

# POLITICAL



# THEORY

## Featured Topics

Introduction to Greek Translations

*Plato's Gorgias*

*Plato's Republic*

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*Aristotle's Politics*

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The Great Leap

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Ethics Vs. Order – Or is it?

## Loeb Classical Library

Callicles: This, they say, is how you're supposed to do your part in a war or a battle, Socrates.

Socrates: Oh? did we "arrive when the feast was over," as the saying goes? Are we late?

Callicles: Yes, and a very urbane one it was! Gorgias gave us an admirable, varied presentation just a short while ago.

## Blackboard Translation

Callicles: To join in a fight or a fray, as the saying is, Socrates, you have chosen your time well enough.

Socrates: Do you mean, according to the proverb, we have come too late for a feast?

Callicles: Yes, a most elegant feast; for Gorgias gave us a fine and varied display but a moment ago.

# είναι ελληνικό για μένα

## (It's Greek to Me)

Frankly, I did not understand the "feast vs. fray" comment from either of these translations. However I happened to come across the Jowett translation of *Gorgias* while I was looking around, and I found his version of the conversation made the most sense.

His version seemed humorous and ironically wise to me - to be late to the battle but not the feast. It reminded me of Moving Day, and those friends who show up after you have moved the couch and the bookshelves but in time for some of the pizza, lol. So I consulted the Jowett translation in a couple of other places when the Blackboard one was not making sense to me. It was very helpful!

## Jowett Translation

Callicles: The wise man, as the proverb says, is late for a fray, but not for a feast.

Socrates: And are we late for a feast?

Callicles: Yes, and a delightful feast; for Gorgias has just been exhibiting to us many fine things.



# Plato's Gorgias



*What's wrong with oratory, from Socrates' point of view?  
Is he right about that? Or wrong? Or is it inconclusive so far?*

Socrates thinks that oratory is not a proper craft because it can be practiced without knowledge or justice. He considers it rather a form of flattery, or what we might call pandering. Telling an audience what they want to hear may get raucous applause but it might not reflect fair or workable public policy.

Socrates is right that oratory can be used to tell people what they want to hear, for the purpose of, say, gaining their electoral support, even if what they want to hear is not true or what is good for them. However I might quibble on the side point that oratory does not require knowledge.

As with advertising, a bit of knowledge about human psychology, for example, can make oratory more or less effective, apart from its content.

*Trump recently gave a speech about his government shutdown to build The Wall. Do you see oratory at work here?*

Socrates would surely have recognized much of the verbal slight-of-hand in this speech. By thanking the federal workers and telling "all Americans" that they are "very special people" (1:39) and he could never make America great "without us," Trump is not only employing flattery, but trying to create the illusion that there was broad support for the shutdown for the sake of the wall. The facts are that a majority of Americans oppose "The Wall" and that immigrants on foot are not a threat to national security. So I would describe this as a prime example of flattery over knowledge. It's easy to gain power by stoking people's fears. Socrates must have been concerned that the orators of his day were enabling this process.

*Who gives a better account of appetites?*

Clearly, Socrates is portrayed as giving the better account in the proper understanding of appetites. As he mentions several times throughout the dialog, those who want power will use clever tricks of speech, telling people only what they want to hear, while a wise philosopher will not pander to their appetites, but will tell them what they need

to hear to become better. Socrates considers this the "true politics." As he says, "This is because the speeches I make on each occasion do not aim at gratification but at what's best. They don't aim at what's most pleasant." To Socrates, merely fulfilling appetites is not sufficient for the individual or to create a good society.

This quote in particular reminds me of a class I recently finished on Positive Psychology. The father of this field, Dr. Seligman, discussed three routes to a good life, one of them being what he termed "the pleasant life," or a life aimed at creating as much pleasant experience as possible. However, despite popular perception, this is not enough to make for a really good life, and is in fact the least important aspect. Seligman suggests that humans also need challenging work for "the engaged life," and most importantly, a life spent doing the right thing for the right reason, or "the meaningful life."

I think Socrates glimpsed the truth that getting what you want is not as important as what you do, and why. Perhaps he would agree with Seligman that a complete life requires some of all three.

*Jorge: So do you think that humans should be allowed to do whatever they would like and accept the consequences of those actions?*

Only up to the point where the consequences are unfair to others.

# Plato's *Republic*

## *Or, Guardians of the Good City*

The beginning of this discussion has a bit in common with the previous one from Gorgias. Thrasymachus suggested, much as Callicles before him, that so-called "justice" chiefly serves the strong or those in power. He says the unjust man ends up doing better and paying less in taxes. Even the judgment of the gods can be expiated with sufficient rituals, so what benefit is there to being just at all?

