

*The word 'State' is traceable to the Greek root word, Polis meaning 'City'. Plato in his argument about the natural basis for society argues that the state grows out of the nature of the individual. The state for him is a natural institution because it reflects the structure of human nature. The origin of the state is a reflection of man's economic needs.*

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# Aristotle's notion of common good

## *Noção de bem comum em Aristóteles*

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### Abstract

Aristotle is one of the greatest political philosophers of Greek history. In his book, *Politics*, we read about Aristotle's political treatise. His notion of the common good is depicted in his effort to portray what the ideal state should be. They could be inferred from his organization or arrangement and functions of the component parts of the state. Here, Aristotle made it explicit that man is made to live in the society and not in solitude. It is pertinent that man lives in a society, hence the name *zoon politikon*, that is, political animal or political being. It is from the natural origin that the state is later formed; that is from the family, the village, then many villages and finally the state. But the state is ordered to be self-sufficient. The current political challenges in the world can be addressed reasonably with the philosophical ideology of Aristotle. This paper intends to reveal this Aristotelian ideologies as a possible remedy to the current political problems in the world.

**Keywords:** State. Citizens. Common good.

### Resumo

Aristóteles é um dos maiores filósofos políticos da história grega. Em seu livro *Politics*, lemos sobre o tratado político de Aristóteles. Sua noção do bem comum é retratada em seu esforço de abordar o que deveria ser o Estado ideal. Eles poderiam ser inferidos de sua organização ou arranjo e funções das partes componentes do Estado. Neste caso, Aristóteles tornou explícito que o homem é feito para viver na sociedade e não na solidão. É pertinente que o homem viva em uma sociedade, o que origina o nome *zoon politikon*, isto é, animal político ou ser político. É da origem natural

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que o Estado é formado mais tarde; isto é, da família, da aldeia, seguida de muitas aldeias e finalmente do Estado. Mas o Estado é ordenado a ser autossuficiente. Os atuais desafios políticos no mundo podem ser abordados de maneira razoável com a ideologia filosófica de Aristóteles. Este trabalho pretende revelar essas ideologias aristotélicas como uma solução possível para os problemas políticos atuais no mundo.

**Palavras-chave:** Estado. Cidadãos. Bem comum.

## Introduction

For Aristotle, every community is formed for the sake of some good, and the state being the supreme and all-embracing community aims at the highest good which he recognized as 'a happy life' that is, the life of happiness and fulfillment. And this level of life is reached when the common good is established in the state. Furthermore, he defines the state which the people form for self-sufficiency as;

An association and that every association is formed with a view to some good purpose ... that association which is most sovereign among them all and embraces all others will aim highest, that is, at the most sovereign of all goods.<sup>1</sup>

The association described above is what Aristotle calls the state, which as well is political. Then in the organization of the ideal state, Aristotle places much emphasis on the family. He saw the family as a natural creation and as such an avenue where man could develop some of his natural endowments through socialization. The family provides man with that root, which is basic to bring men together since it contributes to the good life of each. For him, men agree to enter into political society in order to achieve together their common good which they could not achieve apart.

According to Aristotle, good is that which all things aim at. And the state originating in the bare needs of life exists for the sake of good life. Every community is formed for the sake of some good, and the state being the supreme and all-embracing community must aim at the supreme good. This consists of happiness (*Eudaimonia*). This happiness according to Aristotle is a good for man and complete in itself. It is thus within the three-fold structure of the state; the family, villages and state; that he could adequately answer the question of social justice and equality thereby establishing the common good.

## Origin and nature of the state

The word 'State' is traceable to the Greek root word, *Polis* meaning 'City'. Plato in his argument about the natural basis for society argues that the state grows out of the nature of the individual. The state for him is a natural

institution because it reflects the structure of human nature. The origin of the state is a reflection of man's economic needs. For him a state comes into existence because no individual is self-sufficient; we all have many needs. To this he writes;

Our many needs require skills and no one possesses all the skills needed to produce food, shelter and clothing, to say nothing of the various arts... more easily and better done when everyman is set free from other occupations to do at the right, the one thing for which he is naturally fitted.<sup>2</sup>

Aristotle traces the State back to its generative components, namely, the family which develops from natural pair of man and woman, household, villages and state. The state for him, being the apex of human associations provides for the men's needs. Therefore the state exists by nature. He says it is evident that the state is a creation of nature and that man is by nature a political animal. So closely does he relate man and the state that he concludes that;

