

ARISTOTLE

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*The Politics*  
and  
*The Constitution of*  
*Athens*

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## Principal events

- 384 BC Aristotle born at Stagira in Macedon
- 367 Aristotle goes to Athens and to Plato's Academy
- 356 Alexander the Great born
- 347 Plato dies. Aristotle goes to Assos
- 345 Aristotle leaves Assos for Mytilene
- 343 Aristotle invited by Philip to become the tutor of Alexander
- 336 Philip is killed and Alexander becomes king of Macedon
- 335 Aristotle returns to Athens and founds the Lyceum
- 323 Alexander dies
- 322 Aristotle leaves Athens for Chalcis, where he dies

# *Politics*

B. JOWETT

## BOOK I

1 · Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think good. 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 good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good. 5

Some people think that the qualifications of a statesman, king, householder, and master are the same, and that they differ, not in kind, but only in the number of their subjects. For example, the ruler over a few is called a master; over more, the manager of a household; over a still larger number, a statesman or king, as if there were no difference between a great household and a small state. The distinction which is made between the king and the statesman is as follows: When the government is personal, the ruler is a king; when, according to the rules of the political science, the citizens rule and are ruled in turn, then he is called a statesman. 15

But all this is a mistake, as will be evident to any one who considers the matter according to the method which has hitherto guided us. As in other departments of science, so in politics, the compound should always be resolved into the simple elements or least parts of the whole. We must therefore look at the elements of which the state is composed, in order that we may see in what the different kinds of rule differ from one another, and whether any scientific result can be attained about each one of them. 20

2 · He who thus considers things in their first growth and origin,

25 whether a state or anything else, will obtain the clearest view of them. In the first place there must be a union of those who cannot exist without each other; namely, of male and female, that the race may continue (and this is a union which is formed, not of choice, but because, in common with other animals and with plants, mankind  
30 have a natural desire to leave behind them an image of themselves), and of natural ruler and subject, that both may be preserved. For that which can foresee by the exercise of mind is by nature lord and master, and that which can with its body give effect to such foresight is a subject, and by nature a slave; hence master and slave have the same  
1252<sup>b1</sup> interest. Now nature has distinguished between the female and slave. For she is not niggardly, like the smith who fashions the Delphian knife for many uses; she makes each thing for a single use, and every instrument is best made when intended for one and not for many  
5 uses. But among barbarians no distinction is made between women and slaves, because there is no natural ruler among them: they are a community of slaves, male and female. That is why the poets say, —

It is meet that Hellenes should rule over barbarians;<sup>1</sup>

as if they thought that the barbarian and the slave were by nature one.

10 Out of these two relationships the first thing to arise is the family, and Hesiod is right when he says, —

First house and wife and an ox for the plough,<sup>2</sup>

for the ox is the poor man's slave. The family is the association established by nature for the supply of men's everyday wants, and the members of it are called by Charondas, 'companions of the cup-board', and by Epimenides the Cretan, 'companions of the manger'.  
15 But when several families are united, and the association aims at something more than the supply of daily needs, the first society to be formed is the village. And the most natural form of the village appears to be that of a colony from the family, composed of the children and grandchildren, who are said to be 'suckled with the same milk'. And this is the reason why Hellenic states were originally governed by  
20 kings; because the Hellenes were under royal rule before they came together, as the barbarians still are. Every family is ruled by the eldest, and therefore in the colonies of the family the kingly form of

<sup>1</sup> Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, 1400.

<sup>2</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 405.

government prevailed because they were of the same blood. As Homer says:

Each one gives law to his children and to his wives.<sup>1</sup>

For they lived dispersedly, as was the manner in ancient times. That is why men say that the Gods have a king, because they themselves  
25 either are or were in ancient times under the rule of a king. For they imagine not only the forms of the Gods but their ways of life to be like their own.

When several villages are united in a single complete community, large enough to be nearly or quite self-sufficing, the state comes into  
30 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 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. Besides, the final cause and end of a thing is the best, and to be self-sufficing is the end and the best.  
1253<sup>a1</sup>

Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that 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; he is like the

Tribeless, lawless, heartless one,<sup>2</sup>

whom Homer denounces — the natural outcast is forthwith a lover of  
5 war; he may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts.

Now, that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals is evident. Nature, as we often say, makes nothing  
10 in vain, and man is the only animal who has the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth  
15 the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state.

<sup>1</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, IX 114-15.

