

**THE CONCEPT OF GOOD GOVERNANCE IN
ARISTOTLE'S VIEW
PART II
THE PRACTICAL DIMENSION**

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Abstract: *Due to their natural sociability, men have eventually gathered in a politically organized community. Once realized, this association is required to demonstrate its superiority and this thing can be established by means of its ability to perform the functions for which it was “invented.” Aristotle lays the basis for both the theory of good governance and the ways to achieve it. The purpose of a regime that is underlain by good governance should be the happiness of the members of the political community.*

Keywords: *citizen, civil service, community, sociability, combination, legislator, democracy, middle class, demagogue, freedom, happiness.*

The Stagirit did not limit himself to the analysis of prior or contemporary political regimes when he formulated his political theory, focused on identifying the best form of government. Furthermore, he almost brilliantly rendered the period in which he lived, “the life of the city-state” in all its dimensions, “its living” depending on the nature of its governance. The main actor of this “play”, otherwise extremely important in the game of humanity, was, undoubtedly, the citizen of the city-state, that formidable *zoon politikon*, Aristotle’s contemporary. Starting from the premise that the city is a lot made of people, we learn that not all people were assigned this quality which was after all similar to a title of nobility.

Thus, there were “relative” and still not enrolled citizens such as children and the free of service old persons, there were also civically degraded citizens, but also citizens in the absolute meaning of the term. The latter relied on the assessment done in the *Politics* and were once recorded as such for their participation in the judicial decision and in the civil service. This interesting distinction between the two activities, the judicial one – possibly indefinitely exerted-- and the other one, considered public in itself, but limited in time and also unrepeatable as the exercise of such a mandate.

Of course such a definition of the citizen demanded the need for legitimacy given by the parents of the respective citizen, who were both citizens but had a certain relativization depending on the nature of the political regime, different from the democratic one to which he belonged.

Out of these citizens, themselves inhabitants of the city, but somehow *primum inter pares*, there will emerge the one who will be recognized as their leader, who should have been himself ruled before being legitimize, so that he might understand those whom he will rule and know their aspirations: “The one that is ruled is like the master of flutes and the ruler is the flute player who makes use of them” - Aristotle tells us.

It is interesting and especially perennial the definition that Aristotle gives to the political regime, “the organization of the city in relation to various functions and particularly with that sovereign over all.” So there is always a function “above” all the other functions of the state of which define eventually its essence, and the most prolific

philosopher of Western culture provides a clear example: “In democracy, the sovereign is the people but conversely, a minority is sovereign in oligarchies.

The motivation that leads to the association of men in the community – in the city - is itself complicated and complex. Thus, first, man has a social nature; his sociability generates his first impulse of gathering in a community. Then, there is in man a tendency towards welfare and this leads him to eventually join the community of the city. Before reaching this higher form of association - the city - man lived in the family association, in various guilds, opportunities that convinced him of the benefit of an association. Such associations, previous to the association of the city, were dominated by the attitude of the one who ruled them temporarily, for the benefit of both the ruler and the ruled. When this fundamental rule – the rule of everyone’s good - is breached, there took place deviations from the city’s correct, public function, to bad regimes, foreign to the interest of the city, which by its very nature is “a community of free men.”

The discussion related to the place and the role of the legislator, in the city’s welfare theorized by Aristotle is particularly important because it tells us that the judge must determine the most correct laws in order to achieve the good of the community, serving as a person of leading position within the community.

The practical character of the issues contained in this monumental work, *Politics*, is based on two extraordinary pillars: on the one hand, there are analyzed constitutions prior to the author’s times as well as contemporary constitutions, and on the other hand, a veritable “technology” of how to achieve the best constitution is created starting from reality-based data. The author finds that there are three constitutions that deserve to be evaluated, namely kingship, aristocracy and polity; he also mentions their deviant counterparts, namely tyranny, oligarchy and democracy.

Democracy itself involves various forms of manifestation: sometimes it allows the participation of all citizens in the governing of the city-state, in other contexts participation is permitted only to those who are free, and finally another form is that in which the affairs of the city are governed by those who have no income but who are paid for this activity.

Oligarchy in turn also manifested several forms: Aristotle refers to a situation where there exists a so-called “middle class” and where the rule of law is dominant, then he describes the influence of that oligarchy characterized by the influence of fewer but richer classes and finally the oligarchy of the very few but very wealthy characterized by succession in the sphere of power.

Undoubtedly, the thorough analysis of all the constituent elements of both democracy and oligarchy allowed the great thinker to highlight both the positive and the negative aspects of these two constitutions. The same comparative evaluation has eventually allowed him to manage to “shape” the pattern of the ideal constitution. Definitely, at the end of this work, Aristotle concluded that “the best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class, and that those states are likely to be well-administered in which the middle class is large, and stronger if possible than both the other classes, or at any rate than either singly.”

His experience and knowledge in matters of state theory have allowed Aristotle to assert the supremacy of this type of political community and its good governance, whose purely economic basis was represented by “the average and sufficient wealth” of the majority of the population. Unlike this type of community, both democracy and oligarchy were characterized by deviations, conflicts and, ultimately, by the domination of one class over the other which was exerted strictly to the former’s own interest. Solon and the age when he ruled in Athens represented an additional argument to support not only the theory that the best ruler could be one who came from the middle class but also the

model of society and good government which had really existed although only temporarily.

