

A New Exposition of Aristotle's Thought on Polity

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Abstract

The theory of the regime has been studied for thousands of years since Aristotle. Similarly, the debate about the best regime has not gone away. The ultimate end of politics is the attainment of the highest good, and the regime is the means to that end. Based on a survey of a certain number of city-states, Aristotle came up with his own criteria for the division of government and then discussed what is the best regime. Because of the tension between ideal and reality, the inability of middle-class republics to put things into practice is forcing them to rethink. By absorbing the oligarchic principle of wealth and the populist principle of liberty, the republic becomes the best regime. It is of great significance to explore Aristotle's thought of polity: to awaken the original intention of constructing political community, to find a balance between ideal and reality, to realize that political stability is the inherent requirement of the development of political community, and to pay attention to the cultivation of civic morality.

Keywords

Aristotle; Best Regime; Middle Class.

1. Introduction

Polity is a very important concept in political theory. In short, polity is the organizational form of state power, and refers to "the form in which a certain social class organizes itself to protect itself against the enemy." [1] The polity also includes the central and local establishment of state institutions and the relationships among them. The study of polity can be traced back to Aristotle, the father of political science. As early as in the ancient Greek period, Aristotle made a relatively full study of the polity, spent a great deal of energy to investigate 158 city-states, and made a comprehensive analysis of these city-states. Politics is not only regarded as the first work of political science, but also an important basis for the study of Aristotle's thought of polity.

2. Polity: From A Measure to A Goal

At the beginning of Politics, Aristotle puts forward a metaphor that a polis (city) is like a social group, and these groups are established with internal goals. Aristotle sees these groups as a way to achieve a certain kind of good karma, and the city-state, as the highest political body, will also achieve the highest good, and this highest good will encompass other good karma. Here Aristotle points out the essence of the polis -- the pursuit of the supreme good. Since the polis is to pursue the supreme and extensive good karma, it must need a means to achieve this good karma. According to Aristotle, the regime not only achieves the highest good karma, but also forms the city-state and establishes the highest authority. This does not mean, however, that any type of polity can achieve the highest good and thus allow people to live a good life. In fact, the quality of the polity determines the quality of people's political and social life in the city-state. The better the polity, the better it will bring people a better life. For citizens, on the one hand, choosing the best regime is not only the first prerequisite for good political life; The best

regime, on the other hand, is not only a means to the attainment of the supreme good karma, but also a desirable goal.

3. Which Regime Is the Best

The better the regime, the better the life. This raises an important question in political-what is the best regime? From the ancient Greeks to the 21st century, the debate over the best regime continues. Aristotle himself was also indecisive about the choice of the best regime, which made later scholars full of controversy about his idea of the best regime.

To understand Aristotle's optimal regime, we first need to understand how he divides it. He divided the polis into six regimes based on two criteria. His two standards are slightly different from those of his teacher Plato. In Plato's "Statesmen", he proposed his own criteria for the division of government, which are divided according to the number of rulers and whether the rulers exercise their power according to the law. Aristotle continued his teacher Plato's first criterion for the division of government, but changed the second criterion to whether to defend the interests of the ruler or the public interest of the city. In Aristotle's view, the polity that protects the common good of the polis is genuine, while the polity that protects the interests of the ruler is perverted. The proper forms of government, based on the number of rulers, are monarchies ruled by one man, patricians ruled by a few, and republics ruled by a majority. The corresponding abnormal regimes are tyranny, oligarchy and plebeian regime. Aristotle believed that, "a political community like a polis should also have the combination of the ruler and the ruled, so that the two are interconnected and preserved together." [2] Because there are rulers and ruled in city-states, the rulers of abnormal regimes will only take their own interests as the starting point and foothold of their rule, thus ignoring the interests of the ruled. Due to the lack of their own interests, the identity of the governed to the political community will gradually disappear, when the governed do not want to maintain the current political relationship, it is difficult to maintain and preserve the community. Therefore, from the point of view of the public interest of the polis, Aristotle considered the best regime to be the original regime, and excluded the tyranny, oligarchy and plebdom as abnormal regimes. But which was Aristotle's best form of government, monarchy, aristocracy or republic? Many researchers are divided.

