

“Naturalism” in Aristotle’s political philosophy

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1. Five senses in which we should not call Aristotle a naturalist

In classical Greek, the nearest equivalent to the English “naturalist” is *phusikos*, literally “a man concerned with *phusis*, nature.” The match is not close. To write a treatise “about nature,” *peri tēs phuseōs*, was not to write a book on what we would call physics—though indeed Aristotle’s own work the *Physics* introduced a shift in the sense of the Greek *ta phusika* (literally “natural things”) towards the sense of our word “physics.” Rather it was to write a book on *whatever has grown or come to be* (the root verb is *phuesthai*, with this range of meanings): a book on everything, or a book on nature (Latin *natura*, cognate with *nascere* “to be born”).

A classical Greek philosopher who, like Aristotle, is a self-declared *phusikos* is not a philosophical naturalist in either of our two commonest senses of the word. When philosophers today talk of naturalism, they usually mean either a general view opposed to supernaturalism, or a specifically ethical view opposed to non-naturalism, or both (see Pettit 1992). As opposed to supernaturalism, naturalism is the view that a complete understanding of reality need not posit the existence of God, gods, angels, or the like. As opposed to non-naturalism, naturalism is the view that a complete understanding of moral reality need not posit the existence of special moral properties. The Greek *phusikos* is no

closer to these technical senses of “naturalist” than to the colloquial sense in which a naturalist is a bird-watcher.

Aristotle would have rejected the anti-supernaturalist form of naturalism. The existence of a God—indeed of more than forty gods—is (literally) a first principle of his philosophy (*Metaphysics* XII.8; cf. *Physics* VIII). As for the anti-non-naturalist form of naturalism—and it is telling that this awkward locution is the easiest name for the position—Aristotle’s response, I suspect, would be that he does not know what the modern naturalist and non-naturalist mean by “special moral properties.” The modern ethicists’ idea of the “specially moral” is heavily dependent for its sense on G.E. Moore’s famous doctrine of the “naturalistic fallacy” in his *Principia Ethica*. But it seems unlikely that Aristotle would even have understood Moore’s distinction between “good,” an indefinable “non-natural property,” and every other property, which is “natural.” Nor is it necessarily discreditable for Aristotle not to comprehend this: as MacIntyre 1981 and Anscombe 1958 have pointed out, there may well not *be* anything comprehensible in Moore’s doctrine.

A similar problem confronts a third way of distinguishing ethical naturalists from non-naturalists, which appeals to the alleged “uncodifiability” of the moral (see McDowell 1979, 1981, 1987). On this story the naturalist thinks that moral properties have a non-moral “shape,” such as some suppose could be given by, e.g., equating “the right thing to do” with “the act that maximises utility.” The non-naturalist, by contrast, denies that moral properties have any non-moral “shape.” They may supervene on non-moral properties, but the ways they do so are (as they appear from a non-moral perspective) too chaotic to have a shape.

Like the first and the second, this third way of telling naturalists from non-naturalists presupposes that we have a plausible way of demarcating “the natural” from “the non-natural.” If (as I would argue) we have no such demarcation, it does not even make sense. But even if it did make sense, and could be applied to the ancient Greeks, in any case it does not do what we might have wanted it to do, namely sort Aristotle from Plato. Both authors say things that can be heard (and often are) as endorsements of uncodifiability: with Aristotle’s famous remarks about only seeking the measure of precision appropriate to the subject matter (*Eth. Nic.* 1094b12-14), compare Plato’s famous story (*Resp.* 331c) of the stolen knife, and the moral that is usually drawn from that story. On the other side, both philosophers also say things that can be heard as rejections of uncodifiability. Socrates’ insistence in the *Phaedo* that every token of the action-type suicide is a wrong action is as unconditional as Aristotle’s insistence at *Eth. Nic.* 1107a9 that there are action-types that do not admit of a mean.

The uncodifiability hypothesis presupposes distinctions and doctrines that were unknown to Aristotle. As Williams 1985 and Anscombe 1958 have pointed out, these modern distinctions are not obviously improvements on any related distinctions that Aristotle did know about. For instance Aristotle’s practical/ theoretical contrast (see e.g. *Eth. Nic.* 1103a6) is quite different from, and a good deal clearer than, the modern moral/ non-moral contrast.

It begins to look as if Aristotle can be called a naturalist only in the bird-watching sense. (In that sense Aristotle most certainly was a naturalist, perhaps the first great one in Western history.) But perhaps there is some other, looser sense in which Aristotle can reasonably be called a naturalist. Here is a fourth suggestion: Aristotle counts as a

naturalist because he rejects Platonism. If “rejecting Platonism” means rejecting “the separation of the Forms,” then certainly Aristotle makes this move (*Eth. Nic.* 1.6)—but that alone does not qualify him as a naturalist: Parmenides too rejects the separation of the Forms. Or if “rejecting Platonism” meant rejecting top-down explanatory principles whose reality goes beyond the spatiotemporal, this move would qualify Aristotle as a naturalist. But Aristotle does not make it. He is just as committed as Plato is to top-down transcendent explanatory principles: simply to different ones.

There remains a fifth proposal: that any philosopher will count as a naturalist if he makes some sort of appeal to nature central to his method, or makes it his ambition to explain this or that part of nature “in terms of the rest of nature.” This last phrase I quote from Bernard Williams: “The question for naturalism is always: can we explain, by some appropriate and relevant criteria of explanation, the phenomenon in question in terms of the *rest* of nature?” (Williams 2002: 23).

