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Aristotle's Theory of the Origin of the State

Aristotle opens his “Politics” by stating the obvious fact that the state is a community of some kind. (By state Aristotle has in mind the Greek City-State). Like all other communities, the state must exist for an end, and the end of the state is the highest good of man, which for Aristotle means the life of virtue and contemplation. “But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at the good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.”¹

In order to discover the nature of the state, and how it differs from other communities, Aristotle analyzes it into its component parts and studies it in its historical origin. There are, he says, two basic instincts which are instrumental in bringing people together. The first of these is the reproductive instinct which leads men and women to unite, while the second is that of self-preservation, which causes master and slave to come together for their mutual benefit. “Out of these two relationships...the first thing to arise is the family...The family is the association established by nature for the supply of men’s everyday wants.”² The family, then, is the first stage in the formation of the state.

The second stage is arrived at when “several families are united, and the association aims at something more than the supply of daily needs.”³ Thus is formed the village, which in its most natural form is the union of families of common descent—a sort of patriarchal society.

“When several villages are united in a single complete community, large enough to be nearly or quite self-sufficing, the state comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life. And, therefore, if the earlier forms of

¹ Pol. 1252^a 1-6.

² Pol. 1252^b 9-14.

³ Pol. 1252^b 16-18.

society are natural, so is the state, for it is the end of them, and the nature of a thing is its end. For what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature, whether we are speaking of a man, a horse, or a family.”⁴ This is the third stage where the formation of the state is completed. Thus what differentiates the state from other communities is the fact that it is self-sufficing, and that it enables men to live the good life, whereas the family, for example, is barely sufficient to keep its members alive. The state differs from the family and village in kind, and not merely quantitatively.⁵

For Aristotle, the state is a natural society. He shows how man is impelled by his very nature to form the societies of family, village, and state. Man’s natural end is the good life which is to be found only in the state. Therefore, the state is a natural society. “Man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity.”⁶ That nature intended man to lead a social life is proven by man’s faculty of speech, which no other animal possesses. Now nature does nothing in vain, from which it follows that men were made to associate with one another.

In contrast to Aristotle’s view of the natural origin of the state is that of the Sophists in Greek times, who held that the state arose simply by convention. Aristotle probably had these in mind, among others, when he formulated his own theory in opposition to theirs. A somewhat similar view is expressed by the English philosopher, John Locke (1632-1704), and by the French philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, (1712-1778). The theory advanced by these men is known as the “social contract” theory. According to this theory, man originally lived in a state of nature, where everyone was equal in the sense that all had everything required for his life. (Locke and Rousseau differ somewhat in their interpretation of this original state of nature, but, on the whole, the two theories are in agreement on the main points of contention).⁷ After a time this unregulated life of nature became confused and inconvenient because of the rise of property and the consequent development of selfishness. Without an authoritative political superior there was no one to settle quarrels and controversies. In order to assure peace and safety, it was deemed necessary to create such an authority, the state, to maintain order and to preserve the

⁴ Pol. 1252^b 27-33.

⁵ Pol. 1252^a 8-23.

⁶ Pol. 1253^a 2-4

⁷ Cf. Cronin, *The Science of Ethics*, Vol II, p. 491 ff.

natural rights of every individual. This was done by a voluntary social contract on the part of all the people. A governing group was then chosen by the people, and this group agreed to abide by certain general terms in the governmental “compact” thus created. In case the rulers violated the terms of the original contract, it was the right and duty of the people to rise up and drive them from power, substituting new authorities who would agree to abide by the terms of the contract. According to this theory, then, the state is not a natural society, but an artificial creation of man himself. In fact, Rousseau held that man is by nature asocial, and that it is precisely society which corrupts him and prevents him from developing his natural goodness.

It is easy to see the superiority of Aristotle’s view. “Aristotle’s account of the origin of Society as a development out of the family is now very generally accepted by sociologists as the only account that harmonizes with recent investigations into the organization of the primitive tribes, which, it is stated, being all instances of arrested development, must now, as social communities, be organized on the same basis as that on which society was formed in its first beginnings.”⁸ As Professor Ross points out: “Aristotle did good service to political thought by insisting that the state does not exist merely by convention but is rooted in human nature; that the natural is to be found, in its truest sense, not in the origin of human life but in the goal towards which it moves; that civilized life is not a declension from the life of a hypothetical savage; that the state is not an artificial restriction of liberty but a means of gaining it.”⁹

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⁸ Cronin, *The Science of Ethics*, Vol II, p. 468.

⁹ Ross, *Aristotle*, p. 239.