Leo Strauss thinks Aristotle's idea of the best regime is full of ambiguities and contradictions, but he thinks Aristotle's idea of the best regime is aristocracy. He believed that Aristotle completely rejected his teacher Plato's ideal regime, "philosophy king" one-man regime is by no means the best regime, aristocracy is Aristotle's ideal regime. Strauss argues that "although Aristotle did not explicitly discuss the best regime in relation to earlier systematic analyses of regime types, it is almost certain that he understood the best regime as a kind of aristocracy." [3]

Unlike traditional researchers, contemporary researchers are more likely to regard the republic as Aristotle's best form of government. Davis argues, Aristotle did not believe in meritocracy the way his teacher Plato did. Political rule requires the approval of the governed. In this sense, democracy is the ultimate ideal system. Although Aristotle did not directly specify in his writings what the best form of government is, a careful analysis of Aristotle's ideas of the best form of government leads to the conclusion that, in Aristotle's mind, the best form of government is a republic. Solon and Pericles, the politicians that Aristotle admired, both made democratic reforms, both gave more rights to more citizens, and the citizens became masters. Aristotle spoke highly of the Athenian democracy: "The people make themselves masters of everything, and administer everything by decree, by the jury of the people, and even the cases tried by the council fall into their hands. They are obviously right to do so, for the few are more easily corrupted by money or power than the many." [4] Aristotle believed that the universal

participation of citizens could effectively supervise the organs of power, eliminate corruption to the greatest extent, and ensure the harmony and stability of the city. From the perspective of modern politics, it is to ensure the stability and prosperity of the city-state by expanding citizens' political participation, enhancing citizens' sense of identity to the political community and enhancing the legitimacy of political rule.

4. Who Should Rule the Polis

Of the six types of polity, Aristotle preferred the majority rule of the republic. Now that the best form of polity has been found, the next step is to study the political subject, the majority. In Aristotle's view, every citizen, whether voluntary or compulsory, should participate in political life. If there are isolated people, they should be very few in the political community. The individuals in the community are usually neither gods nor ghosts, but real people. Marx and Aristotle share many similarities in their understanding of human beings. Human beings should be connected with various social relations, and human beings should be political and social animals. There are huge differences between individuals and collectives when they rule a city-state. Aristotle finally chose the majority after analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of the rule of one person, a minority and a majority. The majority, as rulers, did not do as they pleased, and Aristotle laid out criteria and basic requirements for these rulers.

4.1. Standards

Aristotle measured rulers from two dimensions, political and moral. The political criterion is whether the maintenance of the city's public interests in the first place; Whether moral standards possess wisdom and good virtue. The logical starting point of his political standard is that group value is higher than individual value. The realization of individual value depends on the collective, so protecting the public interests of the city-state is prior to protecting their own interests. On this basis, good lawmakers should be most concerned with the concrete measures to make people happy in the polis. Aristotle's rules on the moral qualities of rulers are entirely out of consideration for the maintenance of the polis and the operation of the polity. Since city-state life is a group life, it should take into account the other members of the city-state, the ruler with wisdom and virtue is better able to deal with all kinds of complex affairs.

4.2. Requirements

Through the analysis of the text, it is not difficult to find that Aristotle placed the hope of ruling the city-state on the middle class. He described the middle class in The fourth book of Politics as follows: "In every city-state there are three sections or classes, one of the very rich, one of the very poor, and a middle class in between." [5] Every class has different habits. The rich are accustomed to tyrannical rule, the poor are willing to be enslaved, and the middle class rejects both habits and pursues freedom and equality. In this sense, the middle class is best suited to play the role of ruler, so the regime in which the middle class is the majority and dominant is the best. The middle class is up to the task of governing for three reasons. First, it is more rational. Aristotle argued that both the very rich and the very poor were irrational and unfit to govern. People without reason can become greedy or rogue in their dealings. The middle class, by virtue of its rationality, can avoid becoming greedy or rogue. Second, the middle class is more conducive to stability. If a large middle class outnumbers the rich and poor combined in numbers and power, the ruling middle class does not have to worry about the minority rising against it. The stable dominance of the middle class also ensures stability. Third, the middle class facilitates the enactment and enforcement of laws. The middle class can not only bring their rationality into the legislative process, but also voluntarily obey the legal authority in daily life to ensure the implementation of laws as much as possible.

5. The Tension Between Ideal and Reality

From a practical point of view, Aristotle's criteria for the division of government are too strict. The political community under minority rule not only did one thing in the public interest, but also did one thing in its own interest. Indeed, is this political community an aristocracy or an oligarchy? Similarly, when the monarch is governing a large city-state, is the monarch really completely in the state of absolute rule? No, because the monarch is bound to transfer some of his power to some people, in effect making it a minority rule. There is a huge gap between the ideal division standard and the reality of the regime, which undoubtedly causes people to ask: can Aristotle's best regime be realized in the reality of the political community? Can the tension between ideal and reality be overcome? If not, how can we bridge the gap between our ideals and reality?

