

ARISTOTLE'S *POLIS*: NATURE, HAPPINESS, AND FREEDOM

Ideologists of all stripes seem to have difficulty dealing with the foundations of what is loosely called the "Western tradition," that is, the body of knowledge that has come down to us from Athens and Jerusalem. Of course, these days Jerusalem is simply ignored. The classical tradition, however, must be dealt with. Yet it is frequently so transfigured that what emerges is what the ideologist wishes us to see, rather than what is there. The most ambitious attempt at this sort of thing by a "liberal" ideologist is Eric A. Havelock's *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics*.¹ More recently and on a smaller scale, Fred Miller has, in the pages of this journal, interpreted one aspect of the classical tradition from the standpoint of "libertarian" political theory, in his essay "The State and the Community in Aristotle's *Politics*."²

This curious attempt to defend the "libertarianism" of Lykophron and Hippodamus³ against Aristotle's "paternalism" is a daring, if ill-conceived, enterprise. In Miller's presentation, Aristotle seems to emerge as a villain who misunderstands the enlightened political thought of the Greek "libertarians" and, we are to infer, derails subsequent political thought in the name of "paternalism."

Fundamental to Miller's reading of the *Politics* is the idea that there is a distinction between "community" and "state" that Aristotle confuses in his use of *polis*. He argues that in Book 1 Aristotle is using *polis* in the former sense, at the beginning of Book 3 in the latter, but that later in Book 3 he confuses the two. The *polis* of Book 1, according to Miller, "is understood as the community itself, a complex system of human relationships, voluntary as well as coercive, personal as well as public" (p. 63). But, he maintains, in Book 3 Aristotle shifts his use of *polis* to mean the state, "the association of citizens in a *politeia*" (1276b1-2). By pointing out what he believes to be a distinction in meaning, Miller claims to solve the paradox of Aristotle's assertion that a *polis* changes when its *politeia* changes. Miller has no quarrel with Aristotle up to this point but charges that he confuses the two senses in 3.9 when he criticizes the sophist Lykophron. Miller calls the view of the *polis* attributed by Aristotle to Lykophron and Hippodamus "the *libertarian* conception of the state" (p. 65). According to this conception, the purpose of the political entity is merely to "prevent anyone from doing injustice to another within its jurisdiction" (p. 65).

The theorists Aristotle is attacking clearly want to limit the activity of the state to the protection of rights, and it is for this very reason that he is attacking them. Moreover, the libertarian idea of justice challenges the old alternative between the idea of "natural justice" proclaimed by Callicles in the *Gorgias* and conventional altruism. [P. 66]

"Libertarian justice" requires only that the laws protect individuals from other individuals. This, according to Miller, "is a significant breakthrough in political philosophy. Unfortunately, this significance is lost on Aristotle" (p. 67).

For Aristotle, the purpose of the *polis* is to make men good. Dr. Miller believes that, by attacking Lykophron, Aristotle is assigning to the *polis* (state) a function that properly belongs to the *polis* (community).

The end of community, which is the fundamental justification for its existence, is the good and happy life, in the sense that the fundamental reason individuals have for living in communities and for engaging in a wide variety of community relations is to lead good and happy lives, i.e., to realize themselves and be virtuous. [P. 68]

According to Miller, Aristotle does not seem to realize that

virtue and happiness are attained only by means of voluntary, spontaneous activities, e.g., friendship, career, the pursuit of wisdom. A man cannot be forced to be happy or virtuous. [P. 68]

Now the problem with this analysis is that Miller, at least here, has ignored the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as his failure to discuss the terms *happiness*, *virtue* and *the good* would indicate. Miller has not told us what either he or Aristotle means by these terms; yet without understanding them, Aristotle's *Politics* will always remain a closed book. I would suggest that Aristotle has a very precise view of happiness, virtue, and the good, which is based on his concept of nature, and that the connection between the *polis* as the means to happiness and the *polis* as a law-making entity is to be found in Book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I hope I will be forgiven for trying to establish this connection at some length.

In the *Metaphysics*, 5.4, Aristotle lists six meanings of *nature*.⁴ The nature of a thing can lie in its genesis, its matter, or its form or end. Aristotle's usual meaning of *nature* seems to be primarily the last. Nature is the entelechy, the *eidos*, the form, which defines the end of the process of becoming. Something is by nature if it has within itself a principle of motion or rest. Nature is related to the

final cause of a thing. It is the motion of each thing to its proper place in the universe. "Nature is the end or 'that for the sake of which'" (*Physics* 194a28). For Aristotle, nature beckons; it does not compel. It provides a standard, but this does not mean that nature is always completed. The fulfillment of nature depends on chance, which may impede the completion of nature's intent. The *tendency* of each thing is toward its natural end, *if* there is no impediment (*Ph.* 199a1-199b33). But because of chance, mistakes are possible in the operation of nature. A defect in the purposive efforts of nature may lead to monstrosities (*Ph.* 199a1-7). In some cases, art is required to complete what nature intends (*Ph.* 199a16). Thus, in the *Ethics*, Aristotle quotes Agathon, who said, "technē tychēn estrexe kai tychē technēn." Art loves chance; and chance, art (*N.E.* 1140a19). For it is only through one or the other that nature is completed.