<sup>2</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, IX 63.

Further, the state is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the  
20 individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part; for  
example, if the whole body be destroyed, there will be no foot or hand,  
except homonymously, as we might speak of a stone hand; for when  
destroyed the hand will be no better than that. But things are defined  
by their function and power; and we ought not to say that they are the  
25 same when they no longer have their proper quality, but only that they  
are homonymous. The proof that the state is a creation of nature and  
prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-  
sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole. But  
he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is  
sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a  
30 state. A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature, and yet he  
who first founded the state was the greatest of benefactors. For man,  
when perfected, is the best of animals, but, when separated from law  
and justice, he is the worst of all; since armed injustice is the more  
dangerous, and he is equipped at birth with arms, meant to be used by  
35 intelligence and excellence, which he may use for the worst ends.  
That is why, if he has not excellence, he is the most unholy and the  
most savage of animals, and the most full of lust and gluttony. But  
justice is the bond of men in states; for the administration of justice,  
which is the determination of what is just, is the principle of order in  
political society.

5 children – the poor, not having any slaves, must employ both their women and children as servants.

Once more: there are three offices according to whose directions the highest magistrates are chosen in certain states – guardians of the law, probuli, councillors – of these, the guardians of the law are an aristocratic, the probuli an oligarchical, the council a democratic,  
10 institution. Enough, in outline, of the different kinds of offices.

## BOOK VII

1 He who would duly inquire about the best form of a state ought  
15 first to determine which is the most eligible life; while this remains uncertain the best form of the state must also be uncertain; for, in the natural order of things, those men may be expected to lead the best life who are governed in the best manner of which their circum-  
20 stances admit. We ought therefore to ascertain, first of all, which is the most generally eligible life, and then whether the same life is or is not best for the state and for individuals.

Assuming that enough has been already said in discussions outside the school concerning the best life, we will now only repeat what is contained in them. Certainly no one will dispute the propriety of that  
25 partition of goods which separates them into three classes, viz. external goods, goods of the body, and goods of the soul, or deny that the happy man must have all three. For no one would maintain that he is happy who has not in him a particle of courage or temperance or justice or practical wisdom, who is afraid of every insect which flutters  
30 past him, and will commit any crime, however great, in order to gratify his lust for meat or drink, who will sacrifice his dearest friend for the sake of half a farthing, and is as feeble and false in mind as a child or a madman. These propositions are almost universally acknowledged as  
35 soon as they are uttered, but men differ about the degree or relative superiority of this or that good. Some think that a very moderate amount of excellence is enough, but set no limit to their desires for wealth, property, power, reputation, and the like. To them we shall  
40 reply by an appeal to facts, which easily prove that mankind does not acquire or preserve the excellences by the help of external goods, but  
1323<sup>b</sup> external goods by the help of the excellences, and that happiness,

whether consisting in pleasure or excellence, or both, is more often found with those who are most highly cultivated in their mind and in their character, and have only a moderate share of external goods, than among those who possess external goods to a useless extent but  
5 are deficient in higher qualities; and this is not only a matter of experience, but, if reflected upon, will easily appear to be in accordance with reason. For, whereas external goods have a limit, like any other instrument, and all things useful are useful for a purpose, and where there is too much of them they must either do harm, or at  
10 any rate be of no use, to their possessors, every good of the soul, the greater it is, is also of greater use, if the epithet useful as well as noble is appropriate to such subjects. No proof is required to show that the best state of one thing in relation to another corresponds in degree of  
15 excellence to the interval between the natures of which we say that these very states are states: so that, if the soul is more noble than our possessions or our bodies, both absolutely and in relation to us, it must be admitted that the best state of either has a similar ratio to the other. Again, it is for the sake of the soul that goods external and  
20 goods of the body are desirable at all, and all wise men ought to choose them for the sake of the soul, and not the soul for the sake of them.

Let us acknowledge then that each one has just so much of happiness as he has of excellence and wisdom, and of excellent and wise action. The gods are a witness to us of this truth, for they are happy and blessed, not by reason of any external good, but in themselves and by reason of their own nature. And herein of necessity  
25 lies the difference between good fortune and happiness; for external goods come of themselves, and chance is the author of them, but no one is just or temperate by or through chance. In like manner, and by a similar train of argument, the happy state may be shown to be that  
30 which is best and which acts rightly; and it cannot act rightly without doing right actions, and neither individual nor state can do right actions without excellence and wisdom. Thus, the courage, justice, and wisdom of a state have the same form and nature as the qualities  
35 which give the individual who possesses them the name of just, wise or temperate.

