For him, there exist three types of friendship and only one specific category of friendship is sufficient to achieve the above goal. Friendships of utility are formed when both parties find usefulness in maintaining a mutual relationship. Friendships of pleasure exist where both parties find each other's company to be pleasant. In these two relationships, a man is not loved for himself, but for transient qualities that are not an essential part of his character. Thus, these friendships are fleeting and powerless to help one achieve the good life.[9]

Only the third type of friendship, "perfect" friendship in Aristotle's lexicon, is capable of aiding one in his search for the good life. This level of friendship exists only where the two parties love each other *qua* each other, not because of incidental character traits or socioeconomic conditions. Julia Annas explains that "to like a friend because of his virtue is to like him for what he is in himself, whereas to like him for his usefulness or pleasantness is to like him for attributes that he could lose and which are therefore not part of what he essentially is."[10] Aristotle states that perfect friendship requires each party to love the other completely for the other's sake, not out of any intrinsic benefit to the one who loves. Thus, a proper object of love must be desired purely for its own sake. Nonetheless, it appears that the loving agent must want something for himself in desiring the object. In this frame, the only case wherein one desires an object purely for the object's sake seems to be with one's self. How then is it possible for one to form perfect friendships, showing identical concern for another's welfare as he would his own? Aristotle solves this dilemma by requiring that the one party must love the other as "another self," tending to the other's welfare

as he would his own.[11] Charles Kahn outlines Aristotle's argument for loving a friend as "another self," found in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9, as follows: the truest self of every human being is his essence. Because the essence of all humans is fundamentally the same, perfect friendship will exist when each partner becomes aware that every man's essence is essentially identical and equates the true self of the other with his own true self.[12] Such a bond is based on an equality and passion not found within mere acquaintances. Thus, developing such fiercely intimate relationships with one's neighbors is an integral part of living the good life.

The question may easily be raised: if the good, virtuous man is complete and not lacking in any aspect, why is he then in need of friends? Aristotle tackles this problem and shows that man not only needs friends to eventually find the good life, but he also needs them to maintain such a life. As already outlined, happiness is the end of the good life. Aristotelian happiness is not a passive state. Rather, it is an activity.[13] In his paradigm, man is not only stagnant in his virtuous progression *sans* friends, but actually enters a state of regression. Aristotle continues, explaining that the good man's activity is virtuous and pleasant in itself, and that a thing is pleasant because it possesses the attribute of being one's own. He makes the bold claim that man can contemplate his neighbor's virtue and actions better than his own, thus making them his own, and allowing him to derive more pleasure and virtue from other men's actions than he would his own. If this is so, then "the supremely happy man will need friends of this sort, since his purpose is to contemplate worthy actions and actions that are his own…."[14] Strengthening the argument that good men need friends, a man lacking good friends, whose activities he could gain pleasure from, would be missing something worthwhile and his virtue and happiness would be incomplete. Additionally, friends are useful because they provide a conduit through which one may gain self-knowledge, without which man cannot be sure he is on the correct path. If two good, virtuous people become friends, the one provides a mirror for the other, allowing him to see qualities that he needs to incorporate into his character. In this way, objectivity about others can be converted into objectivity about one's self and friends thereby give mutual support, encouragement, and advice as they, together, search for the good life. It is only through such communal activities that man will find his life "continuously interesting and pleasurable."[15]

Aside from claiming that "the man who is to be happy will…need virtuous friends," Aristotle also asserts that man has another ally in his search for the good life: the state.[16] He argues that the state is a creation of nature, "originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life."[17] Because man is a political creature by nature, and nature creates nothing by accident and void of purpose, the state must have the capacity to elevate man to his highest potential. It will be shown, however, that Aristotle's claim that the state can provide all men with the opportunity to achieve the good life is not cogent; when viewed through lenses framed by his philosophy of friendship, the state is doomed to fail in this objective.

