



“Summary of article by Martha Nussbaum: Aristotelian Social Democracy” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 3: Human Well-Being and Economic Goals. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 273-275

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This article argues that political institutions should focus on developing the capabilities of its citizens and assuring that every citizen has access to the necessary circumstances for good human functioning. This Aristotelian perspective contrasts with other liberal approaches that define social goals in terms of increasing wealth, increasing welfare, or equalizing the distribution of resources.

BASIC ELEMENTS OF ARISTOTELIAN POLITICAL THEORY

An Aristotelian conception of political institutions is based on a theory of human good, i.e., on what it means to function as a human being. Such a theory describes at a suitably general level the functionings and goals that individuals in all societies pursue. The task of the political planner is to make sure that every citizen has the capability to choose a life of good functioning. This objective is accomplished by making available the relevant material, institutional, and educational circumstances, while treating all citizens as free and equal. These circumstances will vary across cultures and societies.

PRIORITY OF THE GOOD

In contrast to the major liberal theories, the Aristotelian view first defines what makes for good human functioning and then designs political arrangements to advance this good. The basic intuition behind this approach of giving priority to the good is that it is necessary to understand what makes for a good life before developing the institutions to promote it. Since this view is concerned with all members of a given society, the purpose of political arrangements is both broad and deep: broad in that its goal is to bring every citizen across a threshold into conditions in which a good human life may be chosen and lived; deep in that it is concerned with the totality of functionings that constitute the good life, not merely with money, land, opportunities, and office.

The Aristotelian conception differs in several important ways from opposing views that define the good either in terms of wealth, wealth and distribution, or utility. (1) Although no major contemporary liberal theorist defines the good in terms of wealth, GNP is widely used by liberal democratic governments as a measure of economic development. This approach mistakes wealth (a means) with goodness (an end), and fails to consider how and to what extent wealth contributes to people's lives. (2) The liberal political theories of Dworkin and Rawls describe the goodness of political arrangements in terms of resources and their distribution among citizens.

The Aristotelian conception objects that possessions are not good in themselves and that answers to interesting questions about distribution require an examination of how resources affect human functioning. "Even to answer the question 'Which things that we have to hand are the useful and usable resources?' requires some implicit conception of the good and of good human functioning." (P. 212) (3) Utilitarian theory supports the Aristotelian view that resources have only instrumental value, but takes a different turn when it argues that an individual's good can be achieved by satisfying his or her actual desires and preferences. The central problem with the utilitarian approach is that desire is an unreliable guide to human good. Desire adapts to both good and bad circumstances, and it tends to constrain the imagination. As a result, political arrangements that focus exclusively on actual preferences lead inexorably to a reinforcement of the status quo.

THE THICK VAGUE CONCEPTION OF THE GOOD

Any political view that questions the reliability of desire as a guide to human good must face the liberal charge of paternalism, i.e., that some life projects are favored over others. The Aristotelian view meets this criticism head-on by sketching a "thick vague" outline of a good life that embraces the important life functions shared by everyone and captures the important ends in all areas of human activity. This escapes the charge of being excessively metaphysical because it is based on commonalities found in the myths and stories of different societies that answer the question: "What are the features of our common humanity, features that lead us to recognize certain others, however distant their location and their forms of life, as humans...?"

The shape and structure of our shared humanity can be approximated with an open-ended list. This list includes various capabilities such as being able to live to the end of a complete life, being able to have good health, being able to avoid pain and enjoy pleasure, being able to use the five senses, being able to assess and critically revise a conception of one's own good, being able to care for others and nature, being able to play and laugh, being able to live one's own life and no one else's, and being able to live one's own life in one's own circumstances. "[O]ur working list is meant not as 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 direct attention to certain areas of special importance." (P. 219.) It is evaluative because it is selective, and it implies that a life without any of these capabilities would be lacking in humanness. It is irreducibly plural, but it contains two elements -- practical reason and affiliation -- that serve to organize and arrange all the others.

The charge of paternalism also suggests that Aristotelianism, because it advocates a single conception of the good life, does not permit individuals to choose a plurality of conceptions of the good life. It allegedly tells people what to do with their lives. The Aristotelian response is first, that the account of the good is a list of capabilities or opportunities for functioning, precisely in order to leave room for choice of when and whether to exercise the function. Second, that there is a plurality of concrete specifications of the thick vague account of the good in different cultures and societies. Individuals endorse the thick vague conception in the way they conduct their lives, even though the variance among individual lives may be very great. The Aristotelian conception of the good life is grounded in the humanness that all members of our species share at a fundamental level. Contrary to the charge of paternalism, Aristotelianism

does not prescribe a certain way of life, and it celebrates choice in at least four ways. Citizens are assumed able to choose (a) whether to function well; (b) whether to participate in the political design of institutions; (c) what kind of life they would like to lead; and (d) where to draw the limits of personal spheres of privacy and non-intervention.

THE TASK OF POLITICS

The aim of Aristotelian politics is consistent with institutional, rather than residual, welfarism. It designs institutions to provide comprehensive support to individuals over the course of their entire lives. Unlike residual welfarism, it does not wait to see who fails under a given institutional arrangement to then bail them out. Instead there is a focus on getting more individuals to have the capability to choose a good life, rather than improving the lives and choices of those who have already fallen below a minimum threshold of choice.

The Aristotelian view has important implications for the areas of labor, property, political participation, and education. According to Aristotle, some forms of labor are so incompatible with good human functioning that compensation in the form of money and commodities cannot undo the damage wrought by such work. As a result, the Aristotelian conception excludes labor opportunities that are inimical to good functioning. With respect to property, Aristotle advocated both private and common property -- that each person should be able to live in an environment that is hers alone, but that a person in need ought also to be able to help herself to someone else's crops with impunity. Citizenship in the Aristotelian view extends to the political sphere. All citizens share the ability to participate in making and administering laws, since it is in the political arena that the conception of good that shapes a citizen's life is formulated. Finally, the most important focus of political planning concerns education because it is here that the capacity to choose is developed and the powers of mind are cultivated.