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 tribeless, lawless, heartless one; whom Homer denounces, the natural outcast is forthwith a lover of war; he may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts.<sup>3</sup>

Man has to live in the state in order to realize his full humanity for nature has made him a social being. Aristotle calls the state a political community (*Koinonia politike*). For him, the ideal state must be synonymous with sharing of various kinds-social life, political offices and ownership of property. Though on sharing of social life he criticized total sharing like that of wives based on extreme type of unity advocated by Plato. Rather, he advocated that plurality and variety natural to the state be promoted. Also on the ownership of property, he recommends generally, private ownership combine with common use. And an ungrudging distribution of goods to all citizens. This will involve the civil virtue of justice in the state.

Hence, what is necessary is the maximum quantity necessary and useful for the proper discharge of the functions of the state. According to Aristotle, the population of the state should not be so large as to destroy the law guiding the State.

Barker stresses this thus;

Teleology and doctrine of the mean thus combine to prove, that the ideal state is one not too populous for citizens and magistrates to be mutually acquainted, and yet populous enough to be self-sufficient. A great population only means difficulties of government.<sup>4</sup>

It would appear then that the teleological method supplies a limit of

size which makes the state no longer than a municipality which divides its member into effective participants and necessary but not integral contribution. Again, Aristotle maintains the view that in the ideal state, the quality of the soil must make its inhabitants independent of foreign supply. It was necessary, for it provided a framework for the satisfaction of basic wants and also ensured a means to ensure and realize good life in a uniquely human sense. An individual found fulfillment from the advantages made possible by the state through its common endeavours.

## Types of state

Aristotle did not lose sight of the fact that every political community should have a government that is guiding it. This need for a competent government, led Aristotle to postulate three true forms of government which is administered either by one, a few or many persons. For the sake of the common good. He expresses thus;

We maintain that the true forms of government are three, that the best must be that which is administered by the best, and in which there is one man, or a whole family, or many persons, excelling all the others together in virtue, and both rulers and subjects are fitted...In such manner as to attain the most eligible life.<sup>5</sup>

According to Aristotle, true forms of government are those governments in which the one, or a few, or the many, govern with a view of the common interest. Thus, he recognizes the following as true forms of government:

I. Polity: This is the rule of the majority for the common good.

II. Aristocracy: This is the government of the few rulers, the Aristocrats. For Aristotle, this government is called Aristocracy either because; the rulers are the best men, or because they have at heart the best interests of the state and the citizens.<sup>6</sup>

III. Monarchy: This is the government of one ruler, the monarch. Aristotle went further to classified those governments which govern for their own private gain or interest as perverted forms of government. He expresses it thus;

But those which regard only the interest of the rulers are all defective and perverted forms, for they are despotic, whereas a state is a community of freemen.<sup>7</sup>

The perverted forms appeared as a deviation from the true forms of governments. They include:

I Tyranny: This is the government of one man.

II Oligarchy: This is the government of a few with rich rulers.

III Democracy: This is the government of the mob, of the many.

These governments have the private good as their subject matter, while relegating the common good to the background. As to which of these deviations is the worst; Aristotle identified tyranny as the worst form of government, followed by oligarchy, and democracy: the tolerable of the three. He thereby provided qualified support for democracy. However, among this classification of government, Aristotle pointed out that monarchy and aristocracy were best suited for ideal forms of state, since goodness was their aim. Thus, the best form of government is predicted on man's goodness, since good people make good state. He advocated for Aristocracy chiefly because, even though ideally an individual of exceptional excellence would be desirable, such persons do not exist in sufficient frequency.

In Aristocracy is the rule of a group of men whose degree of excellence, achievement and ownership of property make them responsible, and capable of command. They are not easily corrupted by wrong influences. They are men of the middle class. Aristotle saw in rule by the middle class fulfillment of two important political ideals: equality, and consensus. Its civility would smoothen the rough edges in society, for it would know how to simultaneously command and obey as free people. It would be a bulwark against selfishness, tyranny, unlawfulness and instability. History however, convinces Aristotle that the best government for all men is constitutional government that is, polity. It aims at an equal share in government freedom, wealth and excellence. This possible best is democracy, a government that has legislative, executive and judiciary arms. Experience till date has taught that human liberty a value so precious to humans, is better guaranteed in a democratic state. We are yet to see an alternative to democracy.