Thus much may suffice by way of preface: for I could not avoid touching upon these questions, neither could I go through all the arguments affecting them; these are the business of another science:

Let us assume then that the best life, both for individuals and  
40 states, is the life of excellence, when excellence has external goods  
1324<sup>a</sup> enough for the performance of good actions. If there are any who  
dispute our assertion, we will in this treatise pass them over, and  
consider their objections hereafter.

5 2 · There remains to be discussed the question, whether the happi-  
ness of the individual is the same as that of the state, or different.  
Here again there can be no doubt – no one denies that they are the  
same. For those who hold that the well-being of the individual  
10 consists in his wealth, also think that riches make the happiness of the  
whole state, and those who value most highly the life of a tyrant deem  
that city the happiest which rules over the greatest number; while they  
who approve an individual for his excellence say that the more  
15 excellent a city is, the happier it is. Two points here present  
themselves for consideration: first, which is the more desirable life,  
that of a citizen who is a member of a state, or that of an alien who has  
no political ties; and again, which is the best form of constitution or  
the best condition of a state, either on the supposition that political  
20 privileges are desirable for all, or for a majority only? Since the good  
of the state and not of the individual is the proper subject of political  
thought and speculation, and we are engaged in a political discussion,  
while the first of these two points has a secondary interest for us, the  
latter will be the main subject of our inquiry.

Now it is evident that that form of government is best in which  
25 every man, whoever he is, can act best and live happily. But even those  
who agree in thinking that the life of excellence is the most desirable  
raise a question, whether the life of business and politics is or is not  
more desirable than one which is wholly independent of external  
goods, I mean than a contemplative life, which by some is maintained  
to be the only one worthy of a philosopher. For these two lives – the  
30 life of the philosopher and the life of the statesman – appear to have  
been preferred by those who have been most keen in the pursuit of  
excellence, both in our own and in other ages. Which is the better is a  
question of no small amount; for the wise man, like the wise state, will  
35 necessarily regulate his life according to the best end. There are some  
who think that while a despotic rule over others is the greatest  
injustice, to exercise a constitutional rule over them, even though not  
unjust, is a great impediment to a man's individual well-being. Others

take an opposite view; they maintain that the true life of man is the  
practical and political, and that every excellence admits of being 40  
practised, quite as much by statesmen and rulers as by private 1324<sup>b</sup>  
individuals. Others, again, are of the opinion that arbitrary and  
tyrannical rule alone makes for happiness; indeed, in some states the  
entire aim both of the laws and of the constitution is to give men  
despotic power over their neighbours. And, therefore, although in 5  
most cities the laws may be said generally to be in a chaotic state, still,  
if they aim at anything, they aim at the maintenance of power: thus in  
Lacedaemon and Crete the system of education and the greater part  
of the laws are framed with a view to war. And in all nations which are 10  
able to gratify their ambition military power is held in esteem, for  
example among the Scythians and Persians and Thracians and Celts.  
In some nations there are even laws tending to stimulate the warlike  
virtues, as at Carthage, where we are told that men obtain the honour  
of wearing as many armlets as they have served campaigns. There was 15  
once a law in Macedonia that he who had not killed an enemy should  
wear a halter, and among the Scythians no one who had not slain his  
man was allowed to drink out of the cup which was handed round at a  
certain feast. Among the Iberians, a warlike nation, the number of  
enemies whom a man has slain is indicated by the number of obelisks 20  
which are fixed in the earth round his tomb; and there are numerous  
practices among other nations of a like kind, some of them established  
by law and others by custom. Yet to a reflecting mind it must appear  
very strange that the statesman should be always considering how he  
can dominate and tyrannize over others, whether they are willing or 25  
not. How can that which is not even lawful be the business of the  
statesman or the legislator? Unlawful it certainly is to rule without  
regard to justice, for there may be might where there is no right. The  
other arts and sciences offer no parallel; a physician is not expected to 30  
persuade or coerce his patients, nor a pilot the passengers in his ship.  
Yet most men appear to think that the art of despotic government is  
statesmanship, and what men affirm to be unjust and inexpedient in  
their own case they are not ashamed of practising towards others; they  
demand just rule for themselves, but where other men are concerned 35  
they care nothing about it. Such behaviour is irrational; unless the one  
party is, and the other is not, born to serve, in which case men have a  
right to command, not indeed all their fellows, but only those who are  
intended to be subjects; just as we ought not to hunt men, whether for



