The Political Animal: Political Naturalism and Moral Deliberation in Aristotle's Politics

Joseph I. Rodriguez

University of California, Berkeley, j0sephrod@berkeley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications

Part of the Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons, and the Political Theory Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/19

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Macksey Journal by an authorized editor of The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal.
The Political Animal: Political Naturalism and Moral Deliberation in Aristotle’s *Politics*

Joseph Rodriguez

*University of California, Berkeley*

---

**Abstract**

In this paper, I argue that Aristotle’s conception of the *polis* as natural derives from the specifically human kind of partnership that is tied to the exercise of the specifically human capacity for *logos*. I argue that Aristotle’s political naturalism is rooted in two claims: (a) the claim that humans are the most political animal and (b) the claim that the *polis* is naturally prior to the individual. Together these two claims constitute Aristotle’s argument that the *polis* alone has the potential to fully satisfy our unique human capacity for *logos*. As I see it, Aristotle thinks that the household and the village are two stages in the development (or growth) of one thing, namely the *polis*. That is, households and villages are essentially the same (they contain the same form) as the *polis*, though they are underdeveloped.

**Keywords:** Aristotle, Deliberation, Political Naturalism

---

“Every state is as we see a sort of partnership, and every partnership is formed with a view to some good,” remarks Aristotle in the opening line of the *Politics*. The observation made

---

here begins with the inclusive plural *we* and then moves on: “[T]he partnership that is the most supreme of all and includes all the others does so most of all, and aims at the most supreme of all goods; and this is the partnership entitled the state, the political association.” Initial speculation on the meaning of the text prompts questioning: Who is this *we*? What constitutes a partnership? Moreover, how do partnerships form with a view to some good? What is so special about the *polis* that makes it most supreme of all? If the *polis* is natural, then perhaps there exists a natural human capacity to be a part of it. Indeed, Aristotle asserts that the *polis* exists by nature because citizens individually and jointly seek the good life and the happiness which is conferred thereby. The uniqueness of the *polis* becomes clear in light of Aristotle’s discussion of the different forms of community he charts out in book one of the *Politics*.

Partnership (*koinonia*) conveys a sense of mutual sharing. What will be used by Christian circles later on, *koinonia* is grounded in the idea that life is to be shared. To say that every state is a partnership is to say something about who humans are. But who exactly is Aristotle’s man? For one, he is not the pre-political being that exists in the state of nature—the rational, autonomous, and self-seeking creature that subsequent philosophers would have. He does not exist in the mind of the philosopher, painted by abstractions about what type of knowledge he has before birth, nor that he is fallen and tainted by original sin. Instead of envisioning human beings in this way, Aristotle begins his account like a sociologist, who carefully examines the development, structure, and functioning of human society.

Notwithstanding the fact that humans are not to be envisioned in pre-political ways, Aristotle wants to claim that there is something in human beings that, above all else, makes them

---

2 Pol. 1252a6-10.
political. Consider first that Aristotle claims that man is “by nature a political animal.”\(^3\) On one reading, Aristotle seems to be saying that all people have a natural right to participate in politics—which would at least establish political equality, but this is not exactly what Aristotle has in mind. Aristotle communicates to us that politics is to be thought of as natural:

And why man is a political animal in a greater measure than any bee or any gregarious animal is clear. For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possesses speech … but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state.\(^4\)

Shown here, Aristotle describes animals, such as bees and ants, as political. The word political thus seems to enjoy a wide range of meanings. In its most common usage, the term can refer to how a state is to be organized; using the terms political would then signify the commonality that exists between associations of a lower scale, and perhaps suggests that this commonality is connected with something that is in common with the political animal. Reflecting on this term, it is possible to see how one is able to make sense of Aristotle’s claim that the \textit{polis} is the end of all human associations. In contrast to the bee, however, man is not defined as a gregarious (\textit{agelaios}) animal, a herd-loving animal. On Aristotle’s account, being sociable is not enough grounds to make a qualifiable distinction between an animal and a human being. For Aristotle, there is something more going on with speech. The sort of speech Aristotle has in mind isn’t merely just communicating—for if that were the case, we could say that animals have speech. Rather, the Greek sheds some insight here, for the term translated speech is \textit{logos}. Whereas man is placed among the genus of animals which form partnerships, the

---

\(^3\) ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν
\(^4\) \textit{Pol.} 1253a7-18.
specifically human kind of partnership is tied to the exercise of the specifically human capacity for *logos*.