In Aristotle's idealized theory, the state aids man in his search for the good life by first fulfilling two

prerequisites: providing both the basic necessities of life and correct moral educational training. Aristotle recognizes that certain material conditions are requisite for a man to be free to pursue the good life. Because happiness, the only good end in and of itself, is contemplative, man must have sufficient leisure time to develop this moral skill. An excess of menial labor, i.e. regular eighteen hour work days put in by farmers to provide basic subsistence for their families, does not grant one adequate time to cultivate a honed sense of virtue. Neither does employment as a house servant allow one the freedom to seek out virtuous friends or to participate in political activities. The state is also obligated to provide moral education to its citizenry. Virtue is learned by imitating virtuous men and it is the responsibility of the state to ensure that its populace receives proper exposure to such people and principles. Aristotle writes, "legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator, and those who do not effect it miss their mark, and it is in this that a good constitution differs from a bad one."[18] Government officials that neglect their educational duties condemn a certain portion of society.

From the above statements, we can deduce that the optimal state (by "optimal" I suggest a state with the highest percentage of its populace living the good life) must be small in size and in population. With an increasingly large governmental bureaucracy, a more complex economy based on trade and services, and public services needed to provide order to urban regions, a larger population base of workers is needed to support the thin crust of people capable of securing sufficient leisure time and moral education. A small autonomous city-state, with an agriculture-based economy, would have an easier time organizing a communal structure to provide for each citizen's basic needs. Moreover, educational resources would not be stretched thin. A handful of virtuous men could serve as the examples for the entire community and each man would have the chance to receive intimate moral training. In such a society, socioeconomic positions would preclude only a tiny fraction of citizens from attaining the good life.

The state has the fundamental duty to fit each citizen for the good life. However, as the state grows in size and complexity, its ability to provide each citizen with an opportunity to live the good life proportionately decreases. With this growth, Aristotle's philosophy begins to break down and the state's role must be viewed as changing from a primary provider of moral virtue to a supplemental aid. It appears, from his writings, that Aristotle believed all men to have the potential to live the good life. However, any engagement in slavish, physical labor precludes one from reaching this goal. Problems arise when one realizes that all forms of society necessitate some form of menial labor to keep production solvent and to tend to the citizens' basic needs. Agricultural states require farmers and those who do little more than physically transport goods. Service-based economies need data collectors and telemarketers. Governments with colossal bureaucracies are obligated to employ legions of people whose sole responsibility is processing documents. No form of government is exempt from this burden; there will always exist those people who are too busy supervising or administrating and must depend on the physical labor of others to survive.

Thus, every society will contain masses of citizens who have nominal rights, but who ought properly to be

excluded from the true citizen body because they are precluded from living the good life. It is not a lack of natural capacity that creates their moral deficiency or ostracizes them from society. Indeed, Aristotle firmly believes all men to have this specific capacity. Instead, this inferior position comes about because of the crushing circumstances under which they are required to live.[19] One might propose to patch up Aristotle's theory by asserting that the definition of "citizen" ought to be restricted in its application, eliminating those with no possibility of living the good life. Such a solution is problematic, though, because it implies that the capacity to achieve the good life is granted by the state in which one lives. In such a case, the inherent nature of man's ability to reach this lofty goal is eliminated and it instead becomes an incidental characteristic of those lucky enough to be born into good socioeconomic conditions.

Aside from precluding its citizens from the good life by necessitating menial labor, the state's inability to appropriately relate to its citizen body renders it incapable of absolutely discharging its duty. It is here that the state's reduced complementary role is revealed. As already established, man requires virtuous friends to reach and maintain a virtuous life. The friendship required is not utilitarian or pleasure-based; it must be perfect friendship if it is to be of any lasting moral value. Both the governmental construct and its individual politicians are powerless to form perfect friendships with the remaining populace. Because the absolute necessity of perfect friendships is key to his living a virtuous life, man must turn to a source separate and distinct from the government.

First and foremost, a governmental structure cannot be classified as moral, virtuous, or lacking in these qualities. It is an inanimate, created object, subservient to the human beings holding its reins. Because it is a hollow framework with no substantive moral characteristics, it is futile for a citizen to attempt to relate to, and much less love, the state as "another self." The state cannot wish the best for the individual; it does not share similar tastes; it does not grieve or rejoice with the individual. In short, man gains nothing pleasant or virtuous by making the state's actions his own; inanimate, amoral entities like state policies and programs have no moral virtue to be appropriated.