Socrates explains some benefits of justice I think we can agree with to this day. "Injustice surely breeds hatred, dissension and fighting among people, whereas justice brings concord and friendship; isn't that so?" he questions the party on page 105. He suggests that in order to work together for success, there needs to be justice in the group, saying, "The fact is that the just appear to be wiser and better and more capable of action, while the unjust cannot even cooperate with each other."

I would say this fits well with ideas from evolutionary psychology, which suggest that, as social animals, humans evolved a sense of fairness in order to preserve group cohesion and the ability to work together for survival. Socrates seems to be observing a natural human proclivity toward justice which would have been selected for as a trait that facilitates group action.

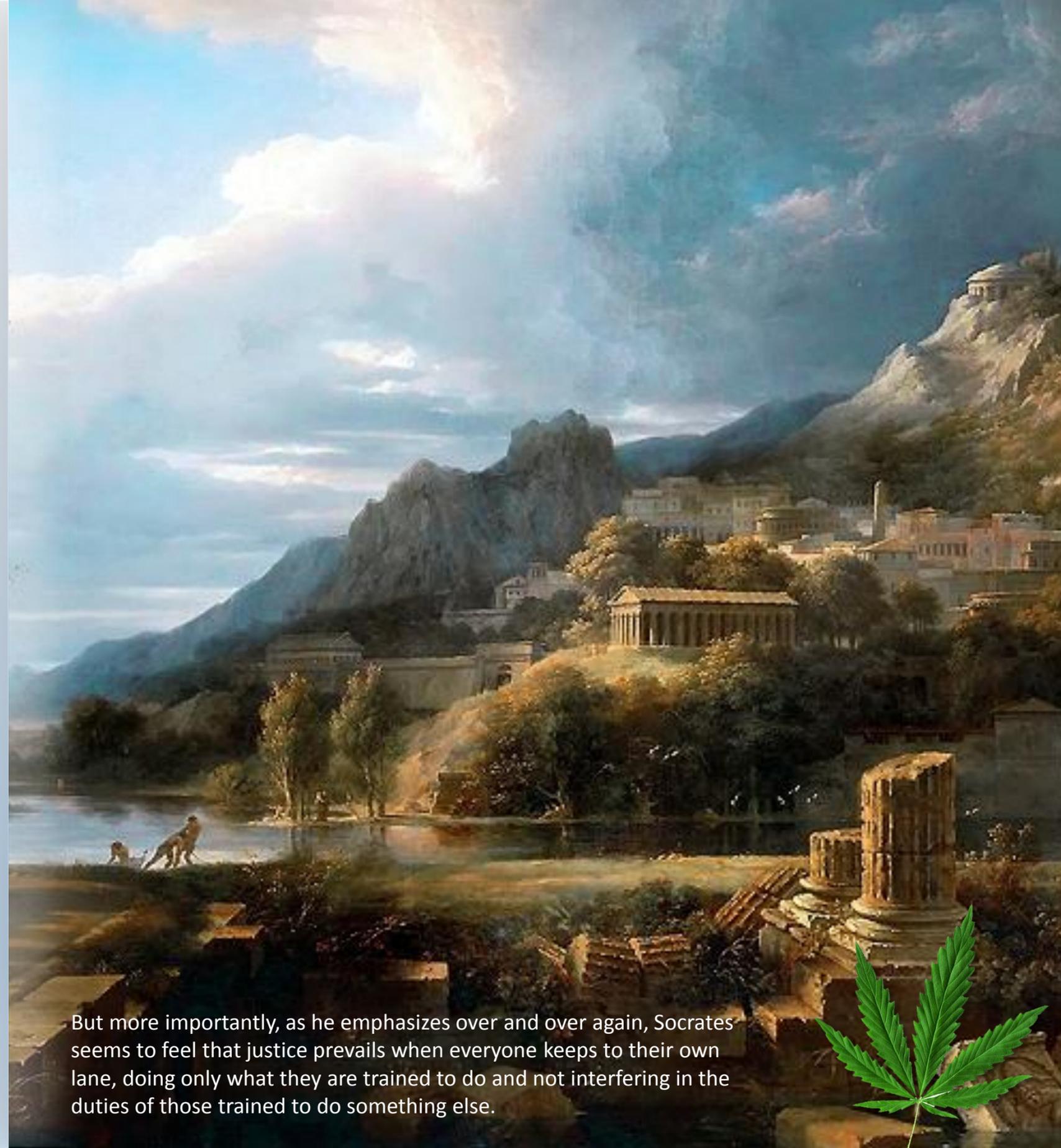
This is uniquely illustrated when Thrasymachus leaves off the discussion and Glaucon and his brother take up the argument in his stead. They clarify that they take this position only to prod Socrates along in the debate. But, they make such a convincing argument, Socrates exclaims, "For you really must have something godlike in your disposition if you are not convinced that injustice is better than justice, when you are able to plead its case like that!"