For Aristotle, *logos* is more than using words to communicate with other creatures; *logos* is speech used with a political function. The distinctive quality of human beings is the capacity to exercise *logos*, a property which allows us to indicate between good and bad and right and wrong. Aristotle offers us a way to think about who humans are, which as we will see later on becomes crucial for how he thinks about the nature of political life. Aristotle begins small and makes his way to human society, the *polis*, which is identified from its inception in the natural human capacity for speech. In defining man as the animal having *logos*, Aristotle claims that man cannot but act under the influence of reason and speech. After all, speech is the fundamental phenomenon of specifically human life. Although humans are motivated by the same urges that lead certain animals—the social animals Aristotle refers to—to create what could be called families in a loose sense, something more is going on in human relationships. The formation of human relationships and partnerships through *logos* is a constituent aspect of the nature of human beings. Thus, insofar as humans develop their social relationships by the use of reason, they do so by nature, by an internal, essential principle derivative from *logos*.

Since man alone possesses a “perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities,” the political community may be called a community of moral perceptions. On this view, the *polis* is a place where different people can coexist, because man is not self-sufficient. Man is envisioned as one in need of friends and fellow citizens to realize the moral qualities that he has. Politics, then, does not so much arise because man leaves nature, but because man enters nature—that is, what is natural for man is for him to engage in politics,
through *logos*. Since this capacity facilitates the *polis*, and since animals capable of facilitating *poleis* are most political, humans are the most political of animals.

To say that the distinctive quality of man is *logos* is to deny any sort of foundation that attempts to conceive of human beings as irrational. Beginning with the human person as the initial locator point, Aristotle next turns to the *polis*, which is founded first and foremost in what can be called a community of conversation about the good and the bad and the right and the wrong. Aristotle remarks:

[M]an is by nature a political animal; and so even when men have no need of assistance from each other they nonetheless desire to live together. At the same time they are also brought together by common interest, so far as each achieves a share of the good life.\(^5\)

In restating that man is by nature a political animal, Aristotle reiterates the point that humans are animals who work together for some common end. Insofar as they are brought together by common interest, men also “come together and maintain the political partnership for the sake of life merely, for doubtless there is some element of value contained even in the mere state of being alive.”\(^6\) Associating together contains “some measure of well-being and of sweetness in its essential nature.”\(^7\) The point of political life—of coming together to form the *polis*—stems not primarily for the necessities of life. Instead, the *polis* results from the type of creatures that we are. Aristotle’s account here is seemingly historical, as he details how the *polis* derives out of simpler communities—namely, the community of marriage, the community of slave and master, and the community of the village.

Aristotle’s metaphysics bear on his argument here, for the whole consists of many parts, arranged together. The relevant theoretical question, therefore, is how these parts came to be

\(^5\) Pol. 1278b20-23.
\(^7\) Pol. 1278b30.
arranged. Is it that the arrangement is imposed on humans, or does it come about in some other way? Even then, the question remains: how does the polis come into being naturally? Isn’t there a crucially important difference between natural as used in relation to the social existence of other animals and natural used in relation to human institutions, devised by human rational reflection, such as a polis? The whole of Aristotle’s argument begins from his perception, confirmed by universal agreement, of a particular human drive to live well. That drive is doubly natural both in the sense that it is universal and, in the second sense, that how to satisfy it is a matter of dispute, depending in crucial respects on the specifically human capacity for logos.

To answer these questions, let’s begin with the first community: the community of marriage. In brief description, Aristotle claims that humans first came together in pairs because they could not exist apart. Quite simply, male and female joined for purposes of reproduction. Aristotle remarks that this process did not come about by means of deliberation. Rather, there is something natural about humans that make them want “to leave behind one another being of the same sort as oneself.” Starting with the drive for reproduction, Aristotle locates political rule in the human capacity to reproduce itself. He claims, “Also, as between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject.”

The next community Aristotle specifies is the one of “natural ruler and natural subject.” Here, Aristotle finds that slave and master came together for self-preservation. More precisely, they came together for security purposes. The relationship between the two was fitted by nature: “and friendship between slave and master in cases when they have been qualified by nature for

---

8 Pol. 1252a28-30.  
9 Pol. 1254b14-15.  
10 Pol. 1252a31.
these positions.”

In Aristotle’s mind, masters employed their intellect to rule, while natural slaves used their body to labor. In the text, Aristotle notes that barbarians and slaves share the same nature, an indication of the sort of political rule that constitutes the relationship between master and slave and Greek and non-Greek. In combination of the first two communities, Aristotle says that they create a household: the “partnership that comes about in the course of nature for everyday purposes is the house.”

After describing the first two communities, Aristotle discusses the third: the village. Aristotle details that when several households came together for “the satisfaction of not mere daily needs,” the village (kome) emerged. The village is a “colony from a household.” Thus Aristotle’s account of the development of the polis so far derives from the household and the village. These two are not two different things, but rather two stages in the generation of the same thing, which is the polis. To consider why this is the case, note that according to Aristotle, a community is necessarily a group with common interests. Households form a community to negotiate basic daily needs. They band together as villages for protection. The polis emerges only once these villages band together. In going through these different communities, Aristotle wants us to have a clear view of the polis, and to see it not as some artificial institution, but instead to see it as natural as life itself. Here, then, the next partnership to come together is the polis:

The partnership finally composed of several villages is the city-state; it has at last attained the limit of virtually complete self-sufficiency, and thus, while it comes into existence for the sake of life, it exists for the good life.

