

# **4 Aristotle and Alexander: from Thinking to Practicing Politics**

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Despite the fact that Alexander the Great is easily visualized as a military agent and reformer, it becomes gradually more popular to evaluate him as a political instigator. The influence of his former tutor, Aristotle, and the impact of Aristotelian political philosophy on the policies that Alexander exerted during his attempt to organize the institutional function of his newly founded empire is the focus of the work at hand. Aristotle's principles of political philosophy are compared and contrasted to various decisions and reforms of Alexander, that allow us to infer that at least some of his former tutor's ideas had informed the way that Alexander regarded politics.

## **4.1 Introduction**

The conquest of the East by Alexander the Great informed not only the geography and the politics of the known world, but still raises issues of contemporary interest, concerning multiculturalism, cultural integration and even mechanisms of organization governance.<sup>(1)</sup> Alexander was an exceptional personality, with progressive ideas that surpassed its times, especially those regarding cultural fusion and the creation of a state comprised of equally functional individuals, transgressing concepts of ethnocentrism.<sup>(2)</sup> Even if it is easier to think of Alexander as a military leader and not as a political instigator or reformer, it is exactly this that should draw our attention.<sup>(3)</sup> It is also interesting to relate the political implementations of Alexander in relation to the political ideas of his tutor, Aristotle and contemplate on the impact of Aristotelian thinking on his tutee, Alexander. I will try to consider the effect of Aristotelian political thought on Alexander's policy, concentrating on the principle doctrines of Aristotle's political philosophy.

## **4.2 Aristotle's political thinking and Alexander's political implementation**

From a methodological point of view, our first concern should be the lack of a written corpus or precise information regarding the teaching of Aristotle to Alexander, during the time that the first was invited by Philip II to tutor the young prince. Aristotle's written work was composed after his fleeing from Macedonia to Athens as resident alien between 335-323 B.C. It is during this period that he worked on the *Politics*. He returned to Macedonia after the death of Alexander, in fear of persecution due to his connection with the royal court of Pella. Despite the lack of precise information regarding the teaching of Alexander, we can infer the main principles from later sources, such as Plutarch's, *Life of Alexander*, where he states that "It would appear that Alexander received from him not only his doctrines of Morals

and of Politics, but also something of those more abstruse and profound theories which these philosophers, by the very names they gave them, professed to reserve for oral communication to the initiated, and did not allow many to become acquainted with".<sup>(4)</sup> According to Plutarch (*Life of Alexander*) the works of Aristotle were published when Alexander was away on his campaign, causing the complaints of Alexander who wished to be the sole beneficiary of his tutor's political teaching:

[7.6] *For when he was in Asia, and heard Aristotle had published some treatises of that kind, he wrote to him, using very plain language to him in behalf of philosophy, the following letter.*

[7.7] *Alexander to Aristotle, greeting. You have not done well to publish your books of oral doctrine; for what is there now that we excel others in, if those things which we have been particularly instructed in be laid open to all? For my part, I assure you, I had rather excel others in the knowledge of what is excellent, than in the extent of my power and dominion. Farewell.*

[7.8] *And Aristotle, soothing this passion for pre-eminence, speaks, in his excuse for himself, of these doctrines as in fact both published and not published:*

[7.9] *as indeed, to say the truth, his books on metaphysics are written in a style which makes them useless for ordinary teaching, and instructive only, in the way of memoranda, for those who have been already conversant in that sort of learning.*

In any case we can safely infer that Aristotle's expressed an idea of naturalism in his political philosophy, immediately influenced by his observation of nature; his interest in comparative politics and his sympathies for democracy as well as monarchy may have been encouraged by his travels and experience of diverse political systems; he criticizes harshly, while borrowing extensively, from Plato's *Republic*, *Statesman*, and *Laws*; and his own *Politics* is intended to guide rulers and statesmen.