I think this is exactly the point: that while Glaucon and Adeimantus are arguing hypothetically that "might makes right," for some reason, that is not how they truly feel, and they are at pains to make that clear. I think this suggests that humans have a natural sense of fairness which, at least for most people, will end up being more important to them than taking advantage of others for their own gain.

Additionally, I find it supremely ironic that Socrates values cooperation and justice within the group, and yet still feels it will be necessary for an ideal society to go to war for land. However I think this is borne out by evolutionary psychology too, which suggests that humans evolved to be fair and compassionate within their ingroups, while being notoriously merciless to gain advantage over their outgroups. Perhaps some day we will come to see the value of cooperation and justice for people on the other side of that imaginary dividing line.

Socrates' alternative to this is rather interesting. Instead of might makes right, where the strongest simply prevail in every conflict, Socrates suggests a harmonious community where conflicts are pre-resolved by systems of arrangement. For example, he hopes to head off relationship drama among the city's Guardians by having them own all women and children in common.

But more importantly, as he emphasizes over and over again, Socrates seems to feel that justice prevails when everyone keeps to their own lane, doing only what they are trained to do and not interfering in the duties of those trained to do something else.



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### *Would Socrates approve of marijuana in The Good City?*

As I read through *Republic*, I inadvertently overshot the assigned pages a bit, and found myself reading about the education Socrates recommended for the Guardians of the Good City. He seemed extremely concerned about corrupting influences, and did not want the Guardians to hear music he did not approve of, or be told tales where the gods do wrong or look bad. Socrates in this section suddenly comes across a lot like Tipper Gore, slapping Parental Advisory warning stickers on all the good myths and songs. Clearly, Socrates did not want the Guardians exposed to anything that could affect their judgment.

Also, Socrates seems unconcerned with the kind of personal freedom we would associate with the choice to use intoxicants. His main idea of justice seems to be a city where everyone stays in his own lane. Again and again he mentions how in the ideal state each person sticks to their own job and class and doesn't try to do or be anything else. The impossibility of prohibition notwithstanding, Socrates may not have felt people had a right to choose such things for personal reasons.

On the other hand, Socrates sets great store by the opinions of doctors, much more than that of other professionals like pastry chefs. If doctors of the time knew of cannabis, they surely would have known of its many medical properties that make it a very effective treatment across a whole variety of symptoms. If doctors of the time thought it would help a patient, I think Socrates would trust their judgment.

So I imagine that the Guardians of the Good City would allow medical marijuana, with a doctor's recommendation of course.

But more importantly, as he emphasizes over and over again, Socrates seems to feel that justice prevails when everyone keeps to their own lane, doing only what they are trained to do and not interfering in the duties of those trained to do something else.