One may try to counter the above criticism by claiming that, although the individual citizen cannot form a perfect friendship with the state *qua* state, it is still feasible that he may form such a relationship with the individuals running the state. If this were possible, it would seem that the state *could* fulfill its duty to fit each citizen for the good life. However, this postulate is unsound; it fails in all types of governments reviewed by Aristotle. In a monarchy the king, because he holds a position of power that does not allow for equals, is so far removed from the general populace that it becomes impossible for a citizen to love him as another self. Smaller still are the chances for that same love to be reciprocated. Oligarchies operate in much the same way. With absolute power invested in the hands of a select few, the administrative duties and burdens are too great for the rulers to form perfect friendships with each individual citizen. Lastly, democratic politicians, by definition, are representative officials. In a representative government, the individual politician's responsibility is to protect the rights and interests of the majority of his constituents. His duty is not to tailor each governmental policy to each and every citizen, but to satisfy the greatest number of people

at any given time. Such actions evince a natural barrier to forming perfect friendships with his constituents because the politician's highest desire is not to tend to the welfare of each citizen, but to the body as a whole. The pluralistic nature of his job thus consistently precludes a certain section of the populace, who must then turn to another source for virtuous friendships. Mere acquaintances with state rulers would not produce self-knowledge nor would they inspire virtuous acts; the shallow affinity associated with political relationships could not be relied upon to produce virtue because it is not based on deep familiarity.[20] The reader will quickly agree that, with the above examples, the problems of forming perfect friendships are only exacerbated as the size and population of the state grows.

If the state cannot be relied upon to provide each citizen with the good life, where can the individual turn? The smaller societal groups, family and close circles of friends, must be considered. The social and physical proximity of the family and neighbors permits one to find, study, imitate, and form friendships with virtuous people. Education is a natural part of raising a family, and moral values can be passed from one generation to the next. Inherent in relationships with family and peers are characteristics that would expedite the self-reflection and criticism phase of perfect friendship. While Aristotle claims that the state is prior to the family, it would seem that the opposite should be affirmed instead.[21] The family can accomplish that which the state cannot. The framework that the government builds is a necessary part of attaining the good life, but something outside of the state is needed to complete the task of creating a virtuous life.

This revision of Aristotle's philosophy has concrete applications in the modern era. Happiness is still generally accepted as the ultimate end in life. Despite the increasing prevalence of obscene Hollywood-esque living, the majority of people seem to agree that true happiness does not come from material objects. Instead, lasting happiness is derived from those people with whom one surrounds himself: his family and friends. In today's world, even as national governments become more massive and powerful than ever before, we should not look to the state to fill our lives with happiness. This state of affairs is not forthcoming—the state neither has the ability to bring it to fruition, nor is it its top priority. Rather, the truly happy man is he who has, as his companions, those who are like him in goodness and are bound to him in perfect friendship.

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[1] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094^{a}.2-3

[2] Ibid., 1094^{a}.17-19

[3] Ibid., 1095^{a}.18-19

[4] Mulgan, Richard, "Was Aristotle an 'Aristotelian Social Democrat'?" *Ethics*, Vol. 111 (2000), 89.

[5] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103^{a}.16-17

[6] Ibid., 1094^{a}.28-29, 1094^{b}.5-7

[7] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252^{a}.4-6

[8] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169^{b}.10-19

[9] Ibid., 1156^{a}.10-22

[10] Annas, Julia, "Plato and Aristotle on Friendship and Altruism." *Mind*, New Series, 86, (1977), 548-549.

[11] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1166^{a}.30-32, 1166^{b}.30-35.

[12] Kahn, Charles H, "Aristotle and Altruism." *Mind*, New Series, 90, (1981), 20-40, pg. 35.

[13] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169^{b}.29

[14] Ibid., 1169^{b}.37-39

[15] Cooper, John M, "Friendship and The Good in Aristotle." *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (July, 1977), 304.

[16] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1170^{b}.18-19

[17] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252^{b}.27-30

[18] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103^{b}.3-6

[19] Mulgan, 87

[20] Cooper, 300

[21] Aristotle, *Politics* 1253^{a}.19