In this meaning of the word Aristotle clearly is a naturalist. The only difficulty is that it is hard to think of a philosopher who is not. Plato, for instance, is certainly a naturalist in this sense, as the *Timaeus* makes abundantly clear. Apparently Parmenides at one end of the history of western philosophy, and G.E. Moore at the other, are naturalists too in this sense—though it is usual to classify Parmenides (arguably) and Moore (unarguably) as paradigm *non*-naturalists. So this fifth proposal fails too. Compared to other philosophers, and in particular to his teacher Plato, Aristotle is not different, or more naturalistic, in having the ambition to explain things—the optimal shape for human society, for instance—“in terms of the rest of nature”; *pace* Williams (apparently), that ambition is universal among philosophers.

Still, this last proposal does bring us to a point where there is a real contrast between Aristotle and those, such as Plato, who are less naturalistically inclined. This is a matter of the weighting of the evidence, of our sense of what counts as a conclusive argument. *This* contrast between naturalism and anti-naturalism is real, and applicable to Aristotle. It is the first of three real contrasts that I shall say more about in section 2.

2. Three senses in which we should call Aristotle a naturalist

Plato, in the *Republic*, had no difficulty seeing that many of his political proposals—his elevation of the role of women, for example, or his abolition of the family among the Guardian class—were proposals that most people in Plato’s own *milieu* would find profoundly counter-intuitive. Similarly, Plato knew that some of his central philosophical methods—not only the appeal to the Form of the Good at the heart of the argument of the *Republic*, but the whole idea of Socratic interrogation—would not be accepted by most of his contemporaries. Plato’s insistence (at the level of doctrine) on abolishing the family life of his Guardians, and (at the level of method) on corralling his interlocutors into a particular mode of argument and response, both naturally meet with the simple objection “But that’s not how things are in real life.” One real contrast between Plato and Aristotle comes out in their reactions to this objection—the Real Life Objection as we may call it. Crudely, the contrast is that Plato does not take it seriously, and Aristotle does.

It is crude to say that Plato “does not take seriously” this objection, because he is certainly not simply dismissive of it. The Real Life Objection exerts a constant

philosophical pressure upon Plato's thought. There are well-known signs in his later political writings, especially the *Laws*, that he is less resistant to that pressure than he was at earlier points in his career, most obviously in the *Republic* (cf. Hitz, this volume). Even in the famously rationalistic *Republic*, Plato does not assign the Real Life Objection a nil deliberative weight without thinking about it carefully; still, *after* careful thought, nil pretty well is the deliberative weight that he awards to it. The *Republic*'s argument against the Real Life Objection—not a completely explicit one, but see the Myth of the Cave in *Republic* VII for some of the key moves—is strikingly reminiscent of Marx and Engels' theory of "false consciousness." The basic point is that our society, being corrupt, has corrupted us, so that what *we* count as "real life" is not a critical conception that can be used to address what is wrong with our society, but just another symptom of its sickness.

In this sense the *Republic*'s pessimistic political philosophy exactly parallels its pessimistic epistemology. Given the reprobate condition of humanity, naïve commonsense intuitions about what is knowable by perception are no more trustworthy or authoritative than naïve commonsense intuitions about what political or human reality is, or what it demands, or where the boundary is to be set between the genuine needs of an actually good city, and what a "pampered" or "febrile" city (*truphōsan polin*, *phlegmainousan polin*: *Resp.* 372e4, 372e9) merely imagines it needs.

Aristotle rejects Plato's apriorism in political philosophy just as surely as he rejects it in epistemology, and for parallel reasons. In the theory of knowledge Aristotle will write that "what appears to all men, that we say *is*; for the person who takes away this trust (*pistin*) will have no chance at all of replacing it with anything else *more*

trustworthy (*pistoteron*)” (*Eth. Nic.* 1173a1-2).¹ Aristotle opposes apriorism about knowledge with the sturdy obstinacy of common sense, and with more than a hint of a Moorean anti-sceptical strategy. Like Moore 1959, Aristotle asks how any argument to undermine our most basic certainties could deserve a higher level of credence from us than those basic certainties themselves.² Similarly in politics, Aristotle’s focus, in his critique of Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws* in *Politics* Book II, is squarely on the practical consequences of attempting to implement their programmes. For him, the key question is *what will happen* if we try to realise these political ideals “in real life.” And he shows no interest in the likely Platonic retort “What kind of ‘real life’ would that be, then?,” or in the charge of false consciousness that lies behind the retort.

This, then, is the first sense in which it is right to describe Aristotle as a naturalist about politics. A second sense connects Aristotle’s political naturalism directly to his ethical naturalism. Aristotle, as is well known, sees humans as one kind of animal among others, and tells us that the business of ethics is to clarify the nature of human well-being, *eudaimonia*, and identify what sort of life and what sort of character-traits we need to have if we are to be *eudaimones*. Since this is the business of ethics, and since politics and ethics are, for Aristotle, contiguous and continuous studies—the *Nicomachean Ethics* famously ends with the words “Let us begin,” i.e. “begin to study politics”—it follows that Aristotle’s ethical naturalism will carry straight over into a political naturalism.

With what specific results, though? No one is going to dispute that Aristotle is a political naturalist in that he believes that human nature has to be recognised as a determinant of what is possible and what is ideal in political theory. No one will dispute this, because the belief is a truism: as we have seen, even Plato at his most rationalist

accepts it. The interesting question is how *exactly* our conception of (human) nature can act as a determinant of our detailed political outlook.

In the remainder of this chapter I shall look closely at two answers to this question. The first of these answers yields a third sense in which the term “political naturalism” is appropriate for Aristotle’s approach to political questions; I discuss it in sections 3 and 4. The other answer brings us to Nussbaum’s capability approach, which I discuss in section 5.