However, when a thing *has* completed its nature, whether through chance or art, it is said to be excellent or perfected. Excellence or virtue (*aretē*) is the perfection of a thing when it reaches its natural state (*Ph.* 246a13-14, 246b1). All things, including man, have natures that may or may not be completed.

Each thing has a proper function, or *ergon*, and a proper operation, *energeia*, by which it fulfills its natural capacity, or *dynamis*. In order for a thing's nature to be completed, in order to reach its excellence or virtue, its potentiality must be actualized. Only through this actualization does a thing reach its culminating end, or *entelecheia*.

What is man's nature, and how is this nature related to virtuous conduct and the laws of the city? Aristotle seems to reason in this way: to allow ourselves to be driven by passion is easy. But to be totally driven by passions is slave-like, or even beastly. To be a man one must act *as* a man. He must fulfill *his* nature. A man, like all things, fulfills his nature if he actualizes his own potential, if he becomes what he *can* become; the excellence of a thing is defined by what is most characteristic of it. *Logos* is the defining characteristic of man. The good or excellence of human nature is a good of the soul (*psychē*) rather than the body, since *logos* is a function of the soul. Therefore, the life guided by intelligence is the life proper to man, since "reason and intelligence (*logos* and *nous*) are for us the end of our natural development (*Pol.* 1334b15; *N.E.* 1141a19). Thus, to really be a completed human being, to live in accordance with one's nature, is *the* meaning of virtue. To be virtuous, then, has a precise meaning, which Miller seems to ignore. A virtuous man necessarily leads a good life and a happy one. The good of man, *pace* the sophists, is not subjective or personal or based on pleasure or one's

"feelings." His good is objectively determinable, based on the perfection of his nature, i.e., the soul.

The best or most virtuous life is the most complete operation of the powers of man in accordance with his highest part (*psychē*). The highest good at which conduct can aim is the good life, "well-acting" (*eupraxia*, *euprattein*) or "well-living" (*eu zēn*, *kalōs zēn*), which is the same as happiness, or *eudaimonia*. Happiness is the end of all human action (*praxis*). Happiness is not a fleeting, momentary euphoria but a general condition, wherein a man's activities are in conformity with his virtue or excellence (*N. E.* 1100b10). In order to be happy, one *must* be virtuous.

But a virtuous action is not simply any action that happens to lead to a pleasurable state. The nature of happiness must be understood as being more than pleasure, although pleasure accompanies true happiness, and the action must be chosen after proper deliberation. An action, no matter its effects, cannot be called virtuous unless it is the result of deliberation and choice, as is made clear in Book 3 of the *Ethics*. A virtuous action is therefore voluntary, in the sense that it is chosen after known alternatives are rejected. *Proairesis* is fore-choice, or the deliberate desire for things in our power. Deliberation guides desire in a virtuous man (*N. E.* 113a10-12). Thus, virtue is the thoughtful organization of desire in accordance with nature.

Miller correctly notes that virtue depends on voluntary activity (p. 68), but he ignores the *conditions* for this voluntary activity. What choice is to be made? What alternatives are available? Does virtuous conduct arise by chance? Aristotle provides an answer to these questions in the *Ethics* and shows how good laws are necessary to the development of virtue. Aristotle argues that virtue does not develop in man through the spontaneous operation of nature, although one by nature may have the capacity (*dynamis*) to be virtuous (*N.E.* 1103a22-1103b25). Virtue is a *hexis*, which is ingrained by habit. This requires proper education, which is the responsibility of the *polis*. Only after the *dynamis* for virtue has been transformed into an *energeia*, or activity, by *hexis* can virtuous actions occur under the guidance of *logos*, or right reason. Once a man has become virtuous by proper training, he will almost automatically make the correct choice with regard to conduct.

Now the *polis* aims at the most supreme of all goods (*Pol.* 1252a5; cf. *N.E.* 1094b6), which is the highest good of man. As Aristotle has shown us, the highest good of man is virtue, or the perfection of his nature. Thus the *polis* is instituted to *make* men virtuous, to *make* them conform to what is highest in them by nature. It is, in contradistinction to Lykophron, more than a contract. To be a perfected *polis* is to realize its own true form, which is to provide all

the conditions necessary to complete human life. The *polis* is the means for training the excellences of the individual; indeed, there would be no excellences of the individual without the *polis*. In addition, the *polis* provides a field for the operation of these excellences. Moral action is possible only within the *polis*. Man exists for living well, and the good life is the same for the individual man and the *polis*. In other words, virtue, which is based on nature, requires choice; but making the *right* choice depends on habituation, since one must be habituated away from the easy, slavish inclination to follow the passions. Habituation depends on good laws that, through pain and pleasure, teach the "right behavior" (*N.E.* 1104b12-13), until such time as one reaches the point where the proper activity itself is pleasurable (e.g., *N.E.* 1099a11-16).