#### **4.2.1 Principle of teleology**

According to Miller, Aristotle begins the *Politics* by invoking the concept of nature. In the *Physics* Aristotle identifies the nature of a thing above all with its end or final cause (*Physics* II.2.194a28–9, 8.199b15–18). The end of a thing is also its function (*Eudemian Ethics* II.1.1219a8), which is its defining principle (*Meteorology* IV.12.390a10–11). On Aristotle's view plants and animals are paradigm cases of natural existents, because they have a nature in the sense of an internal causal principle which explains how it comes into being and behaves (*Phys.* II.1.192b32–3). For example, an acorn has an inherent tendency to grow into an oak tree, so that the tree exists by nature rather than by craft or by chance. The thesis that human beings have a natural function has a fundamental place in the *Eudemian Ethics* II.1, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7, and *Politics* I.2. Thus teleology is crucial for the political naturalism which is at the foundation of Aristotle's political philosophy.<sup>(5)</sup>

It seems that Alexander's inherent wish to become a leader and transgress limits and limitations <sup>(6)</sup> was recognized very early by his own father, as we infer from the anecdote on the story of the horse Bucephalus, recounted by Plutarch, who connects this story with his version of how the tutorship of Aristotle came to be: "Philip and his company were speechless with anxiety at first; but when Alexander made the turn in proper fashion and came back to them proud and exultant, all the rest broke into loud cries, but his father, as we are told, actually shed tears of joy, and when Alexander had dismounted, kissed him, saying: "My son, seek thee out a kingdom equal to thyself;

Macedonia has not room for thee." And since Philip saw that his son's nature was unyielding and that he resisted compulsion, but was easily led by reasoning into the path of duty, he himself tried to persuade rather than to command him; and because he would not wholly entrust the direction and training of the boy to the ordinary teachers of poetry and the formal studies, feeling that it was a matter of too great importance, and, in the words of Sophocles "A task for many bits and rudder-sweeps as well," he sent for the most famous and learned of philosophers, Aristotle, and paid him a noble and appropriate tuition-fee. The city of Stageira, that is, of which Aristotle was a native, and which he had himself destroyed, he peopled again, and restored to it those of its citizens who were in exile or slavery".<sup>(7)</sup>

#### **4.2.2 Principle of community**

Miller draws attention to the second principle of Aristotle's political philosophy, which is the principle of community: Aristotle maintains that the city-state is the most complete community, because it attains the limit of self-sufficiency, so that it can exist for the sake of the good life (*Pol.* I.2.1252b27–30). The *Politics* further argues that it is part of the nature of human beings that they are political or adapted for life in the city-state. Individuals outside of the city-state are not self-sufficient, because they depend on the community not only for material necessities but also for education and moral habituation. "Just as, when perfected, a human is the best of animals, so also when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all" (1253a31–3). On Aristotle's view, then, human beings must be subject to the authority of the city-state in order to attain the good life. The following principle concerns how authority should be exercised within a community.<sup>(8)</sup>

In his essay "On the Fortune and Courage of Alexander the Great" Plutarch claims that "by founding over seventy cities (*poleis*) among the barbarian tribes and seeding Asia with Greek magistrates, Alexander conquered its undomesticated and bestial way of life" (*Mor.* 328E). This is a notion distinctively different to the principles of Plato, for example, who did not advise for the founding of cities. It is in accordance, though, with the aforementioned principles of Aristotle. It is not important to numerate the precise number of cities founded by Alexander, as both ancient and modern scholarship is divided, nevertheless recognizes the importance of the cities.<sup>(9)</sup> Arrian provides us with a revealing account on Alexander's intentions, which is in accordance with the Aristotelian thinking. Arrian refers to the foundation of a new city at the Tanais river, Alexandria Eschata (151-153):

*He was himself planning to found a city on the Tanais, and to give it his own name. For in his view the site was suitable for the city to rise to greatness, and it would be well placed for any eventual invasion of Scythia and as a defence bastion of the country against the raids of the barbarians dwelling on the other side of the river. He thought the city would actually rise to greatness because of the number of settlers and the splendour of its name.*<sup>(10)</sup>

Of course, Aristotle might have been provided the general model, but the fine-tuning of this belonged to Alexander. "The degree of independence which individual *poleis*, or groups of *poleis*, enjoyed in the new age of empires and kingships appears to have varied widely. While it is striking that Aristotle seems to have paid so little attention to the new emerging political realities (the shape and consequences of which may in any case not have been so obvious to a contemporary observer as they are to us) the old issues about the organization and administration of the polis still remained very much alive".<sup>(11)</sup> The most crucial factor is the realization of the necessity of the city-state that became the means of stability for the new formation of his empire and the cradle of a civilization that aspired to the merging of

both old and new, local and imported from the Greek world and the importance of the *polis*, as stated by Aristotle.