3. Aristotle’s doctrine that the *polis* is natural

In the third sense, Aristotle is a naturalist about politics because he holds that the state is natural:

The community (*koinōnia*) formed of numerous villages is the complete city state (*teleios polis*). This has achieved the limit (*peras*) of pretty well entire self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*): though it came about merely for the sake of survival, once in existence, it is for the sake of the good life. For this reason (*dio*) every *polis* is by nature (*phusei*), if at least the first communities also are. For the *polis* is itself the natural aim (*telos*) of those communities, and nature *is* what it naturally aims at (*hē de phusis telos esti*); for what a thing is when its coming-to-be is fully completed, we say that that is its nature, whether it is a man, a horse, or a house. (*Pol.* 1252b28-36)

In Aristotle’s philosophy the claim that something is *phusei* (“by nature,” “natural”) can stand in more than one opposition. The development of an organism, or

any similar process, can be natural as opposed to spontaneous (*automatōi*) or subject to mutilation (*pērōsis*) (*Part. an.* 656a7-12, 686b2-5; *Gen. an.* 767b5). Events can happen naturally; they can also happen by luck (*tuchēi*) or accidentally (*kata sumbebēkos*), or again spontaneously (*Metaphysics* V, 30). A different distinction is between events happening naturally and being made to happen, either by skill (*technēi*) applied in “production” (*poiēsis*) or by deliberate choice (*proairesei*) applied in “action” (*praxis*) (*Pol.* 1254a7; *Metaphysics* 1069b). Further, an agent’s possession of a character-trait can be a result of nature, or of habituation (*ethismos*) (*Eth. Nic.* 2.1). Another and more traditional opposition is taken up by Aristotle when he agrees that human behavior and belief can be natural as opposed to conventional (*nomōi*) (see e.g. 1253a31). Finally, Aristotle contrasts what is natural (*kata physin*) with what is unnatural (*para physin*) (see, e.g., *Politics* 3.6; compare *Pl., Leg.* 890a2-9, and *Grg.* 483c for a sophistical argument that the *polis* is unnatural). Which of these oppositions does Aristotle have in mind when he says that the *polis* is natural?

He cannot mean all of them. Aristotle cannot mean, for instance, that the *polis* is natural in the way a flower is natural—that it comes about by biological process rather than by human skill and ingenuity. Nor can he mean that the *polis* is more like an innate character-trait than one acquired by habituation, such as a virtue: Aristotle clearly thinks of a good constitution as the equivalent in a city of virtue in an individual, which makes the development of the *polis* more the work of “second nature” than of nature itself (*Eth. Nic.* 1103a24-5). On the other hand, Aristotle surely does mean that the *polis* is not unnatural; and that it is not (*pace* Callicles) merely conventional; and also that it is not spontaneous.

No doubt; but for an adequate understanding of his claim that the *polis* is natural, we need to see that claim as moving beyond all these senses of the natural/unnatural opposition. When the claim is first made (at *Pol.* 1252b28-36), Aristotle presents it as the terminus of a line of reasoning about self-sufficiency—a line of reasoning that is more than a little reminiscent of the one Plato uses to establish the “city of pigs” in *Republic II*: “The *polis* comes into being... because of the fact that each of us is not self-sufficient, but lacks many things; no other principle (*archē*) establishes the *polis*” (*Resp.* 369b5-7). So, first, male and female individuals seek each other out because without each other they “could not even exist” (*mē dunamenous einai*, 1252a27). (Interestingly, Aristotle explicitly says that this seeking-out happens not by conscious purpose, *ek proaireseōs*, but because “the urge to leave behind another individual like oneself” is *phusikon*, “part of nature”—“instinctive,” as we might also translate it (1252a29).) Then “the natural master and the natural slave” (*archon de kai archomenon phusei*, 1252a31) likewise seek each other out—“for the sake of security,” *dia tēn sōtērian* (1253a31). Evidently Aristotle thinks that the natural master and the natural slave too could not even exist without each other, the master because he could not do all his own work, the slave because he needs the master’s protection and direction. Once these two partnerships are in place we have the household, *oikia*, a form of natural partnership that suffices “for everyday needs,” *eis pasan hēmeran* (1252b13). Then, Aristotle goes on, “the first partnership that is established on account of needs that are not everyday (*chrēseōs heneken mē ephēmerou*) is the village (*kōmē*)” (1252b17). This brings us up to the stage that the argument has reached in the passage quoted above: it is by the combination of these villages (possibly

Aristotle has in mind the relation of its demes to the city of Athens³) that we finally get the city-state itself, *pasēs echousa peras tēs autarkeias*.

This is only the sketch of an argument. Aristotle wants to motivate each step of the development from individuals to *polis* by appealing to a need that is not yet met. But he does not tell us what the need is that gets us from household to village, or from village to *polis*, beyond saying that the former need is “not everyday,” and that the *polis* is unlike families or villages in being “for the sake of the good life, not merely of life.” As for the two mutual needs that he does tell us about—the two sexes’ and the master’s and slave’s—his account of these is decidedly unconvincing. A man does not seek out a woman (or *vice versa*) merely for the sake of survival, or because without her *he* will not exist. A “natural master” who will die unless he finds a slave hardly seems worthy of the name. And Aristotle’s suggestion (1252a35) that the natural slave’s interests are identical with the natural master’s seems a transparent piece of ideology.

However, we must not allow these superficial faults to distract us from the argument’s deeper faults. The thought behind the argument is that political association is natural just where it meets some sort of need (*anangkē*) that is unmet by any smaller unit of political association. Hence, the largest natural unit of political association is the one that meets *every* human need, and when we reach this we have reached the natural terminus of the process of political development: so the *polis* is natural because it is self-sufficient. The argument’s key notions of need and self-sufficiency both need to be scrutinized. In section 4 I consider them in turn.