11 Pol. 1255b13-14.
12 Pol. 1252b12-14.
13 Pol. 1252b16-17.
14 Pol. 1252b18.
15 Pol. 1252b28-31.
Political life comes into existence for the sake of mere life and continues to exist for the sake of the good life. Aristotle takes it to be the fullest possible development and exercise of the capacities inherent in human nature. Recall Aristotle’s earlier assertion that humans are unique because they are the only animals that possess speech. Speech about such matters occurs in all of the various forms of human associations—the three ones detailed just above—because speech is simply the distinctive way of human nature. But only the polis, less bound than other forms of partnerships by the narrow constraints of necessity, permits—indeed demands—speech about more than mere life, about what Aristotle calls the good life. It is precisely in making sensible the start of the full development of logos that Aristotle regards the one who first brought a polis together as the greatest of benefactors: “Therefore the impulse to form a partnership of this kind is present in all men by nature; but the man who first united people in such a partnership was the greatest of benefactors.”

The claim is made that the polis is the end, and thus the nature, of the household and village because “each thing is when its growth is completed we speak of as being the nature of each thing.” These are reasons to think that the polis is the fully formed thing, and that the household is the same thing considered in its first growth and origin. In its development, the polis as a whole, constituted by the parts of the household (the relations between master and slave and husband and wife), grows out of these smaller communities. Its most basic parts (the relations within a household) arise from these smaller communities. The household and the village are the first stages of the polis, and as such they have a form identical to the fully developed polis. Aristotle’s tripartite division between the household, the village, and the polis...
are not to be understood as three different entities. Rather, they are one and the same entity. The *polis* is natural inasmuch as it is reproduced from these earlier communities. At its inception, the *polis* is found in the household, and then come more complex arrangements of the village.

To understand the logic at work here, consider why each community culminates in the *polis*. First, note that the *polis* exists for the good life. Whatever the good life is, it is rooted in something distinct about human nature. To be sure, the good life is only actualized in the *polis*, and it is in some way connected to Aristotle’s understanding of teleology. Locating what it means to be human as the capacity for moral reasoning, the *polis*, for Aristotle, provides the stage for which humans can actualize their potential for good actions. Aristotle writes:

[W]hile the object of a state is the good life, these things [friendship] are means to that end. And a state is the partnership of clans and villages in a full and independent life, which in our view constitutes a happy and noble life; the political fellowship must therefore be deemed to exist for the sake of noble actions, not merely for living in common.\(^{18}\)

The *polis* exists for performing noble actions, which is connected to Aristotle’s claim that man’s *telos* is rational activity, actualized only in the context of the *polis*. Using a body analogy, Aristotle wants to say that the human person, divorced from his *telos*, becomes meaningless: “since when the whole body is destroyed, foot or hand will not exist except in an equivocal sense … because a hand in those circumstances will be a hand spoiled.”\(^{19}\) 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 noble actions. In connection to this claim, Aristotle is explicit in the *Ethics* to argue

---

\(^{18}\) 1280b41-43.  
\(^{19}\) 1253a22-25.
for the importance of virtue; perhaps the *polis* helps toward that end in that it exists for the sake of noble actions:

For even though it be the case that the Good is the same for the individual and for the state, nevertheless, the good of the state is manifestly greater and more perfect good, both to attain and to preserve. To secure the good of one person only is better than nothing; but to secure the good of a nation or a state is a nobler and more divine achievement.20

Aristotle accepts that the purpose of the *polis* is to secure the good of the *polis*. The *polis*, in seeking the Good, works in accordance with virtue and the good life. The *polis*, envisioned in this way, is multilayered; it acts for its own sake, which is virtue. It is self-sufficient, and yet those who make it up are not self-sufficient. It is the partnership that can be called a partnership in moral reasoning. Notice how Aristotle arrives at this position through asserting that securing “the good of a nation or a state is a nobler and more divine achievement.” Once again, Aristotle casts away any indication that man is to be conceived in ways that are separated from any contextual partnership. “To secure the good of one person only is better than nothing,” is evidence that the *polis* is more important to Aristotle than any single person. Aristotle prioritizes the community over the individual, thinking that the whole is necessarily prior to its parts.

