

Aristotle

Introduction: Aristotle vs Plato

Let's set the stage for one of the greatest intellectual debates of all time—**Aristotle vs Plato**.

Plato believed that **reality is the shadow of idea**—that what we see around us is merely an **illusion**, and the true reality exists in the world of perfect, eternal **Forms**. But **Aristotle** strongly disagreed. He argued that **idea is not independent of matter, but is present in matter itself**. For him, reality was not something far away—it was here, in the **material world**, waiting to be studied and understood.

Aristotle shifted the focus from **metaphysical idealism** to **practical governance, observation, and logic**. While Plato imagined radical reforms and ideal states, **Aristotle was conservative**. He placed great importance on **institutions like property and the family**, believing they were **essential for social stability** and order.

Teaching and the Lyceum

Aristotle's Lyceum—a place where philosophy met practical wisdom.

Aristotle taught at the Lyceum, and unlike Plato, who chased abstract ideals, Aristotle promoted **empirical and logical inquiry**. He believed that knowledge must come from **common sense and experience**, not just lofty ideas. His book "**Politics**" remains a **foundational political text**, shaping how we understand governance even today.

For Aristotle, a ruler needed to be **worldly wise, not lost in abstract wisdom**. He championed **pragmatism**—arguing that we must **strive for the best practicable** rather than **sacrificing the good for the best**. His famous remark, "**I would rather take leave than hemlock**," perfectly reflects this practical attitude.

Aristotle also gave us the timeless concept of the **golden mean**—**virtue lies equidistant between extremes**. For example, **courage** is the balance between **cowardice and foolhardiness**. This, he believed, was the secret to a balanced and ethical life.

Teleology: School of Destiny

Aristotle's most profound ideas—**Teleology, the School of Destiny**.

Aristotle believed in **teleology**—the idea that **everything develops toward its own perfection and completeness**. Nothing in nature is random. **The function of a thing is to fulfil the purpose it was designed for**. Just like a seed is meant to grow into a tree, every being and institution has a **natural destiny**.

This is where Aristotle's **functional theory** comes in. It explains that every natural process exists for a reason and serves a **specific purpose**.

And here's the beauty of it—this **teleological view** doesn't just apply to objects or living beings. It applies to **humans, institutions, and even the state**. A human's purpose is to achieve their highest potential, while the state's purpose is to help its citizens lead a **good, virtuous life**.

Theory of State and Sociability

Theory of State and Sociability—a concept that defines why we live together as communities.

Aristotle begins with a powerful statement: **“Man is by nature a social animal.”** We are not driven solely by self-interest. **Every community is established with a view to some good**, and among all communities, the **state is the highest good**—because it serves the well-being of the **entire community**.

He explains that **the state comes into existence for the sake of life but continues for the sake of the good life**. Without the state, man cannot fully realize his potential. **Anyone who lives outside the state is either a beast or a god, but not a man**.

The state, for Aristotle, **emerges through stages**:
individual → family → village → state.

Chronologically, **man is prior to the state, but logically, the state is prior to man**—a view that even echoes Socrates.

Three Communities: Family, Village, State

Three Communities: Family, Village, State—the foundation of his political philosophy.

Aristotle believed that human life evolves through **three levels of community**.

1. **Family**: This is the first and most basic community. It is based on a **strict hierarchy**—parent over child, master over servant—and here, there is **no free choice**. The family exists to fulfill basic needs like survival and reproduction.
2. **Village**: When several families come together, they form a **village**. At this stage, **sociability is purely instinctual**—people cooperate out of necessity, not reason.
3. **State**: The highest and most developed community. Here, people engage in **free speech, deliberation, and collective decision-making**. This ability to **debate, reason, and seek justice** is what truly **distinguishes humans from animals**.

For Aristotle, the **state** is where humans achieve their full potential and live the **good life**.

Citizenship and Civic Republicanism

For Aristotle, **citizenship was not a right, but a responsibility**. And not everyone qualified as a citizen. He **excluded**:

- **Slaves**—because they lacked the **capacity for reason**.
- **Women**—as they were seen as **family-bound**.
- **Children**—because they lacked **maturity**.
- **Old people**—since they were **physically weak**.

Who, then, were citizens? **Adult Greek propertied men**—the **men of reason**—those who had the **leisure and luxury** to actively participate in governance.

For Aristotle, **participation is a duty, not just an identity**. Citizens must engage in **deliberation, adjudication, and the affairs of the state**. This is the essence of **civic republicanism**—the idea that **being political is a responsibility**.

The modern philosopher **Hannah Arendt** beautifully echoed this when she described man as **Zoon Politikon**—a **political animal** defined not just by reason but by **action**.