4. Need and self-sufficiency

Aristotle's deployment of the notion of need seems a good deal less critical than Plato's in the *Republic*. Aristotle, to put it bluntly, just offers us assertions about what is natural—and not especially convincing assertions. It would be nice to be able to say that these assertions were at least well-rooted in Aristotle's philosophical biology. But as my close look at *Politics* 1252b28-36 has already suggested, honesty compels us to regard them as little more than bolt-on additions to his serious science.

Plato, by contrast, does not offer us mere assertions about need; instead, he offers us an explanation of why such assertions cannot establish much even about, say, the kind of family structures that are genuinely needed in the good state. A passage we have already touched on, *Republic* 369b-372e, demonstrates this by working out, more as a step in the dialectic than as anything like Plato's own considered view, a simple outline account of the good city the development of which is explicitly driven by the (commonsense) notion of need: "What will make the city, apparently, is our neediness" (*hē hēmetera chreia*, *Resp.* 369e8). This "city of pigs" is contrasted at length with the *truphōsa polis* (372e4-373e6), the city which goes beyond "the limit set by our needs" (373e1) and is therefore exposed to the greatest evils that can come to states, including war (373e3-7). How then are we to locate the true limit set by our real needs?

Plato pointedly does not answer this question. He moves on, instead, to discuss the nature of the good soldier (374a-d), and then the nature of the good ruler and his education—the discussion that takes us into the heart of the *Republic's* concerns. The point of this significant silence is that, at this stage of Plato's inquiry, there is no way to

fix the boundary between our true and our merely apparent needs—any more than a good response to the Real Life Objection could begin by just asserting a demarcation between what is and what is not really “Real Life.” At 373e it may seem to Socrates and Glaucon and Adeimantus that the development of the luxurious city out of the city of pigs is as inevitable and indeed as “natural” as any other development. Plato is, of course, convinced that it is neither inevitable nor natural. But he does not think that he can prove that simply by stipulating a content and scope for the notion of need. To show it, he thinks, requires a journey to a viewpoint on philosophy that will change the way we look at *everything*: namely, the journey to the Form of the Good that the central books of the *Republic* take us on. There can, for Plato, be no ideologically innocent account of need, any more than there can of “Real Life.” To a Platonist, Aristotle’s attempt to help himself to one must seem at best naïve.

Aristotle’s use of the notion of self-sufficiency is equally exposed to objections. The guiding idea of the argument is that a natural limit to political development has been reached when we arrive at the point where human living becomes self-sufficient. Now for something to be a self-sufficient unit in Aristotle’s sense is for it to be able to provide, by itself, for all its own *needs*. So clearly the objections to Aristotle’s notion of need that I have just raised are also objections to his notion of self-sufficiency. But that is not the only or even the main difficulty about Aristotle’s notion of self-sufficiency. That notion is hopelessly unclear anyway—and unclear in both directions, so to speak.

In the one direction (towards smaller units than the *polis*), Aristotle is famous for saying that the life of contemplation is self-sufficient: *hē te legomenē autarkeia peri tēn theōrētikēn malist’ an eiē* (*Eth. Nic.* 1177a27-8). So it is his own view that the individual

human can be self-sufficient. Aristotle's adherence to this view is not restricted to the *Nicomachean Ethics*: the *Eth. Nic.*'s package of views about the contemplative life is briefly reaffirmed at *Politics* 1325b17-22. So either Aristotle should have accepted that the truly self-sufficient unit was not the city-state but the (enlightened) individual; or he should have further explained his notion of self-sufficiency in order to show how it fitted the *polis* better than the individual.

We could respond that there is a distinction between personal and political self-sufficiency: the ideal of self-sufficiency that is achieved by the contemplative individual is one sort of *autarkeia*, the ideal that is achieved by the *teleia polis* is another. But this suggestion merely prompts the question "Why just these?" If there can be two Aristotelian ideals or notions of self-sufficiency, why not three (perhaps counting as the third the self-sufficiency of a world trade-system—more about that in a minute)? Why not four, or five, or as many as you like?

Going in the other direction (towards larger units than the *polis*), international trade was hardly an unknown phenomenon in Aristotle's day, and not all of it was trade in unnecessary luxury items. Thus every *polis* in Aristotle's famous collection of constitutions will have been a *polis* that was not, economically, a self-sufficient community. So either Aristotle should have accepted that the truly self-sufficient unit in politics was not the city-state but the international trading community of city- and other states (including Egypt, Persia, Carthage, China? And the states that traded with them?); or else he should have further explained his notion of self-sufficiency in order to show how it uniquely fitted the *polis*.

Perhaps Aristotle means that the *polis* is the terminus of a natural process of development because it is the smallest self-sufficient political unit—rather as, in the metaphysics of the *Categories*, individual substance is the least abstract and most concrete thing to which predicates can be applied (*Categories* 2a34-6). This suggestion, like the parallel suggestion in metaphysics, merely prompts the question “Why stop there?” We have been given no argument that the natural process of development is completed when we reach the smallest viable self-sufficient state. Why couldn’t someone retort that the natural process of association goes on beyond the level of the *polis*, and that these smallest possible states are themselves merely raw material for an ever-wider union—such as, to give one obvious example, Alexander’s empire? (There is a well-known irony in the idea of a “resident alien” philosophy professor, sitting in Athens writing out an eight-book defense of the Greek city-state as exemplified by Athens, just as his most famous pupil Alexander was busying himself with the final and permanent destruction of the Greek city-state in general, and the Athenian city-state in particular.)

Aristotle says something about this second objection at 1280a25-b10. The difference between an economic relationship and a political relationship, he suggests there, is that an economic relationship is only for the sake of life, whereas a political relationship is for the sake of the good life. The suggestion is, presumably, that the city-state “is self-sufficient in respect of virtue”: the *polis* is uniquely the context in which we have all the resources that we need to achieve full virtue (perhaps, of the active rather than the contemplative kind), and where we have those resources in a way in which they are not available at any lower level of political organisation.