Aristotle

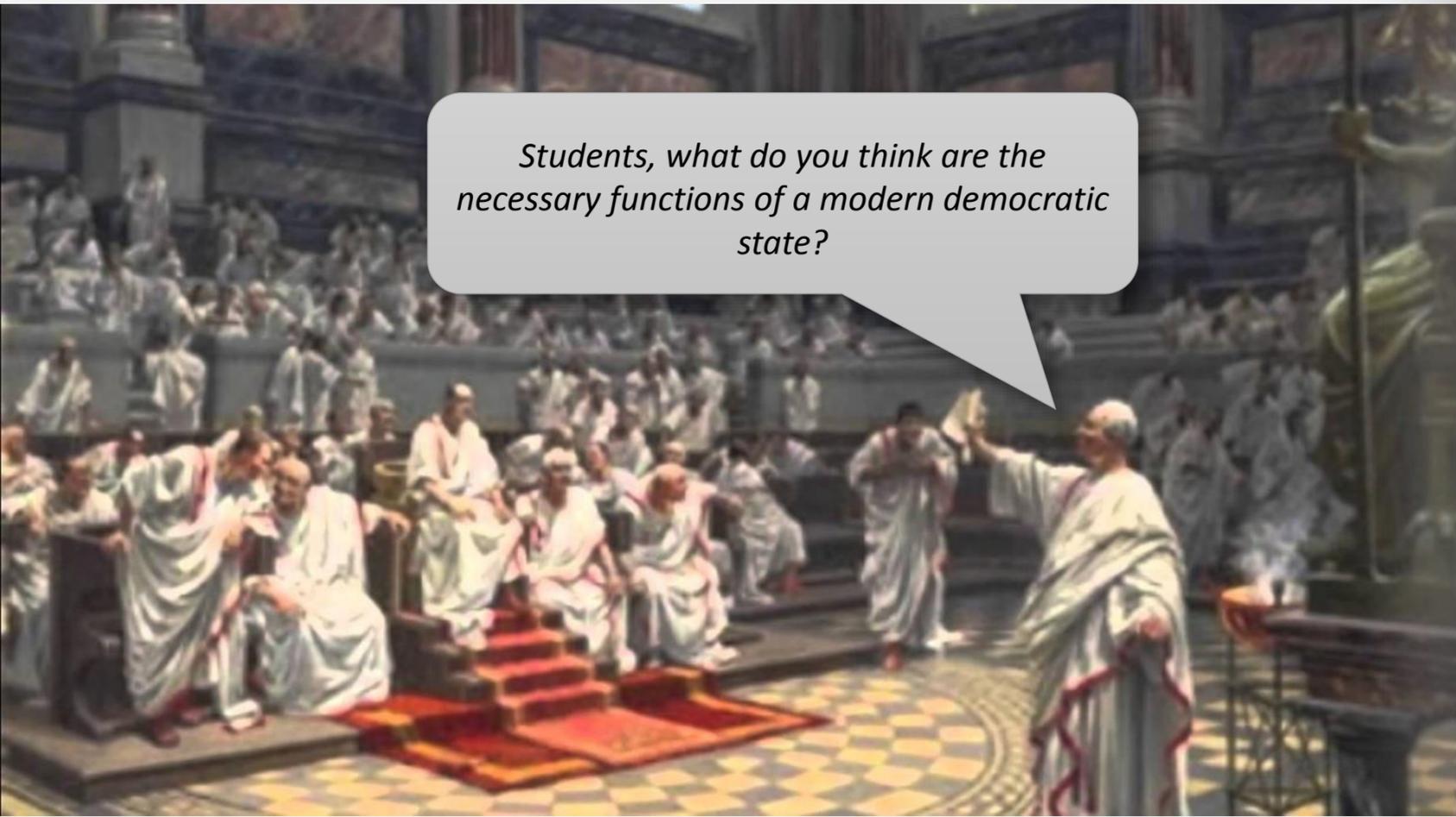
# FUNCTIONS

of the

# DEMOCRATIC STATE

The state is us. Our modern democratic state system should perform functions that make life better when we do them together. We require:

- Subsistence systems - to provide food, clothing, shelter
- Health systems - to promote good living and repair injuries and illness
- Education systems - to grow knowledge and cultivate wisdom
- Relation systems - to arrange how we are related to each other
- Entertainment systems - to give us an avenue for creativity
- Meaning systems - to provide guidance and opportunity for service
- Justice systems - to regulate and ease relations
- Enfranchisement systems - to be sure the will of all is accounted for



*Students, what do you think are the necessary functions of a modern democratic state?*

Some of these functions, like maintaining subsistence systems, are obvious. We have to eat. In the ideal society these functions will be largely automated.

Others like "relation systems" sound new-fangled, but we have always had them - families. A good society would have systems for arranging people into social units. I imagine these would mainly be self-selected/state supported - like marriage is now, where we choose our partners but we can use state institutions to formalize our mutual obligations. But traditional marriage hardly accommodates the many ways humans can live together. Most humans in most societies have lived in extended families and these can take many forms, even self-selecting ones. The ideal state would support families, groups of humans in whatever way they want to configure their relations, to make it easy for them to succeed together.

Another unfamiliar term might be "meaning systems," but I would like to suggest that one function of an ideal society would be to provide variety of what might be termed "religions" or "life practices." These would not need to be related to any ancient religion and in fact I think it might be better if we started over, basing religions on ourselves and our real lives, instead of what people said a long, long time ago. Meaning systems would be self-selecting organizations created to provide moral guidance, community, and ritual celebration of life's milestones.

Most importantly, the ideal society would have enfranchisement systems. These may take the form of votes, caucuses, representative assemblies, etc, but the essence is that in an ideal society, everyone who is affected by a decision should have a say in it, to the extent of that effect.