The city-state is studied both in terms of its quality composed of wealth, education, noble birth, and in terms of its quantitative side which presupposed the “superiority of the many”. These features characterize all citizens regardless of the nature of the established regime just as another common feature was the existence of a middle category between the other social categories of the political community. Political regimes, whatever their nature, being made by people for people, had, of course, just as in our time, common fundamental features. At the origin of the articulation of these features laid, according to Aristotle, the so called “tricks” used to diversify the “political game” but also to enhance its applicability, such as the assembly, the functions and the tribunals. The modern and contemporary era has named the presentation of these common features of political regimes “the separation of powers”; however, this separation existed and was practiced, many centuries before our era, within those political regimes which were all aware of the existence of the three “bodies”: the deliberative body, the body that is responsible for functions, and finally the legislative body. The similarity between these various political regimes went beyond the common existence of these “bodies” to the identical skills that were attributed to these bodies.

Certainly, at one moment, there also occurred difference between the different types of political regimes, and the specificity was offered by the concrete way to exert such skills, the presence or absence of a balance between them and, not least by the access of some or everyone to fill positions in these “bodies”. The specificity of each regime is then deepened by the duration of these functions within each “body”, by the number of seats, by the modalities of investiture and finally, by the means of access to various functions.

Controversy could occur even at the time when Aristotle analyzed the defining elements, the necessity and the utility of the so-called public functions. Another issue linked to the theory of the public function was and still is the one regarding the overlapping of functions which is often seen as an objective to be achieved. Of course, “the functions’ landscape” was often similar in different regimes but besides the common fundamental functions necessary to the city-state, each system took care to establish its own specific functions. The differences arose from the people who were entitled to designate functions, then from where the future occupants of these positions were selected and not least the practical way of implementing these procedures.

Special attention was given to the analysis of the judicial body which, in turn, could be different depending on the competence, the manner of formation and its composition. We notice the strict, specialized organization of the tribunals, an average of eight, naturally determined by the different nature of the conflicts that they were required to submit to their trial. It is worthy to note the existence of the political courts of justice which Aristotle considered to be so important that they even led to “changes of political regimes”. After establishing the defining elements of the regimes to which they belonged the “judicial body” came also to be configured causing in turn to be judged democratic, oligarchic or aristocratic.

The stability of regimes may be due to common elements but also their changes may have common causes. One major cause resulted from the lack of a middle class, intended if it existed, to “arbitrate” the conflicts between the dominant social groups.

The individual human factor can, in turn, determine the good or bad fate of the city-state, the reinforcing of a certain system or even its disappearance. This particular human factor is also that of the demagogue (demagogues), who in the name of the so-called ideals to which the majority can adhere temporarily, often incite the overthrow of the existing regime. However, such demagogues can sometimes be faced with the

boomerang effect of their own subversive actions by the return to power of those whom they had banished.

The demagogue has remained a figure of all political regimes even though his vehemence and directly proportionate “success” differs from one period to another or from one human community to another.

Aristotle considered the ephemeral exercise of the different functions of power in as essential for a good constitution, considering it a good shield against the emergence of tyranny.

He also noted the practical ways of manipulating the population by those who dealt with strengthening and maintaining one regime or another by means of exaggerating the fears of the community, by describing remote dangers as immediate and not least by the strict monitoring of conflicts or of potential conflicts between the different social groups.

Political regimes also shared common threats to their integrity; one of the greatest dangers was the corruption of those who held various positions who were often suspected of defrauding mutual funds. The solution proposed by Aristotle to this disease was that functions that must be occupied by those who were rich and did not accept any source of revenue for it. Although he noted, in a greater measure, the common elements of various political regimes, Aristotle found it necessary to define the democratic regime as a model good constitution, founded, in his view, on the fundamental principle of freedom.

According to Aristotle, the manifestation of the concept of freedom consists in the ability to lead and also to be led, characterizing the member of each community that has chosen the democratic regime.

We are almost in the theoretical presence of an absolute individual freedom since the content of the concept contained living to one’s own will.

Once this premise is established as the defining principle of democracy, all other principles appear as natural consequences of it: everyone leads and is led by everyone, free access to any function, limited mandates so that, theoretically, everyone could manage to obtain one and, why not, payment of these high functions.

The legal system that organized and protected such a community would, undoubtedly, ensure the total equality of the members of this city.

After the balanced presentation and analysis of the different types of constitutions and their way of governing, Aristotle returns to the leitmotif of his work: which is the best type of constitution, capable, therefore, to ensure the happiness of the city?

Nothing easier: that constitution that aims to ensure the happiness of the city and is capable to have as a result of its activity the attainment of this ideal.

What is happiness? Nothing more complicated than the answer to this question, because both the question and the answer has thousands of owners. For reasons related to the intellectual force of Aristotle he knew to find the defining element of happiness; furthermore, in *Politics*, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *Metaphysics* and not least in *Rhetoric*, although at different times, he manages to present the true way that can lead to happiness.

The entire action of all the institutions that made up the state mechanism was obligatorily required to achieve the city’s state of happiness if it wanted to achieve good governance. Therefore, in order to understand this part of Aristotle’s thinking we will have to present the moral dimension that characterizes the good governance.

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