In fact, Aristotle was aware not only of the ideality of the division of government, but also of the ideality of the republic under the rule of the middle class. An excellent ruler should not be immersed in the ideal, but should construct the best regime in theory, and should also start from reality, consider all kinds of realistic factors of the city-state, and harmonize the ideal principle and realistic factors, so as to construct the best regime in practice. As well as deciding which regime to choose, rulers also have to consider the sustainability of the best regime. The short-term maintenance and long-term metamorphosis of the optimal regime were common problems in the Greek polis for a long time. Lacking the conditions necessary to maintain the best form of government, the form of government can present only a poor standard of governance.

The best practical form of government is often one which is constantly improved and perfected under the existing form of government. From the point of view of the time, most of the city-states chose abnormal regimes -- oligarchic regimes and civilian regimes. In Aristotle's view, there is a metamorphosis of the regime, and usually the orthodox regime becomes a perverted regime, the aristocratic regime and the republican regime in the orthodox regime become oligarchic and the civilian regime respectively. The principle of oligarchy is wealth, the rich as rulers constantly encroaching on the interests of the poor; The principle of the popular regime is that the people are free, and the poor are the rulers who violate the interests of the rich. Since oligarchy and civilian government represents the reality and republic represents the ideal, then the oligarchy of wealth principle and civilian combination principles of freedom, and the two principles embedded in a republic, realistic best regime is formed, thus it can effectively reduce the harm brought by the regime change. The rich and the poor get along with each other without encroaching on each other's interests, which is also in line with the principle of moderation advocated by Aristotle. Thus the republic, which mixed the principles of liberty and wealth, became the best form of government that was realistic.

6. The Practical Significance to Exploring Aristotle's Thought of Regime

The debate about the best regime has been going on since Aristotle. Similarly, Aristotle's criteria for classifying regimes are still used today. Now, when people study the idea of the regime, they eventually come back to Aristotle, so his idea of the regime has a very important contemporary value.

6.1. Awaken the Original Intention of Political Community

Aristotle's division of the regime was a preparation for the search for the best regime. Only on the basis of distinguishing various types of polity, and then analyzing the principles and advantages and disadvantages of rulers under various polity, can we make clear what is the best polity. His pursuit of the best regime can be traced back to allowing citizens to live an ideal city-state life and realize the highest good -- justice. At present, we use a modern perspective to

analyze Aristotle's thought of polity, in order to better understand the original intention of building a political community, is to live a happy life for human beings, natural best polity is the means to achieve this goal. Although from ancient Greece to modern society on what is the best political system has never stopped the debate, but the modern nation state in the construction of political system should not deviate from this ultimate goal.

6.2. Keep Balance between Ideal and Reality

In his search for the best regime, Aristotle realized the gap between ideal and reality, that the best regime of the ideal does not exist, or is difficult to achieve. He embedded in the republic the principles of oligarchic regime and plebeian regime, and the republic was not only the best in theory, it was the best in reality. Obviously, this has important realistic enlightenment for us: when the ideal is difficult to achieve, we should learn to compromise with reality, reconcile the tension between ideal and reality, and make a prudent choice as far as possible.

6.3. Political Stability Is the Inherent Requirement of Political Community

When Aristotle discussed the types of regimes, he had in mind the metamorphosis, the transformation of genuine regimes into abnormal regimes, and the metamorphosis often caused damage to the existing political order. For the consideration of political stability, he put forward higher requirements for rulers, rulers with wisdom and virtue can often effectively deal with the conflicts within the city-state. A good political environment is an important prerequisite for the survival and development of a community, so we should effectively grasp the relationship between social development and political stability: social development needs political stability, and political stability will also guarantee social development.

6.4. Pay Attention to the Cultivation of Civic Morality

In constructing the ideal life, Aristotle not only considers from the political dimension, but also attaches great importance to the political subject. Therefore, Aristotle, after choosing a good form of polity, made rigid provisions on the qualities that political subjects should have. In his opinion, good virtue is an essential quality, and citizen's life in a city-state should be a virtue life. Justice, temperance and other qualities belong to the category of virtue, and citizens with these good qualities will eventually promote the development and progress of the political community.

References

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