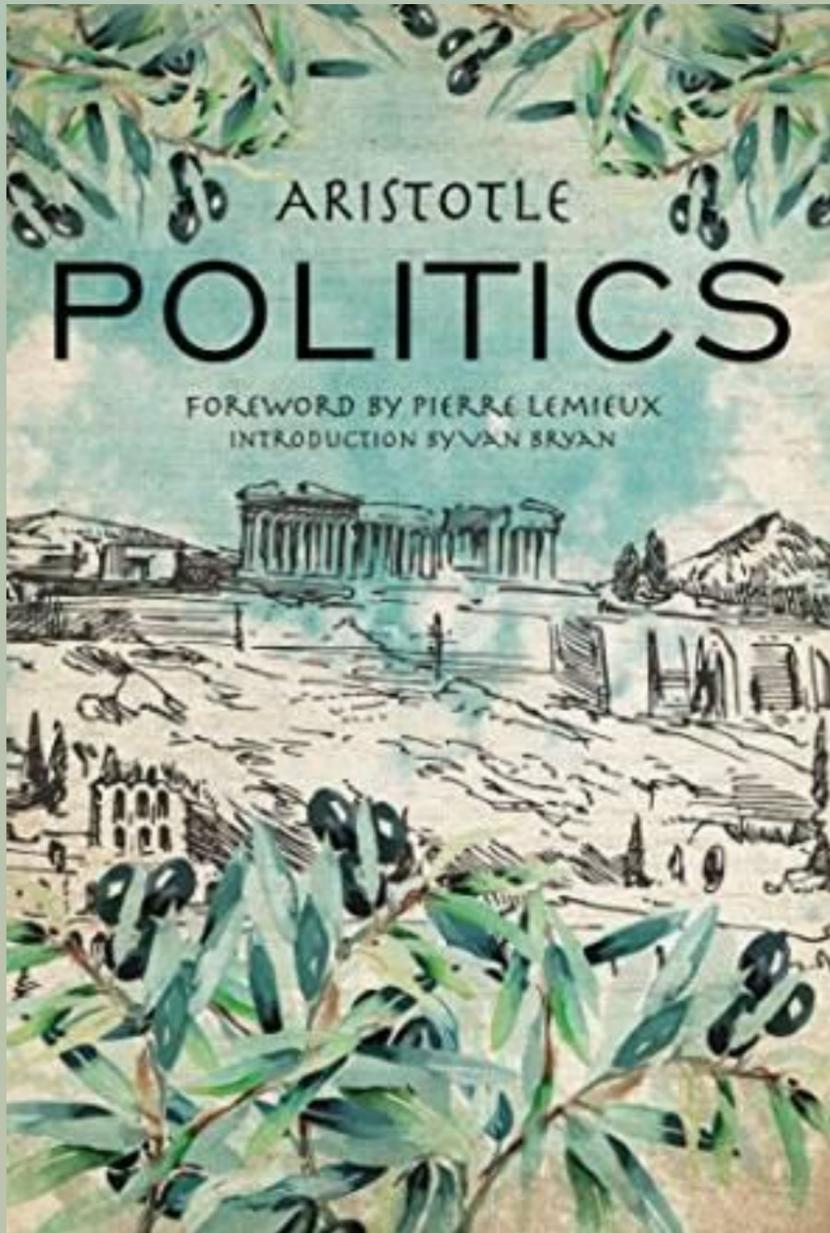
These are functions we have always performed for each other, but they have not always been deliberate or worked well or been fair. Now, the textbook of history is open for our examination. I think we can learn from the past and create societies for the future that, if not ideal, are at least better than anything we stumbled into by accident.

*Rebecca: How is political Science "the best science"? Does it create happiness, really? I'm skeptical.*

It is hard to imagine that political science could be considered above other sciences, but I can imagine making a similar argument, say for example that Positive Psychology is the best kind of psychology, because rather than trying to cure illness, it deals with helping healthy people to be their best. Like the kind of political science that Aristotle is considering, it is a serious study of what makes for happiness in life.

It's hard to say that any one science is more significant than any other. Do we need biology or physics more? Neither; we fully need both, and the same is true of political science. I would answer your question yes, political science DOES bring us happiness today, because it examines the systems we make as a group to coordinate our common lives. We have happiness with our families, in our careers, out in nature, etc., in part because we have constructed a society which defines our families, provides education and has need for careers, and preserves natural settings. Working out how to get along and make things happen together will always be foundational to our survival. Thanks for sparking that thought Rebecca!

## ARISTOTLE'S FUNCTIONALISM & ETHICS



What is the purpose of Aristotle's functionalism?

The advantage of Aristotle's functionalism is that it made it easy for Aristotle. He sized everyone up by what he could see about what they did for a living, and gave it no more thought. The disadvantage is that no one is just his job and needs are not dictated by one's place. Slaves are people, women are people, and everyone needs the same thing.

Functionalism in sociology strikes me the same way - designed to maintain the status quo by explaining that this is how people 'naturally function.' It lets them off the hook for explaining what those at the top are gaining from exploiting the 'natural arrangement.'