40 food or sacrifice, but only those animals which may be hunted for food  
 or sacrifice, that is to say, such wild animals as are eatable. And surely  
 1325<sup>a</sup> there may be a city happy in isolation, which we will assume to be  
 well-governed (for it is quite possible that a city thus isolated might be  
 well-administered and have good laws); but such a city would not be  
 constituted with any view to war or the conquest of enemies – all that  
 5 sort of thing must be excluded. Hence we see very plainly that warlike  
 pursuits, although generally to be deemed honourable, are not the  
 supreme end of all things, but only means. And the good lawgiver  
 should inquire how states and races of men and communities may  
 10 participate in a good life, and in the happiness which is attainable by  
 them. His enactments will not be always the same; and where there  
 are neighbours he will have to see what sort of studies should be  
 practised in relation to their several characters, or how the measures  
 appropriate in relation to each are to be adopted. The end at which  
 the best form of government should aim may be properly made a  
 15 matter of future consideration.

3 Let us now address those who, while they agree that the life of  
 excellence is the most desirable, differ about the manner of practising  
 it. For some renounce political power, and think that the life of the  
 20 freeman is different from the life of the statesman and the best of all;  
 but others think the life of the statesman best. The argument of the  
 latter is that he who does nothing cannot do well, and that acting well  
 is identical with happiness. To both we say: 'you are partly right and  
 partly wrong'. The first class are right in affirming that the life of the  
 25 freeman is better than the life of the despot; for there is nothing noble  
 in having the use of a slave, in so far as he is a slave; or in issuing  
 commands about necessary things. But it is an error to suppose that  
 every sort of rule is despotic like that of a master over slaves, for there  
 is as great a difference between rule over freemen and rule over slaves  
 30 as there is between slavery by nature and freedom by nature, about  
 which I have said enough at the commencement of this treatise. And it  
 is equally a mistake to place inactivity above action, for happiness is  
 activity, and the actions of the just and wise are the realization of  
 much that is noble.

But perhaps someone, accepting these premises, may still maintain  
 35 that supreme power is the best of all things, because the possessors of  
 it are able to perform the greatest number of noble actions. If so, the

man who is able to rule, instead of giving up anything to his  
 neighbour, ought rather to take away his power; and the father should  
 care nothing for his son, nor the son for his father, nor friend for  
 friend; they should not bestow a thought on one another in com-  
 parison with this higher object, for the best is the most desirable and  
 40 'acting well' is the best. There might be some truth in such a view if  
 we assume that robbers and plunderers attain the chief good. But this  
 1325<sup>b</sup> can never be; their hypothesis is false. For the actions of a ruler  
 cannot really be honourable, unless he is as much superior to other  
 men as a man is to a woman, or a father to his children, or a master to  
 5 his slaves. And therefore he who violates the law can never recover by  
 any success, however great, what he has already lost in departing from  
 excellence. For equals the honourable and the just consist in sharing  
 alike, as is just and equal. But that the unequal should be given to  
 equals, and the unlike to those who are like, is contrary to nature, and  
 nothing which is contrary to nature is good. If, therefore, there is  
 10 anyone superior in excellence and in the power of performing the best  
 actions, he is the man we ought to follow and obey, but he must have  
 the capacity for action as well as excellence.

If we are right in our view, and happiness is assumed to be acting  
 15 well, the active life will be the best, both for every city collectively, and  
 for individuals. Not that a life of action must necessarily have relation  
 to others, as some persons think, nor are those ideas only to be  
 regarded as practical which are pursued for the sake of practical  
 results, but much more the thoughts and contemplations which are  
 independent and complete in themselves; since acting well, and  
 20 therefore a certain kind of action, is an end, and even in the case of  
 external actions the directing mind is most truly said to act. Neither,  
 again, is it necessary that states which are cut off from others and  
 choose to live alone should be inactive; for activity, as well as other  
 25 things, may take place by sections; there are many ways in which the  
 sections of a state act upon one another. The same thing is equally  
 true of every individual. If this were otherwise, the gods and the  
 universe, who have no external actions over and above their own  
 energies, would be far enough from perfection. Hence it is evident  
 30 that the same life is best for each individual, and for states and for  
 mankind collectively.