Law and the Statesman

For Aristotle, **law is not just a dictate or command**. It is a **means of maintaining equilibrium** between **competing and conflicting interests** in society. Without law, governance would collapse into chaos or tyranny.

He makes a powerful distinction:

The **authority of the statesman** is not like that of a **master**. A master has **absolute power over family and slaves**, but a statesman is **bound by the rule of law**.

Aristotle believed that **law is reason without passion**. Just as reason guides us to what we **should or shouldn't do**, law does the same. **Law and reason are two sides of the same coin**.

Unlike Plato's **Philosopher King (PK)**, whose rule is **personal**, law reflects **collective wisdom**—it is **time-tested, impartial, and enduring**.

Slavery: Functional Utility and the State

Aristotle's controversial view on **Slavery: Functional Utility and the State**—an idea that has drawn both admiration and criticism over centuries.

Aristotle believed that **slavery is natural and desirable**, and he based this on **functionalism**—the belief that every individual has a natural role. According to him:

- Those who are **physically strong** are **fit for slave labour**.
- Those who are **mentally strong** are **fit to be masters**—they make decisions and have the **courage to face consequences**.

For Aristotle, **slaves were essential for economic utility and productive labour**. Why? Because their work **freed the master** to participate in **civic affairs** and focus on **developing virtue**.

He even argued that a **slave, through the company of the master, might improve in reason** and gain a chance to **develop virtue**.

But these ideas clash sharply with the **modern age of human rights and dignity**. Thinkers like **Immanuel Kant** rejected this view, insisting that **each man is an end in himself, never a means to an end**.

Property and Social Responsibility

Aristotle saw **property** not just as wealth, but as a **source of motivation** and **social stability**. He made a clear distinction between:

- **Just property** – **acquired through labour**, which he respected.

- **Unjust property – acquired through lending or exploitation**, which he opposed.

For Aristotle, **property encourages self-work, creates stakes in stability, and supports men of reason**. It also inspires **charity**—because those who own should give back.

He also classified **ownership types**:

1. **Common ownership, common use**: When everyone owns everything, **no one feels responsible**—leading to waste and **unproductivity**.
2. **Common ownership, individual use**: **Illogical and impractical**.
3. **Individual ownership, common use**: **Productive and beneficial**, since people maintain what they own while society still benefits.

Finally, Aristotle believed the **rich should share**, not just out of morality, but because **man is a social animal**. Sharing acknowledges the contributions of others and ensures **stability and peace**—an idea later echoed in **Gandhi's trusteeship**.

Constitution: Comparative Method and Classification

Aristotle was not just a philosopher but a **political scientist**. He used both **inductive** (particular to general) and **deductive** (general to particular) methods to study politics. By analyzing **158 constitutions**, his approach became **truly comparative**—focused on real, functioning governments.

Classification of Regimes

Number of Rulers	Purpose – Interest of People	Corrupted Form – Interest of Ruling Class
One	Monarch / Philosopher King – Best	Tyranny – Worst
Few	Aristocracy	Oligarchy
Many	Polity – Best Practicable & Middle Path	Democracy – 2nd Worst

- **Polity**: A **balanced government based on moderation**—where there is neither extreme wealth nor poverty, neither arrogance nor ignorance.
- **Oligarchy**: A **rule of the rich that fails due to disobedience to law**, as the poor distrust the wealthy.
- **Democracy**: A system of the masses, but must **avoid the rise of demagogues** who manipulate people.

Aristotle believed in **proportionate equality** (merit-based), not absolute equality. As he said: **“It is unjust to treat equals unequally; it is equally unjust to treat unequals equally.”**

Justice: Practical and Proportionate

Unlike Plato, whose justice was **abstract and philosophical**, **Aristotle's justice is practical**. He believed that justice must operate **in real life**, with fairness tailored to situations and people.

Aristotle divided justice into **two key components**:

1. **Distributive justice:** This is about **allocating honours, rewards, or resources based on merit**. For example, the most deserving should receive the highest honour or share.
2. **Rectificatory justice:** This focuses on **harm, punishment, and compensation**—restoring balance when someone has been wronged.

Crucially, Aristotle supported **proportionate justice**, not blind equality. He argued that **individuals should be treated based on what they deserve**, not equally in all respects. Giving everyone the same, regardless of merit, would be as unjust as showing unfair favouritism.