*Professor Torrente: That's good Shara. I think it would help to think about exactly how Aristotle was lazy, though. He certainly did a lot of observing and thinking. I totally agree that there was a kind of work he wasn't very eager to do. Can you think of what it is?*

*Classmates, this is a good place to jump in, too. Shara's right that functionalism made things easy for Aristotle, but let's throw the old Macedonian a bone and say he was a hard worker. What work, specifically, did he shirk or avoid? What work would he have had to do in order to wind up with less imbalanced results?*

*Michael: I wanted to address these questions. Aristotle may have developed a somewhat reasonable understanding of functionalism with regards to gender considering the time he lived in and the inquiry tools at his disposal. However, where he could have done more work was in actually engaging with women and slaves in order to develop a more collective understanding of their purpose in the world. This likely could have broadened his perspective, and maybe changed his view on the function and human worth of women and slaves in society, as opposed to viewing them as tools/a means to an end.*

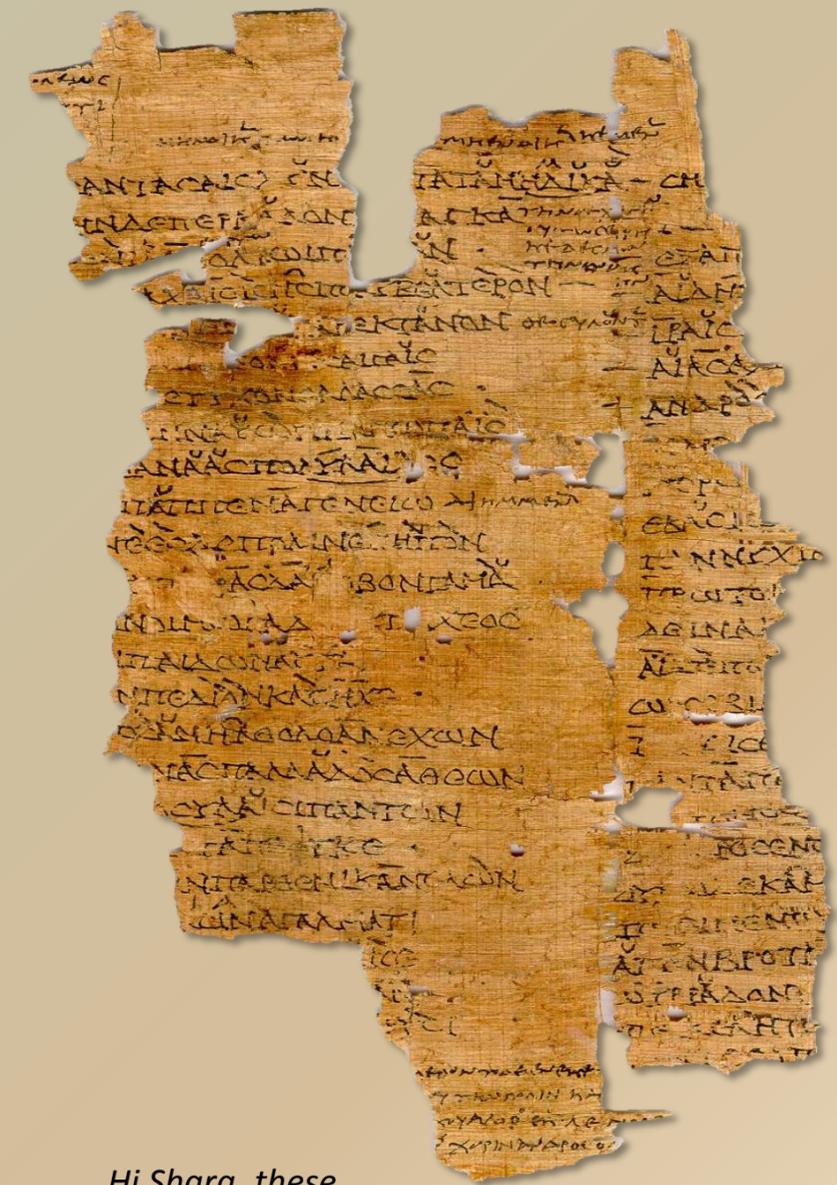
*Very good Michael. If Aristotle had turned his attention to the women and slaves, he might have got a different result. The fact that he didn't shows us something about the strength of social structures that kept things the way they were. (Or rather, he did turn his attention to the slaves, and he decided that "being ruled" must be their "function," which certainly doesn't fit with modern ideas of individual freedom.)*

What does he say about ethics in the city?

Aristotle seems to be saying that humans live their best lives by working together. That is, it's not enough for each individual to be virtuous. For the greatest good, we have to create a public environment where virtue can thrive.