Now all of this is at odds with Miller's view that man cannot be "forced to be virtuous" and his apparent confusion of happiness with pleasure. Can a man be "forced to be virtuous"? Of course he can, if "force" is properly understood. Parents, after all, "force" their children to be virtuous. Virtuous conduct is hard. It is much easier to succumb to one's passions. The force of habit, instilled through the laws or parental authority, is necessary to the development of virtue. Aristotle's argument is that, with time, right conduct becomes easier, through the development of reason and the emergence of the ability to properly see what is right for man by nature. Miller seems to hold that "virtue" (whatever he means by the term) develops spontaneously. Taken to its logical end, Miller's "libertarian concept of virtue" would preclude parental discipline, since if the laws cannot force one to be virtuous, certainly neither can parents. Of course this is all nonsense. Both parental authority and the laws can teach right conduct and thus "force" men to be virtuous. (See below, p. 74.)

What about Miller's view of happiness? Miller seems to claim that happiness is that which suits each individual and that, therefore, the libertarian concept of the state could ensure happiness. But by this argument, bawds, sybarites, gluttons, drug addicts, etc., could all be as happy as a philosopher, a good citizen, or thoughtful people in general. I doubt that Miller really believes this. Let us, for instance, imagine a society of drug addicts. Let us really be outrageous and say that the supply of drugs is no problem, nor is nutrition, so that each member of this society can stay constantly "stoned." Such a society may very well observe "libertarian justice." Perhaps the only laws involved are those that protect one drug addict from another. This is no doubt a peaceful community, but are the individuals happy? They of course *think* they are happy, but only because they, like Miller, confuse happiness with pleasure. Aristotle would main-

tain that they are not happy because they are not *active* in conformity with virtue (*N.E.* 1176a35-1176b8). They are not perfecting their natures. Indeed, they are not even human.

What then is the proper view of happiness, and what is its connection with the *polis* as the law-making entity? Happiness is an activity in conformity with the excellence natural to man (*N.E.* 1.7, 1098a16-17, 1176a35-b9, 1177a1-2, 1177a12-19). Pleasure, properly understood, attends happiness, because it completes the activity, but it is the proper activity and not the pleasure that is the end (*N.E.* 9.9, 1174b22, 1174b32-34, 1175a20, 10.5, 6). As stated before, this excellence that leads to happiness is not spontaneous. It is the result of habituation and requires the control of the passions.

Argument and teaching, I am afraid, are not effective in all cases; the soul of the listener must first have been conditioned by habits to the right kind of likes and dislikes, just as the land [must be cultivated before it is able] to foster the seed. For a man whose life is guided by emotion will not listen to an argument that dissuades him, nor will he understand it. [*N.E.* 1179b23-28].

Accordingly, if, as we have said, a man must receive a good upbringing and discipline in order to be good, and must subsequently lead the same kind of life, pursuing what is good and never involuntarily or voluntarily doing anything base, this can be effected by living under the guidance of a kind of intelligence and right order which can be enforced. [*N.E.* 1180a14-18].

Now, if the community is not able or willing to make men virtuous, it is "incumbent upon every man to help his children and friends attain virtue (*N.E.* 1180a32); but it is better if it can be done through legislation, for "matters of common concern are regulated by laws, and good concerns by laws which set high moral standards (*N.E.* 1180a33-35). I would suggest, therefore, that Book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* establishes the necessary connection between happiness and virtue, properly understood, and the role of the *polis*, both as the means to happiness and virtue and as the law-making entity. For indeed, it seems clear that those two aspects of the *polis*, *pace* Miller, cannot be separated.

Why is Aristotle's formulation superior to that of Lykophron and Hippodamus? Of what concern is Aristotle's "paternalism," as it is styled by Miller, to those who are committed to a "free society? To answer this, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of "freedom."

Our society of drug addicts, which abides by Miller's "libertarian concept of the state," is "free" in the sense that no individual inter-

feres with the action of another. Thus, the lowest forms of bestiality may be compatible with the "libertarian concept of the state." But the "citizens" of such a society would seem to be, in reality, the least free of men: indeed, they are totally controlled by their passions. They are not free to choose the conduct that by nature is "right" for man: the exercise of the rational part of the soul, that part of the soul that man does not share with the beasts.