## Functions of the state

The state, according to Aristotle, was the highest form of political union, for it represented the pinnacle of social evolution. Its primary function is the constitution of a community (communion) of families and aggregation of families in well-being. This is for the sake of a perfect and self-sufficing life. The state was an instrument for an individual's self-perfection. It was necessary, for it provided a framework for the satisfaction of basic wants and also ensured a means to secure and realize good life in a uniquely human sense. An individual finds fulfillment from the advantages made possible by a state through its common endeavours.

For Aristotle, the state is established for the provision of the common good of its members. A state exists not for the sake of life only but a good life. On this he said;

The state exists for the sake of a good life and not for the sake of life only; also the state is the union of families and villages in a perfect and self-sufficient life, by which we mean a happy and honorable life.<sup>8</sup>

Not only is human nature in its natural order, is predisposed to the state for completion, the state as every other community finds the reason and order of its being in the nature of the person. The state comes into existence in the first instance to preserve life for families and villages, which in the long run are not self-sufficient. It is a means for human nature with its needs and capacity for completion in the attainment of full humanity. Therefore, the state exists as a horizon of values making possible individual goods of the society. As a horizon of values and condition for realization of full humanity of its members, the state possesses a supra-individual and enduring being of its own. Yet without individuals there can be no state, for the state exists for the common good of the individuals. Beyond the economic end, the function of the state is to ensure the supreme good of man, namely his moral and intellectual life which summarily means happiness.

The state is the highest form of association. It is the most sovereign of communities which embraces all others, and aims at good in the highest order. Aristotle expresses it thus;

The state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.<sup>9</sup>

Man as a political animal, is distinctively the only being that dwells in the state. Thus this living in the state is to enable him realize his full humanity. Aristotle strongly believes that the arts of civilization are attainable only within the state. In his work *The Politics*, he highlighted some characteristic functions of the state as;

That there must be food, arts, for life requires instruments. There must be arms for the members of a community have need of them ... and in order to maintain authority both against disobedient subjects and against external assailments; there must be a certain amount of revenue, both for internal needs and for the purpose of war. Rather first there must be a power of deciding what is for the public interest, and what is just in men's dealing with another.<sup>10</sup>

## Relationship between the states and citizens

It is important to emphasize that for Aristotle, political philosophy is more embracing that it is for us with regard to the relation that should exist between the citizens and the state. According to Aristotle, the state exists for the sake of a good life, and not for the sake of life only, because if life only were the object, slaves and brute animals might form a state but they cannot, for they have no share in happiness or in life of free choice. Nor does the state exist for the sake of exchange and mutual intercourse. Hence, it may be further inferred that virtue must be the ease of a state which is truly so called and not merely enjoys the name, and law is only a

convention surety to one another of justice. Hence, it is clear then that a state is not merely a society, having a common place, established for the prevention of mutual crime and for the sake of exchange. Rather, the state exists for the sake of noble actions. Its end is the good life and not for mere companionship.

But a state is composite, like any other whole made of many parts: these are the citizens, who compose it: it is evident therefore that we must begin by asking who is a citizen and what is the meaning of the term? For here there may be difference of opinion. He who is a citizen in a democracy will often not be citizen in an oligarchy. Leaving out of consideration those who have been made citizens, or who obtained the name "citizen" in any other accidental manner, we may say, first that a citizen is not a citizen because he lives in a certain place, for resident aliens and slaves share in the place; nor is he a citizen who has no legal right except that of suing and being sued. Thus the citizen whom we are seeking to define is a citizen in the strictest sense whose special characteristic is that he shares in the administration of any state.

Aristotle defines a citizen as he who has the power to take part in the administration of any state. To buttress this point, he stresses;

He who has the power to take part in the deliberative or judicial administration of any state is said by us to be a citizen of that state; and speaking generally, a state is a body of citizens sufficing for the purposes of life.<sup>11</sup>

It is within the community that individual could realize himself. This community is the state; and the virtue of the citizen must therefore be relative to the state of which he is a member. A citizen must know how to rule and obey because it has been well said that "he who has never learned to obey cannot be a good commander". Therefore, a good citizen must have the intelligence and the ability to rule and be ruled. He should know how to govern like a free man and to obey like a freeman as these are the virtue of citizen.

Consequently, the state exists for the good life of man. And man has to live in the state for full humanity. Hence, it is the responsibility of all to work towards the provision and realization of the existential end (common good) for the common good is fostered and advanced both by the citizens and by the state. This means that both should contribute their respective quota towards the realization of the common good. For the good life of the state exists only in the good lives of its citizens.