We only need to develop this suggestion to see how unpromising it is, whether we apply it to Aristotle's society or to our own; though it is surprising how much rose-tinted idealisation of the Greek *polis* we will have to see past in order to get the point. As any reader of Thucydides' *Histories* will quickly gather, the idea that politics is not the practice of virtue but merely the art of the possible is as much a classical Greek idea as a modern one. As any reader of Sophocles' *Antigone* will see, Aristotle's idea that the state is there for the good life, the family only there for the sake of survival, can quite easily be stood on its head—even in a classical Athenian context. What *Antigone* shows us with stark clarity (and it is not the only classical Greek drama to do so: compare, for instance, the *Oresteia*, or Sophocles' *Philoctetes*) is that the state and its imperatives can easily become the most important *obstacle* to an agent's practice of virtue; and that the Athenians of Sophocles' time knew this perfectly well.

The idea that engagement in the public life of the state is necessarily more an exercise of virtue than life at more local levels of association, such as family life, therefore deserves little credit either from us or Aristotle, who was in no worse a position to be critical of it than we are. The idea that life at more global levels of association than the *polis* is necessarily less of an exercise of virtue does not deserve much credit either, as any supporter of the United Nations or the European Community might point out. But this too is not just a modern point, it is a point that Aristotle was in a position to see. Presumably the exchange of philosophical ideas is a form of association for the sake of the good life if anything is. But the Athenians' practical cosmopolitanism about philosophical exchange was proverbial—as St Luke reports (*Acts* 17.21), and as Plato repeatedly illustrates. Athenians like Socrates would talk philosophy with anybody, and

learned as much from foreigners like Protagoras and the “Eleatic Stranger” as from fellow-citizens of the Athenian *polis* like Glaucon, Adeimantus, Phaedo, or Theaetetus. Plato, then, gives us a picture of ethical interaction and mutual instruction that is at least panhellenic in its scope. The idea that there can be fruitful ethical debate with an even wider scope is presented repeatedly by the Athenian playwrights. Euripides’ *Troïades* (415 BC), for instance, is a sustained meditation on the wrong done by the Greeks to the Trojans, with a studied contemporary reference to the Athenian city-state’s rape of the city-state of Melos (416 BC). The meditation is presented, moreover, by characters who are both barbarians and women, and so presumably have a double dose of Aristotelian natural inferiority.

I suspect that Aristotle is only led in the first place to talk of self-sufficiency as an ideal in ethics⁴ and political theory because of the strong analogy with his talk of independence as a criterion of substance in metaphysics (see, e.g., *Metaphysics* 1029a28). The analogy does little real work in political theory unless we take seriously an organic conception of the state. Plato takes that conception seriously, with familiarly sinister consequences for any conception of individual freedom worthy of the name. Aristotle, to his credit, usually does not. Of course he does sometimes gesture in the direction of the organic conception; as for instance in the opening lines of the *Politics*, where we are supposed to derive the priority of the *polis* over the individual from a hierarchy of *telē* of a familiar sort (1252a1-7); and again a little later, where Aristotle tells us that the individual is related to the state as part (*meros*) to whole, and that the state is “prior in nature” (*phusei proteron*) to the individual (1253a27). If it is to be taken as more than

mere metaphor, such talk is bound to conflict with the deeper substantial individualism of Aristotle's metaphysics.

The fallout of that conflict includes, apparently, the series of philosophical problems that I have reviewed in this section. Aristotle should not have sought, and did not need to seek, to make self-sufficiency the mark of the naturalness of the city-state. Indeed, in order to defend the *polis* in a way that is true to his own most important commitments, Aristotle did not even need to be a naturalist about the *polis* in the sense that this section has explored—the sense of taking the *polis* to be the natural end-point of a process of development towards complete self-sufficiency. The conclusion about the naturalness of the *polis* that is (from Aristotle's own point of view) really worth having is, I suggest, not a point about self-sufficiency at all. It is only the thesis (which Aristotle of course accepts) that living in *poleis* contributes in a distinctive and non-replaceable way to individuals' *eudaimonia*. But this thesis could be true without the much stronger thesis about natural self-sufficiency that Aristotle tries to argue for. Suppose it is agreed that no particular form of human association is any more *natural* than any other is. Even then, we can intelligibly discuss the question which sorts of friendships or associations best contribute to *eudaimonia*. After all, in just the same way we can intelligibly discuss the question which board-games we find most worthwhile. This is possible even though it all agree that the only relevant natural fact is that it is human nature to devise and play *some* sort of games; that no board-game is any more natural than any other; and indeed that all board-games are paradigms of conventionality. Even, to take Aristotle's own favorite example, chess (1253a8).

This conclusion brings us back to the second way of spelling out the details of an Aristotelian political naturalism that I identified at the end of section 2: namely, by working up an account of the human good such as that offered by Martha Nussbaum under the name of “the capability approach.” I look at this line of thought in section 5.

5. The Capability Approach

Nussbaum’s capability approach explicitly aims at producing a defensibly universalistic ethics. She seeks this by starting with *human* universals: aspects of human life which all humans in all societies share in, areas of experience and choice in which all humans must have some conception or other of what well being is, and how it can be achieved.