Consider the analogous situation of an athlete. A person in poor physical condition is not "free" from indolence. He has no choice. In order to be free of indolence, the nonathlete must train, and this is painful, particularly at the beginning. He must habituate himself to the pain. Initially a trainer may be necessary to provide the discipline necessary to ensure that the training is accomplished. After a while, the training becomes more pleasant, and self-discipline is possible. Finally, the individual is able to choose between activity and nonactivity, because he has reached a certain level of physical strength and stamina. He *may* be inactive, but it is now by choice. This choice did not exist before.

According to Aristotle, men do what is pleasant, and to follow one's passionate desires is pleasant. But in order to become truly human, one must be able to moderate the passions, so that the truly human aspect of the soul may be developed. This is painful, but through the proper function of good laws, good moral habits are developed, and hence the free exercise of one's humanity. This free exercise of humanity, attended by a habituated pleasure, properly understood, is the good life toward which Aristotle aims. It is not, as Miller suggests, some subjective sense of pleasure. According to Miller, the members of our society of drug addicts are free and happy (and even "virtuous"!), since they pursue their own ends peacefully, "realize themselves," and harm no one else. But by splitting happiness and freedom from the concept of a natural right for man, both *happiness* and *freedom* become empty terms.

The reason that drug addicts or others committed to the mere pleasure of the senses, whether they abide by "libertarian" principles of justice or not, cannot be called free or happy may be illustrated by the following anecdote from Diogenes Laertius related by Jacob Klein:

Let me by way of conclusion, report the preposterous, yet deeply significant, story told in ancient times about Aristotle's sleeping habits. When he went to bed, so the story goes, he used to hold in his hand a sphere of bronze—the sphere representing the whole world, I presume—while on the floor, close to the bed, beneath his extended hand, lay a pan. As soon as Aristotle

would fall asleep, the sphere would slip out of his hand, fall on that pan, and the ensuing noise would awaken him. This procedure was apparently repeated over and over again. Aristotle could hardly have survived such an ordeal for any length of time. But no story could more aptly relate his claim to immortality.⁵

Nor could any story more aptly relate his commitment to wakeful consciousness as the true end of man.

Those who wish to defend a free society can learn much from Aristotle concerning the nature of man, right conduct, and the moderation of the passions. By connecting these concepts to freedom, Aristotle makes freedom *decent*. To treat Aristotle, as Miller does, as merely one on whom the significance of the "libertarian concept of the state" is "lost" is to surrender the concepts of natural right and reason to the opponents of freedom. For without reason, natural right, moral conduct, happiness and goodness properly understood, libertarianism becomes nothing more than indecency, or what the title of a recent libertarian book proclaims: *Defending the Un-defendable*.⁶ The replacement of human excellence by indecency and the slavish submission to desires is not made more attractive by calling it "freedom."

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1. New Haven: Yale University Press. Cf. Lep Strauss, "The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy," in *Liberalism, Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 26-64.

2. *Reason Papers*, no. 1, pp. 61-69. All references to Miller's article will be found in the text.

3. Miller makes much of Aristotle's description of Hippodamus' unorthodox appearance and his commitment to "libertarian" justice. It seems to me, however, that Aristotle is having a little fun at Hippodamus' expense; the joke is that Hippodamus bases his entire "political science" on the number three: in his city, there are three classes, three divisions of land, and three divisions of the law. Hippodamus appears to be less a "libertarian" than an Athenian Buckminster Fuller (*Politics* 1267b23-40).

4. All references to the works of Aristotle will be found in the text: *Nicomachean Ethics: N.E.*; *Physics: Ph.*; *Politics: Pol.* Additional discussions of "nature" are found in Book 2 of the *Physics* (192b8-200b10) and Book 1 of *Parts of Animals* (639a1-642b5).

5. Jacob Klein, "Aristotle: An Introduction," in *Ancients and Moderns: Essays in Honor of Leo Strauss*, ed. Joseph Cropsey (New York: Basic Books, 1964), p. 68. This entire essay, by one of the foremost authorities on classical thought, is a particularly valuable introduction to Aristotle.

6. Walter Block, *Defending the Undefendable* (New York: Fleet Press, 1975). Block's book has been hailed by many, though not all, libertarians. Insofar as his conclusions are accepted, my contention that unmoderated libertarianism can degenerate into bestiality seems justified. Block maintains that those who are normally called undesirables are instead heroes: e.g., prostitutes, drug pushers, pimps, and loan sharks. They are heroes because, in defiance of the standards of society and at great risk, they supply a service that somebody wants. It is no accident that those who hold this view of libertarianism are frequently economists: whatever the market provides is "good," as long as exchanges are voluntary. But it is one thing to employ the "economic way of thinking" to trace the consequences of policy and to determine the cost of laws prohibiting certain behavior. It is another thing to substitute economics for moral judgment and to say that everything is "good" as long as there is no coercion.