## Effects of common good in the state

Aristotle maintains that the state is established for the sake of the common good. It is for the common good do men congregate and establish a government that guides the citizenry towards the common good. Hence, the common good should be seen as that which is to the benefit of the generality. This entails that each and every citizen must have a fair share of the common

good provided by the state. The doctrine of common good comes into play via the distinction between justice as applied to the general and to the particulars. Justice applied in the general sense is of virtue. It implies the relationship of every member of a community as a part is to the whole.

Moreover, Aristotle gives concern to the import of virtue and law in the attainment of the common good in the state. Thus, he writes;

Whence it may be further inferred that virtue must be the care of a state which is truly so called... for without this end the community becomes a mere alliance which differ only in place from alliances of which the members live apart; and law is only a convention, a surety to one another of justice<sup>12</sup>

Virtues are means; they are states of character which tend by their own nature to do the acts (things) by which they are produced and they are in our power and voluntary. Without the practice of virtue (justice) in the state, common good would be difficult if not impossible to attain. And when the common good is not guaranteed, the happiness of the citizens would not be realized. Aristotle argues that a state cannot be happy unless it prospers; but it cannot prosper unless it does good actions, and it cannot do good things or actions unless it has virtue. For him the realization of the common interest in the state is dependent on virtue, since virtue (of justice) involves the fulfillment of one's function or responsibility.

Thus, justice is essential in the state in order that the common interest be attained and not the private interest of any individual. Consequently, when justice is maintained and laws obeyed by the citizens, the common good of the populace will be guaranteed. Hitherto, the cravings of the citizen are satisfied and their wanton attitude towards materialism will cease. But, when justice is perverted and lawlessness rules, injustice is enthroned. Injustice is;

A special vice, in so far as it regards a special object, namely the common good which it (condemns); and yet it is a general vice, as regards the intensions, since contempt of the common good may lead to all kinds of sin.<sup>13</sup>

Hence, when justice is perverted, injustice dares the vulnerable state of the people and the common good is threatened. Given this, the rights of the citizens are trampled upon. Emanating from this will be socio-political unrest. Concerning this, we can say, the effects of the common good in the state is two-fold; positive and negative.

(I) Positive effects: Peace, self-sufficiency, morally sound citizens, progress and stupendous development are achieved.

(II) Negative effects: In this realm, injustice opens the door for other crimes/vices such as lack of respect for the rights of others, interference with the duties and responsibilities of others.

In order to silence these negative effects, it expedient to prepare the seminal ground for the (growth and) actualization of the common good and its perpetuation.

## Conclusion

Law and justice are recognized by Aristotle as important criterion with regard to the end of the state. He took a cue from Plato's suggestion in the laws were necessary for a moral and civilized life. However, civility of law was possible if one perceived law as wisdom accumulated over the ages and generations resulting from customs, both written and unwritten. Law as contended by Aristotle gave to the magistrate and the subject; the ruler and ruled a moral quality and dignity respectively.

In Aristotle's conception, law itself is sovereign, that is, there is no power supreme over law. It enjoys courage, continence and consideration; commanding and forbidding. Extolling the relevance and supremacy of law as a mark of a good state and a good ruler, Aristotle writes;

As a supreme authority or power, law is identified with reason; it is defined as dispassionate reason, thus in man reason is close neighbor of many passions and can hardly be heard for their clamour. For Aristotle, law is order, and good law is good order; for law is essential for political stability in the state. Law speaks of the good of its subject is also a government in accordance with law and justice. Both law and justice help to make the individual members of the state good. Without law and justice, man would be the worst of all animals. Aristotle captured this notion when he writes;

For man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, he is the all; 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 worst ends.<sup>14</sup>

The concern Aristotle gives to law and justice springs from his concept of a perfect society. Here, law and justice are observed; and the existential end is realized. Hence, the individual members of the society are happy. Both Plato and Aristotle recognized the importance of law and justice in the state. Aristotle strongly believed that the primary task of a law was to ensure justice. This is because; it is by the practice of justice that the existential end of the state could be realized.

A lawless man is an unjust man; and a law-abiding man is a just man. Aristotle writes;

The lawless man was seen to be unjust and the law-abiding man just, evidently all lawful acts are in a sense just act; for the acts laid down by the legislative are lawful and each of these, we say, is just.<sup>15</sup>

Justice exists only between men whose mutual relations are governed by law; and law exists also for men between whom there is injustice.

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