Alone, we have no chances to be generous, or loving, or compassionate, and so don't get to express our highest virtues. But, a good city would be a place where we are taught how to express virtue and then are given opportunities to practice, strengthen, and become proficient in virtue over a lifetime.

Maybe, like working together to build a magnificent cathedral, by being virtuous together we can create a great 'edifice of virtue' to express our highest values even more than we could alone. When considering what an 'edifice of virtue' might look like, Social Security sprang immediately to mind - a social arrangement of generous, loving compassion. It's a better monument to our society than Mt. Rushmore.



*Hi Shara, these are good insights. Your second paragraph is especially important. For Aristotle, the very activities that are the sign of a good life really depend on having other people around.*

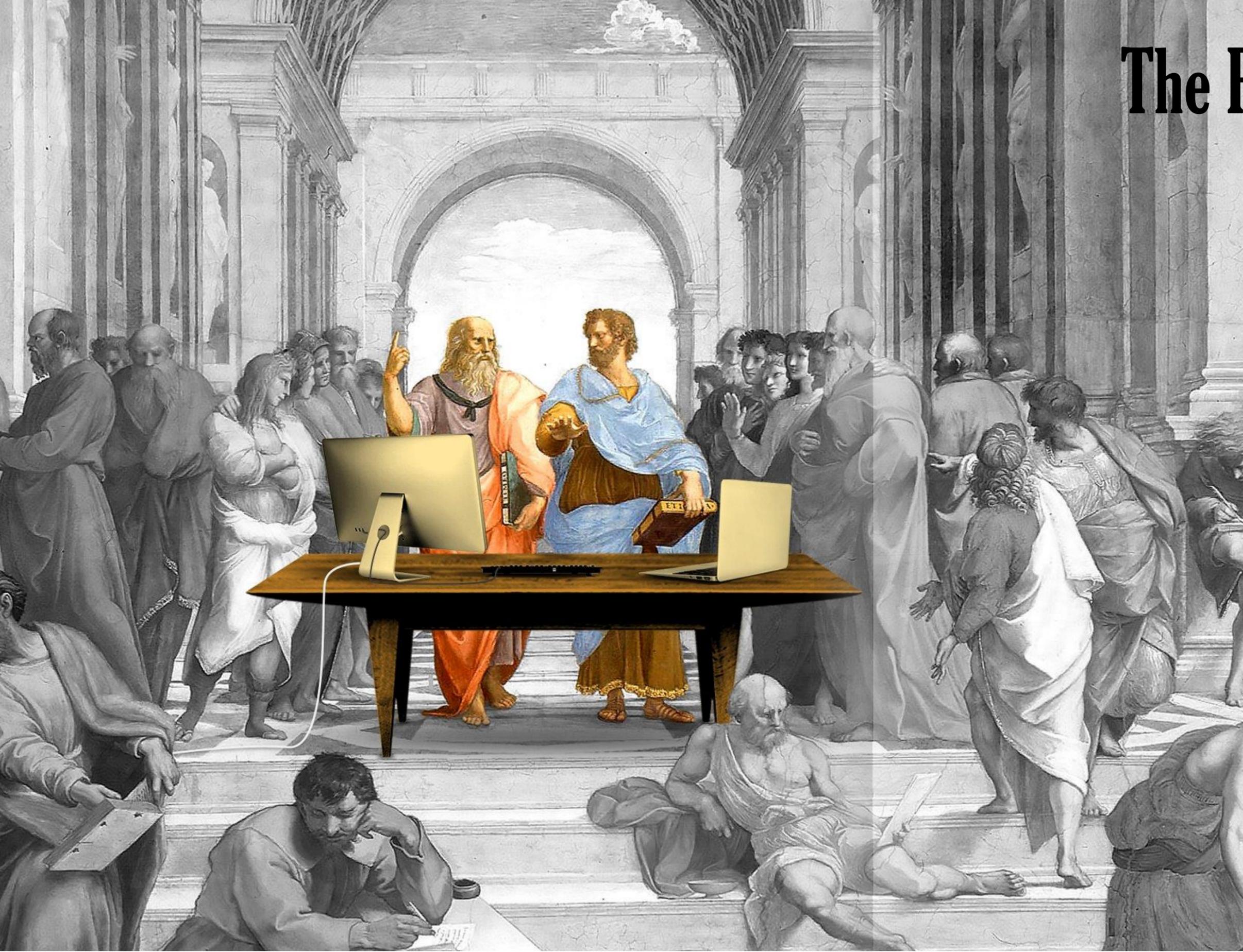
*That's also why he says a bit later that a self-sufficient man who doesn't need or partake in the state "must be either a lower animal or a god" (1253a28). It's possible to read that as an insult, but in a more direct sense, Aristotle is just saying that a person who is so self-sufficient that he (or she) can live without the city is another type of creature altogether.*