Revolution: Causes and Cures

Aristotle believed that **revolutions don't just erupt suddenly—they have deep roots**. He identified **general causes** that apply to every society:

- A **feeling of inequality**, whether **real or imagined**.
- The **universal passion for power and privilege**—what Nietzsche later called the “**will to power**.”
- **Carelessness and corruption** among leaders.
- A growing **gap in income and wealth**—a concern echoed by **Thomas Piketty** today.
- Giving **undue importance to any one group or person**—similar to **Marx's class conflict**.
- **Rivalry between classes**.
- **Inflow of foreigners**, changing social dynamics.
- Any **disproportionate increase in power or influence** within the state.

Aristotle noted that **change is inevitable, but many resist it**, leading to **paradigm conflicts** and instability.

Regime-Specific Causes:

- **Monarchy:** family quarrels, jealousy, conspiracies.
- **Oligarchy:** the poor conspiring against the rich.
- **Democracy:** the rise of **demagogue leaders** who exploit emotions.

Solutions (Cures):

Aristotle believed the way to prevent revolutions is to:

- **Cultivate obedience to law.**
- **Educate citizens in civic virtues.**
- **Inculcate patriotism** to unite people.

His insights remain **remarkably relevant today**, visible in movements like the **Arab Spring** or recent political unrest in **West Africa**.

Aristotle's Legacy

Aristotle's Legacy—a thinker who shaped how we understand politics, society, and life itself.

Aristotle is rightly called the **Father of Political Science**. Unlike Plato's abstract ideals, Aristotle grounded his philosophy in **what is practicable**—what works in **real life**. He built a framework that still guides political thought today.

His **contributions are immense**:

- The **comparative method**—studying **158 constitutions** to learn from real examples.
- The principle of the **rule of law**—where reason, not passion, governs.
- His **teleology**—believing everything moves toward its **purpose and perfection**.
- Nuanced theories of **justice, citizenship, and revolution**—all deeply connected to the realities of human nature.

Aristotle offered a model that **bridges reason and action**, reminding us that politics is not just about ideals, but about creating a society where people can **live the good life**.

Modern connections to Aristotle's concepts

1. Democracy & Rule of Law – The U.S. Power Struggle

Aristotle warned that **democracy can slip into tyranny** when leaders chase power unchecked. Look at the U.S. today—debates over executive overreach under Trump's second term have raised alarms. Aristotle would say, "*When passion overtakes reason, law loses its power.*" His **rule of law** as "**reason without passion**" is the antidote to such chaos.

2. Deliberation & Civic Republicanism – Citizens' Assemblies

Have you seen the rise of **citizen assemblies** in Europe and beyond? These spaces allow ordinary people to debate policies—just like Aristotle's vision of **collective deliberation**. He believed the wisdom of many, when guided by reason, can surpass the brilliance of a few. He would smile at these experiments and say, "*Here lies true democracy—debate, reason, and action!*"

3. Citizenship & Social Change – Civil Rights

The **Civil Rights movement** in the U.S. expanded the meaning of citizenship beyond legal identity, bringing moral and social equality. This reflects Aristotle's belief that a **citizen must not only live in the state but shape it through civic virtue**. He'd call these activists *true citizens*, because they combined **reason with action**—the heart of **Zoon Politikon**.

4. Teleology & Governance – Welfare States

Scandinavian nations, with their focus on **collective welfare and the good life**, echo Aristotle's **teleology**—that the **state exists not just for survival but for the highest good**. He would see their

policies—free education, healthcare, equality—as modern attempts to achieve the **good life for all**, which was his ultimate goal of politics.

5. AI Ethics & Aristotelian Virtue

Today, even AI scientists are borrowing Aristotle’s wisdom! They are trying to design **AI systems with virtues** like fairness and temperance. Aristotle believed **virtue is cultivated by practice and reason**, and applying this to AI means machines could learn to act ethically. Imagine Aristotle saying, *“If even machines can learn virtue, why not humans?”*

PYQ - [Day 3 & 4]

1. "Explain the Aristotelian view of politics. To what extent do you think it has contributed to the development of modern-day constitutional democracies?" 2021, 20
2. Everywhere, inequality is a cause of revolution- Aristotle. Comment. 2017, 15
3. Comment on: Aristotle’s Conception of Equality. 2015, 10
4. Central to Aristotle's political thought is his classification of the different types of political constitutions in the Politics. Evaluate. 2014, 15
5. Comment on: “The State is a creation of nature and man is by nature a political animal.” (Aristotle) 2011, 20
6. Attempt a critique a Aristotles ideas on slavery. 2006, 60
7. Comment on: The authority of the master and that of the statements are different from one another (Aristotle). 2004, 20
8. Comment on: The polis exists by nature and that it is prior to the individual (Aristotle). 2002, 20