### **4.2.3 Principle of rulership**

“Aristotle believes that the existence and well-being of any system requires the presence of a ruling element: “Whenever a thing is established out of a number of things and becomes a single common thing, there always appears in it a ruler and ruled ... This [relation] is present in living things, but it derives from all of nature” (1254a28–32). Just as an animal or plant can survive and flourish only if its soul rules over its body (*Pol.* I.5.1254a34–6, *De Anima* I.5.410b10–15; compare Plato *Phaedo* 79e-80a), a human community can possess the necessary order only if it has a ruling element which is in a position of authority, just as an army can possess order only if it has a commander in control. Although Aristotle follows Plato in accepting this principle, he rejects Plato's further claim that a single science of ruling is appropriate for all (see Plato *Statesman* 258e-259c. For Aristotle different forms of rule are required for different systems: e.g., political rule for citizens and despotic rule for slaves. The imposition of an inappropriate form of rule results in disorder and injustice. This point becomes clearer in the light of the following corollary of the principle of rulership”.<sup>(12)</sup>

Let us compare the views of Aristotle to the notions of rulership by Alexander. First of all, with regards to the notions on political rule for citizens and despotic rule for slaves. Aristotle asserted this influence particularly with regard to the so-called barbarians—a term that was used to characterize essentially all non-Greeks. Alexander himself was already passionately anti-Persian; and Aristotle provided him with the intellectual justifications for his fated and inherited mission. Aristotle believed that slavery was a natural institution, and that barbarians were by nature meant to be slaves. He therefore encouraged Alexander to be a leader to Greeks and a despot to barbarians, treating the former as friends and the latter as beasts. It is however an utter exaggeration to say that Aristotle considered all barbarians to be natural slaves. Aristotle says that freedom should be offered to slaves as a reward ( 4. 7. 10. 1330a32-33). However, slavery is not a permanent situation and according to Aristotle, one could be educated out of slavery, perhaps under a virtuous master. Nowhere does Aristotle claim that it is unjust to free natural slaves. He says that it is unjust to enslave those who are not natural slaves. In short, masters are those who are naturally virtuous and slaves are those who had wrong upbringing or are corrupted. Many “barbarians” are in this condition, but, rationally speaking, many Greeks would be in this position, too. It is true, of course, according

Then with regards to the notion of the ruling element in position of authority: according to Appian, “it is a conceivable theory that, if he both believed that all men were brothers, and also desired that the peoples of the world he knew, whether in his Empire or not, should live in unity and concord (see. App. 25. Vi), then he must have desired to bring all people under his rule in order to promote unity”.<sup>(13)</sup>

### **4.2.4 Principle of the rule of reason**

“Aristotle agrees with Plato's dictum that, whenever a system contains a rational element, it is appropriate for it to rule over the nonrational part, because the rational element alone knows what is best for the whole (see Plato *Republic* IV.441e). Aristotle elaborates on this principle: observing that different individuals can exemplify rationality in different ways and to different degrees, he maintains that different modes of rule are appropriate for different

sorts of ruler and subject. For example, a child has a deliberative capacity, but it is undeveloped and incomplete in comparison with an adult's, so that a child is a fit subject for paternal rule by its father; but paternal rule would be inappropriate between two adults who both have mature rational capacities (see *Politics* I.13 and III.6). In a political context the principle of the rule of reason also implies that different constitutions are appropriate for different city-states depending on the rational capacities of their citizens. This is an important consideration, for example, in Aristotle's discussions of democracy and the rule of law (see *Politics* III.11 and 15–16)".<sup>(14)</sup>

Without a doubt Alexander had realized the necessity of variable constitutions according to the rational capacities of their citizens. The most noted example is the issue of his deification, which led to much opposition on the side of his Macedonians who could not fathom the political benefits – even political need – for this decision.<sup>(15)</sup> In the 6th paragraph of the so-called stone or stēlē of Behistun<sup>(16)</sup>, Darius claims the legacy of his sovereignty as deriving straight from Ahura-Mazda.<sup>(17)</sup> Divine origin and protection had been the characteristic of all Egyptian and Persian rulers.