We begin from the general intuitive idea of a creature who is both capable and needy... the question we are asking is: What are the features of our common humanity, features that lead us to recognise certain others, however distant their location and their forms of life, as humans and, on the other hand, to decide that certain other beings who resemble us superficially could not possibly be human? The question directs us to cross boundaries... (Nussbaum 1990: 219)⁵

When we cross these boundaries and look around, what we find ourselves working towards is “a kind of story about what seems to be part of any life that we count

as a human life” (loc. cit.). This story generates a list of aspects of human potential for well-being, “functionings” as Nussbaum sometimes calls them:

The list we get if we reflect this way is open-ended... like most Aristotelian lists, our working list is meant not as a systematic philosophical theory, but as a summary of what we think so far, and as an intuitive approximation, whose intent is not to legislate, but to draw attention to certain areas of special importance. And the list is not only intuitive, but also heterogeneous; for it contains both limits against which we press and powers through which we aspire. (loc. cit.)

These aspects of potential for wellbeing are the eponymous capabilities. Nussbaum’s own list runs: (1) Mortality; (2) The human body; (3) Capacity for pleasure and pain; (4) Cognitive capability: perceiving, imagining, thinking; (5) Early infant development; (6) Practical reason; (7) Affiliation with other human beings; (8) Relatedness to other species and to nature; (9) Humour and play; (10) Separateness (Nussbaum 1990: 219-224).

This list gives the capability approach a theory of the good: a “list theory,” as such theories are often called. Indeed it is worth comparing Nussbaum’s list with some other list theories of the good, in particular with those offered by the neo-Thomist “new natural law theorists” such as John Finnis, who offers a list of seven goods: life (cf. Nussbaum’s 1, 2, 10), knowledge (cf. her 3), play (9), beauty (8), friendship (7), practical reasonableness (6), and religion (1).

On the basis of this list of the human capabilities, the capability approach then offers a foundational normative claim. And here I pause to query the vague connective “on the basis of”: *how* does the list of capabilities generate the normative claim? There are many routes that might get us from a theory of the good to the theory of the right. Contrast consequentialist and deontological routes, for instance, and bear in mind that this is only one of many contrasts that might be drawn. There is much work still to be done by capability theorists in deciding between these alternatives.

The foundational normative claim of the capability approach is egalitarian in two distinct ways. The capability approach posits it as the good that ethical and political choice should work towards the (a) equal support and realisation of citizens’ capacities, which in themselves are thought of as (b) broadly equal capacities—in general, citizens do not differ *enormously* in what they are able or unable to do or achieve or experience.

The task of Aristotelian politics is to make sure that no citizen is lacking in sustenance. With respect to each of the functionings... citizens are to receive the institutional, material and educational support that is required if they are to become capable of functioning in that sphere according to their own practical reason—and functioning not just minimally, but well... Politics examines the situations of the citizens, asking... what the requirements of the individual for good functioning are, in the various areas. Both the design of institutions and the distribution of resources by institutions is done with a view to their capabilities... [Politics’] aim is... to design a comprehensive support scheme for the functionings of all citizens over a complete life. (Nussbaum 1990: 228)

This, in quick outline, is the capability approach. What are we to make of it? The quick reply is that it is an extremely plausible application of neo-Aristotelianism to political philosophy. However, there are reasons to doubt that the Aristotelianism is more than neo-

It is clear that the capability approach deals well, or can deal well, with the most obvious objections that it raises. For example, the approach is not really vulnerable at all to Bernard Williams' objection to all forms of Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian naturalism, that they depend on an antiquated teleological biology:

In Aristotle's teleological universe, every human being... has a kind of inner nisus towards a life of at least civic virtue, and Aristotle does not say enough about how this is frustrated by poor upbringing, to make it clear exactly how, after that upbringing, it is still in this man's real interest to be other than he is. If Aristotle, with his strong assumptions about the nisus of each natural kind of thing toward its perfection, cannot deliver this result, there is not much reason to think that we can. Evolutionary biology, which gives us our best understanding of the facts that Aristotle represented in terms of a metaphysical teleology, cannot do better in trying to show that an ethical life is one of well-being for each person [because] evolutionary biology is not at all directly concerned with the well-being of the individual, but with fitness. (Williams 1985: 44)

Williams assumes here that evolutionary biology and “metaphysical teleology” are two understandings of *the very same facts*. This seems mistaken. The facts about human life that Nussbaum appeals to in spelling out her list of functionings or capabilities are facts about human ethology *as it is now*. They are not facts about how that ethology developed in the past, as evolutionary facts are. Moreover, there need be nothing particularly “metaphysical” about the kind of teleology needed by the capability approach. For sure, the approach needs the claim that we do have various sorts of “inner nisus,” such as the nisus to avoid our own deaths, or the nisus to deploy practical reason in planning our own lives. That is a claim against which Bernard Williams has another important argument, his famous argument against external reasons: he only gestures towards this argument in the quotation above, though on reflection it may well seem that it is really Williams’ anti-external-reasons argument that is, subterraneously, driving his thinking here. To assess that argument would be another paper.⁶ The point for now is that it does not seem very ambitiously metaphysical to say that we have more than one inner nisus. Nor does that claim conflict with the facts about evolution: it could be an evolutionary fact that we have evolved these inner nisūs.

This is one place where we should distinguish Aristotle from neo-Aristotelians. Williams may have a good point against the historical Aristotle’s own ethics and politics; he may be right that *Aristotle* is committed to, and bases his normative views on, a defunct metaphysical and teleological science. (Though even with the historical Aristotle, that seems an overly uncharitable reading, given the possibility of separating ethology from scientific theories about how that ethology came into being.) Williams is surely wrong to say that *any neo-Aristotelian* has to share that commitment to implausible

antique science—and certainly Nussbaum seems able to avoid any such commitment. (For Nussbaum’s own rather different arguments against Williams’ objection, see her 1995.)