In thinking about the naturalness of the *polis*, Aristotle offers several supporting claims. First, the *polis* exists by nature in part because it develops from what can be called more primitive natural associations. These associations culminate in the *polis* in their connection to moral reasoning and the good life. Insofar as speech of this sort also takes place in the lower tier associations of the household and village, the *polis* represents not a discontinuous break with such associations but rather their fulfillment. Second, the *polis* alone obtains self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*), which denotes a certain level of independence. The pivot of the argument here is *this*

---

drive, implying not being dependent on others. Does this mean having everything or lacking nothing? If one reads it in this way, then the conception of self-sufficiency in view is not completely obvious and perhaps may lack the insight needed to understand the connection between the different communities Aristotle charts out. Self-sufficiency appears to be tied to the good life:

It follows that the lowest limit for the existence of a state is when it consists of a population that reaches the minimum number that is self-sufficient for the purpose of living the good life after the manner of a political community.²¹

The *polis* is self-sufficient with regard to the good life insofar as humans are able to live well. This idea is related to the size of the population of the *polis*, and sheds light on Aristotle’s initial contention that not all have the inherent capacities to lead a good life. In light of this, the city is self-sufficient just in case it has a diverse population. A population is diverse when it is made up of different types of people who perform different types of tasks. Here, it seems like Aristotle is getting at what Plato saw as the principle of specialization, where each member of the political community is assigned one of three roles in the *Republic*. In the same way that a child cannot be called self-sufficient, because they depend on others to be nourished, clothed, and housed, the household and the village are in different degrees not fully able to satisfy the economic and security needs of their members. Only the *polis* is fully capable of meeting those needs, the needs of mere life. But the *polis* is not only a necessary means for achieving economic self-sufficiency, for it alone exists for the sake of living well. Understanding how the *polis* is self-sufficient does not mean that it has literally everything and lacks nothing. The end of the

---

²¹ *Pol.* 1326b8-9.
polis is self-sufficiency, because the polis is fully developed. Attached to this idea is the claim that the polis alone has the potential to fully satisfy our unique human capacity for logos.

While Aristotle’s conception of self-sufficiency has within it a component of virtue, Aristotle wants to deny the sort of individualism that would hold that the individual is to be conceived in ways separated from the setting of the polis. Human beings are by nature political animals, because nature, which does nothing in vain, has equipped them with speech. Such communication is decisive for the formation of the household and the polis. The point of Aristotle’s argument is not to deny that political life has nothing in common with other forms of animal and human community, but to show that the specifically political form of human community is such that it constitutes a whole of which households however natural, universal, and biologically necessary, are parts, and parts that are regulated and limited by the activity of the whole.

As something natural, the polis can be explained as a whole and the individuals as the parts of that whole. The claim that the polis-individual relation is one of parts and wholes is centered on the fact that individuals isolated from the polis are not self-sufficient. Self-sufficiency is the level needed to realize human natural ends; without a doubt, it permits the pursuit of the good life. Unless an individual is a lower animal or a god, his realization of his natural end is only possible in the polis. Therefore, the individual depends on the polis. Understood in this way, the polis does not depend on any particular individuals, because the polis is prior by nature to the individual. This confirms the more general metaphysical claim that natural wholes are necessarily prior to their parts.

Fundamentally, we have Aristotle make a claim that the polis is naturally prior to the household (and to the individual) not temporally or in terms of universal biological necessity but
ontologically. The *polis* alone, he implies, is the association in which the human capacity for *logos* develops to its fullest extent. Though not made explicit, we can infer that the household also involves a sharing of perceptions via reasoning and discourse of the good and the bad and the right and the wrong. However, it is only in the *polis* that one is able to fully develop the activity of human life as defined by reasoning and discourse. As such, the *polis* is more fully a community of speaking and reasoning than the household. Of course, both are driven and constrained by biological necessity, by nature in its broad sense. But in the *polis*, the realm and power of speech and reason—the realm and power of human choice shaped by speech and reason—reaches its natural limits.

By grounding the *polis* in nature, Aristotle suggests that it exists for natural ends, which are necessarily good. As such, the sort of laws and customs that will be brought out by the *polis* will naturally be just. Humans, the political animals that they are, have a natural desire to rule. And to that end, justice will serve the *polis* as it relates to the good life. Political life serves the natural ends of the *polis*, as its existence is absolutely necessary for human beings, who are political by nature. Hinting at what is perhaps the grounding for Aristotle’s account, the ancients sought to discover what made humans distinct. For Aristotle, it was politics.

The *polis* is natural for the reason that it arranges and rearranges our common lives in response to our capacity to utilize *logos* in the process of debate, argument, and choice among options in a response to politics. Indeed, Aristotle’s account of the human person guides the way he thinks about the nature of political life. Man’s political nature makes him suited for life in the *polis*. The practice of politics done in the right way, as described by Aristotle, serves to cultivate the good life, an active life lived in accordance with virtue. Aristotle’s political thought is
grounded in this conception, and this conception is located in the very nature of the natural *polis* itself and of ourselves.
Works Cited