Most of our ancient sources agree that what Alexander really wanted from his visit to Ammun was confirmation of his divine patronage and his right to rule the world.<sup>(18)</sup> It is the story recorded by Curtius Rufus, who describes the famous linguistic slip of the priest of Ammun, who greeted Alexander as *son of Zeus*, simply by changing the final “n” of the vocative case into an “s”, thus turning it into a genitive, translated as ‘Hail, son of Zeus!’ instead of ‘Hail, young man!’. Curtius Rufus concludes his anecdote by informing us that Alexander not only allowed everyone to address him as Son of Zeus, but he also gave orders that this should be carried out.<sup>(19)</sup> Plutarch states that “nothing happened to Alexander, nor was he drunk; he was merely using the fame of his divinity only to subdue others”.<sup>(20)</sup> Curtius also agrees that by doing this, Alexander simply wanted to boast the glory of his achievements.<sup>(21)</sup> Why did he do this?

If Alexander wanted to legalize his ascendancy to the throne of Persia as a legal heir of the Achaemenid line of Kings, he had to demonstrate to his local subjects his divine origin, just like their previous rulers. Of course this led to great conflicts with his Macedonian associates, who, according to Curtius, “turned their back to their king, who was persistently talking about his immortality, making them feel awkward”.<sup>(22)</sup> It is true, that the only irresolute problem for Alexander was the making of his associates see eye-to-eye his visionary concept of a progressive joint administration of their new empire.

The same can be told of Alexander's decision to start wearing Persian attire – again, a burning issue which brought great discomfort to his Macedonian companions. Plutarch explains it in the most evident manner: “Considering carefully this order of affairs, Alexander did not favour the Median raiment, but preferred the Persian, for it was much more simple than the Median. Since he deprecated the unusual and theatrical varieties of foreign adornment, such as the tiara and the full-sleeved jacket and trousers, he wore a composite dress adapted from both Persian and Macedonian fashion, as Eratosthenes has recorded. As a philosopher what he wore was [p. 403] a matter of indifference, but as sovereign of both nations and benevolent king he strove to acquire the goodwill of the conquered by showing respect for their apparel, so that they might continue constant in loving the Macedonians as rulers, and might not feel hate toward them as enemies.”<sup>(23)</sup>

### **4.3 Conclusion**

Although difficult to judge the immediate influence of Aristotle's philosophy of politics on his young student, Alexander, the comparison of Aristotle's principle doctrines of political

thought to the implantation of Alexander's policies, reveals a close connection between the two great thinkers. Alexander definitely did not follow uncritically his tutor's teachings, as is evident in his treatment of his Persian subjects, whom he did not consider barbarians as Aristotle might have envisaged, but appointed many Persians in high ranking positions in the army and the administration of the satrapies. However, he was influenced in many regards by his tutor's ideas and applied them extensively while trying to create a model administration for his newly founded empire. In this respect Aristotle's most noted political wish as expressed via his *Politics*, that is the teaching of a ruler, was accomplished. Most of all, Alexander was the realization of every tutor's dream: teach someone the wish for life-long-learning. This is what we infer when we allow once more Plutarch to sum up the influence of Aristotle on Alexander with the following words: "For a while he loved and cherished Aristotle no less, as he was wont to say himself, than if he had been his father, giving this reason for it, that as he had received life from the one, so the other had taught him to live well. But afterwards, upon some mistrust of him, yet not so great as to make him do him any hurt, his familiarity and friendly kindness to him abated so much of its former force and affection, as to make it evident he was alienated from him. However, his violent thirst after and passion for learning, which were once implanted, still grew up with him, and never decayed".(24)

## 4.4 References

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- 18 Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 27; Diodorus, XVII, 51,3; Curtius IV, 7, 28; Justin XI, 11, 10. Only Arrian does not refer to any details with regards to the visit of Alexander to the temple and claims that the only thing Alexander wanted to know was about the future (Arrian, III, 3.2).
- 19 Curtius, XI, 11, 10.
- 20 Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 28.
- 21 Curtius, IV, 7. 30.
- 22 Curtius, IV, 7. 31.
- 23 Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, chap. xlv. (690 e-691 a); Cf. Diodorus, xvii. 77.
- 24 Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 8.4-8.5.