A different objection asks why it should be assumed that all basic human capabilities are essentially benign. If we can say that there are human capabilities for practical reason and humour, why can’t we also say that there are human capabilities for spite, murder, adultery, war, treachery, embezzlement? If there are no such malign capabilities, we need to know why not, given the striking prevalence of these sorts of activity in human life. Or if there *are* malign capabilities, we need to decide how to respond to this fact. Perhaps it means that the capabilities approach cannot be applied at all—we need to try some other approach. Or perhaps it means that the capabilities approach can be applied, but yields immoralism rather than a conventionally moral outlook. The point is not that the capability approach cannot deal with this sort of objection. It is that it is a virtue of the capability approach to raise this problem so clearly, since the problem is central for any biologically based ethics.

A third sort of objection to the capabilities approach will begin in suspicion of the sheer scope and ambition of the kind of state that Nussbaum envisages: “[Politics’] aim is... to design a *comprehensive* support scheme for the functionings of *all* citizens over a *complete* life” (Nussbaum 1990: 228); “The job of government... does not stop until we have removed *all* impediments that stand between [the] citizen and fully human functioning” (1990: 215).

It sounds like the capability approach has a worrying tendency towards statism and centralism. But here we come back to the problem I noticed above, about how to get

from a theory of the good to a theory of the right. The objection to sweeping claims like these is not that the capability approach inevitably yields a worryingly strong form of statism. It is that there seems to be no inevitability at all about the emergence of these strongly statist views alongside the theory of the good with which the capability approach begins. The capability approach cannot be a complete political philosophy without clear answers to crucial questions of liberty and rights: about the balance between state and individual, about what sorts of state intervention and confiscation are permissible and why, and indeed about what justifies the very existence of the state in the first place. Again, I am not suggesting that these questions cannot be answered by adherents of the capability approach—though I am suggesting that they have not been answered yet.⁷

A different kind of question about the capability approach, to which I briefly turn in closing, is not whether it is plausible, but whether Nussbaum is right to claim that it is genuinely Aristotelian. To answer that, let us take the components of the capability approach one by one.

First, I said above, the capability approach aims to offer us a *universalistic* approach to ethics and politics, by identifying aspects of human life which all humans in all societies share in, and in which all humans must have some conception or other of what well being is, and how it can be achieved. In its concern to identify these functionings, the theory is certainly very like Aristotle's own, though Nussbaum identifies them more clearly and systematically than Aristotle does.

However, the reasons why Aristotle and Nussbaum wish to identify a set of capabilities and found a normative theory on them seem to be different. Nussbaum 1988 takes her own universalism to be an ambition that Aristotle shares: she sees him as

someone who engages in a cosmopolitan critique of all known ethical and political outlooks. But it is surely clear that Aristotle does not share Nussbaum's ambition. Unlike some other Greeks—Herodotus, for instance—he is simply not interested in being able to engage in normative debate in a cosmopolitan way. Aristotle certainly wants to vindicate his own ethical and political views as the absolute truth, but the vindication is for his own and his friends' and peers' sake, not for the sake of just any interlocutor at all. If the barbarians disagree with him, Aristotle does not wish to argue with them. He simply doesn't care—for they are barbarians.

This mention of barbarians brings us to the most striking difference of all between the neo-Aristotelian capability approach and anything that is actually in Aristotle himself—the difference that makes the capability approach acceptable to modern liberal individualists like me, while Aristotle's own political naturalism is not. As I noted above, the central normative claim of the capability approach is doubly egalitarian: we are to work towards the (a) equal support and realisation of citizens' capabilities, which are thought of as (b) broadly equal capabilities. The problem with taking these egalitarian claims as not only neo-Aristotelian, but also historically Aristotelian, is not that Aristotle does not make similar sounding claims. As Nussbaum goes to great lengths to demonstrate, he certainly does. The problem is that Aristotle's egalitarian claims only *sound* similar. The trick is in the word “citizens,” *politai*.

Nussbaum tells us that, for the Aristotelian,

the task of political arrangement is both *broad* and deep. *Broad*, in that it is concerned with the good living not of an elite few, but of each and every member

of the polity. It aims to bring every member across a threshold into conditions...
in which a good human life may be chosen and lived. (Nussbaum 1990: 209)

On the face of it this seems the plainest of exegetical sailing. After all, doesn't Aristotle similarly say this, in a passage that Nussbaum has just quoted?

It is evident that the best *politeia* is that arrangement according to which anyone whatsoever (*hostisoun*) might do best and live a flourishing life.⁸

But here we come to it. "Anyone whatsoever": a slave? A barbarian? A woman? Of course not. Here and everywhere in the *Politics* that he uses this sort of general language, Aristotle means "anyone whatsoever *who is naturally qualified to be a citizen in the first place,*" and takes this to be such an obvious qualification on his remarks that he does not bother to state it. (Any more than we might state the real, but to us easily invisible, limits on a claim true in our society such as "Everyone can vote.")⁹

Here a great gulf opens up between Aristotle's "anyone whatsoever" and Nussbaum's supposedly parallel "each and every member of the polity." She and Aristotle disagree fundamentally: not about what is owed to a citizen, but about who is entitled to be a citizen in the first place. Nussbaum contrasts a defensible concern for the well-being of every citizen with an indefensible concern only for the well-being of what she calls "an elite few." But, in her terms, the citizenry that Aristotle has in mind *is* "an elite few."

Remember the sheer number of slaves that, in Aristotle's time, were working in Athenian society. (For more on slaves, cf. Depew, this volume.) Pretty well every Athenian citizen, even the poorest, had at least one domestic slave; in the true style of a Hegelian master and slave dialectic, poor citizens saw the possession of a slave as a mark of their own freedom. The rich would certainly not stop at a single domestic slave (rich households might include fifty). There were many other categories of slaves besides domestic ones. Most, perhaps all, Athenian businesses presupposed the existence of slavery: large-scale businesses owned slaves who worked in factories and mines and docks and galleys; smaller-scale businesses like farms involved something like serfdom. The city of Athens deployed 1200 "public slaves" (*dēmosioi*) as its police force (these are the Scythians often mentioned in Aristophanes); other public slaves worked as clerks in the Athenian treasury and the Assembly, as executioners and torturers, at producing coins in the Athenian mint, as temple attendants like Ion in Euripides, and so on.

Familiar though they may be, these facts cannot be emphasized enough if we want, for the purposes of political philosophy, a clear view of exactly what kind of society it is that Aristotle was admiring and advocating, in his admiration and advocacy of the Athenian style of city-state. For instance, the facts about slavery at Athens should help us to get a proper perspective on Aristotle's well-known doctrine (see e.g. *Pol.* 1278a22) that certain forms of work, and in particular manual labor, are inconsistent with the dignity of citizenship. Against the background of the socio-economic facts about slavery at Athens, this is not an admirably high-minded proto-Marxian plea for "the construction of fully human and sociable forms of labor for all citizens" (Nussbaum

1990: 231). Rather it is the fiercely conservative doctrine that slaves should be kept in their place, so that the citizens can be kept in theirs.

More widely, the sheer number of slaves as opposed to citizens that were found at Athens should help us to see the crucial ambiguity of that tricky phrase “all citizens.” Restricted in the way that Aristotle means to restrict it, and in the way that it was in fact restricted at Athens in his time, “all citizens” does not mean the universal-suffrage group of all mentally competent adults that liberals like myself and Nussbaum readily assume must be meant. The Aristotelian citizenry are nothing like the citizenry of a modern liberal democracy. They may indeed be equal among themselves, but then so are the members of a gentlemen’s club; what is more to the point is the number of *non*-equals who are excluded from their sort of equality. Given the racial distinctions that there usually were between Athenian freemen and their slaves, who were usually brought from the middle east or central Asia as victims of war, terror, or professional slave-hunting (*Pol.* 1256b24), the closest equivalent to the Athenian citizenry in the modern world is the white elite of South African apartheid. And, remember, Aristotle in the *Politics* is busy arguing for this sort of polity: he goes to as much effort to show that slavery is natural as he does to show that the *polis* is natural, and indeed his arguments for the two theses are connected.

The uncomfortable conclusion of this train of thought is that Aristotle uses the resources of something like a capability approach to argue for a racist and supremacist segregationism. That fact should give us a little pause before we claim, as we might in a brash moment, that whatever is neo-Aristotelian is also historically Aristotelian. It might

also prevent us from being completely confident that an Aristotelian, or neo-Aristotelian, capability approach leads inevitably to a plausible and attractive liberal political theory like Nussbaum's. It would be nice if it did, of course; but the fact is that Aristotle manages to take the approach to an embarrassingly different conclusion.

It is interesting to try and think out the reasons why this difference is possible. One of the reasons, at least, is obvious: in between Aristotle's resolute chauvinism and Nussbaum's resolute universalism, there came the radical cosmopolitanism and egalitarianism of Pauline Christianity.¹⁰

FURTHER READING

The standard edition of Aristotle's *Politics* is Ross 1957. Good translations include Barker's (see Stalley 1995b) and Jowett's, revised by Jonathan Barnes (in Barnes 1984). Valuable secondary reading includes Keyt and Miller 1991, Kraut 2002, Miller 1995, Mulgan 1977, Salkever 1990, Simpson 1988, and Yack 1993. The best online resource is Miller 2002.

¹ Here and elsewhere in this chapter, the translations from the Greek are my own.

² Cf. Denyer 1991, last chapter ("Aristotelian optimism"), and Hedrick in this volume, p.4.

³ Unless the demes were not ancient entities but artefacts of Cleisthenes' reforms, a question on which ancient historians do not agree: see Ostwald 1986: 175-181.

⁴ Self-sufficiency as an ethical ideal faces other objections, too. What is so great about needing no one else? Why shouldn't it be a sign that I *lack* well-being that I am never vulnerable or dependent? Perhaps we should celebrate human interdependence, not see it as a flaw to be remedied: cf. MacIntyre 2001. In any case Aristotle's emphasis on self-sufficiency is not entirely easy to reconcile with another emphasis that he frequently makes much of—namely his emphasis on friendship.

⁵ Nussbaum's question has a curious implication: that a group of creatures with human chromosomes and genetic lineage might *not* be human, and that a group of creatures with no such chromosomes or lineage might *be* human. This distances her use of "human" from the scientist's sense of the word. It makes "human" in her mouth, like "person" in many contemporary philosophers' mouths, an "evaluative concept," as she agrees at Nussbaum 1995: 126n.17; indeed she tends to treat "person" and "human" as synonyms. I share Williams 2006's reservations about any such use of "human": even in its ethical deployment it is much better kept a straightforwardly biological term.

⁶ Williams 1981; for further discussion see Chappell 2006.

⁷ They are not answered, for instance, by Wolff and de-Shalit's impressive book (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007), which takes their version of the capability approach as its theory of the good, and adds their version of egalitarianism as its theory of the right; but, explicitly, not so much by arguing for egalitarianism over non-egalitarianism, as by seeking a consensus *among* egalitarians: Wolff and de-Shalit 2007: 3.

⁸ Nussbaum's own translation; the reference is to *Politics* 1324a24.

⁹ For an examination of a similar invisibility in Socrates' ethical and political thought, see my paper "Why wasn't Socrates a cosmopolitan?," which is available on my webpage at http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/philos/why_wasnt_Socrates_cosmopolitan.pdf.

¹⁰ Thanks to Ryan Balot and Sarah Broadie for helpful comments; neither is, of course, responsible for my mistakes.