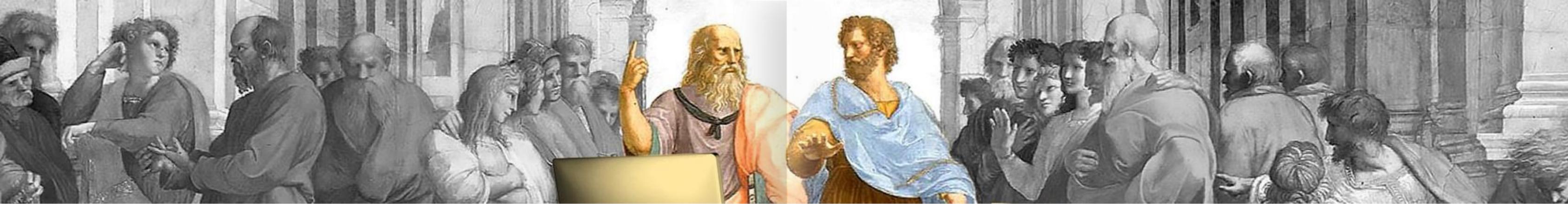
# The First Programmers

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were concerned with the good of the city. What did they know?

It is difficult to imagine being an intellectual human at the dawn of civilization. As Socrates, Plato and Aristotle wrestle with questions like “What is justice?” and “How can people work together?” it is worth remembering that, unlike us, they did not have long philosophical traditions to look back on and ponder. They wrestled with these questions in a world where the answers were not already written by someone else. Watching these men literally inventing basic concepts like ‘justice in the city’ makes me appreciate that they were the very first coders, writing the operating system we would run our brains and civilization on for the next two thousand years.

Of utmost importance to humans throughout this time has been the question of what to do, or what policies to enact as a public. In ancient Greece, as now, there were a variety of approaches to choosing public policy. One such method, in prominent use at the time, was oratory, or using trained speakers to make a case before an assembly. Socrates coined a different method, still in use today, of asking and answering questions to get to the heart of the matter. Also familiar both then and now as a method for keeping people in line is the threat of scary supernatural consequences. Finally, Aristotle syncretized a set of virtues and suggested that if each person lived by them, the individual, the city and their interactions would all be positive goods which lead to human flourishing.





Probably the least important method for enacting public policy is “scary supernaturalism,” or the threat of Final Judgment after death. For one thing, upon consideration, a person may find such threats unmoving because there is no way to show that they are true. In *Gorgias*, when Socrates turns the conversation to eternal consequences, he prefaces by saying, “You’ll think it’s a mere tale, I believe” (Plato, 107), demonstrating that even in ancient times, people dealt with threats from beyond the grave by taking them or leaving them. Also, threats of consequences, either in this life or the next, do not tell you how to act or what is good, only what might happen if you don’t get it right. So alone they do not provide much guidance. But, it would be wrong to dismiss the scary supernatural method entirely. Clearly some people are swayed by suggestions of divine retribution, as evidenced by the prominence of these threats in various religions. Furthermore, Socrates himself turns to this as a method to persuade Callicles after his other arguments have failed, suggesting he thinks it might be more effective than discussion alone. Socrates claims to believe the story is true, or perhaps he just appreciates the power of a myth to motivate human behavior. Later, when he is describing the Guardians in *Republic*, he proposes inventing a “lie” about the gods being behind his social arrangements in order to get the men and women to go along with them (Plato, 333). Socrates knew that a story can be very powerful for shaping behavior, so while scary supernaturalism is the least important method, it can’t be entirely dismissed.

Another proposed method, one of more obvious efficacy, is oratory. Clearly this is the method of choosing public policy which is favored in Greece at the time of the great philosophers. As it says in our notes, oratory would have been “an essential and useful skill for any Athenian” (LS-2, 3) and one student in *Gorgias*, Polus, finds it to be “the most admirable of the crafts” (Plato, 3). But, while this skill is lionized by the Greeks, the entire point of *Gorgias* is that relying on oratory is the wrong way to go about making public policy. Socrates argues that oratory is more about manipulation than about doing what’s right. For one thing, orators are like pastry chefs, offering flattering tidbits to entice people’s appetites, instead of like doctors, telling people the truth, however unpleasant, about what they need to eat to be healthy. Socrates observes that “if a pastry baker and a doctor had to compete” for a living on “expert knowledge of food good and bad” the doctor would starve because the pastry cook would win over the audience every time (Plato, 25). What’s more, as with “scary supernaturalism,” oratory contains no “internal knowledge” of the just and the unjust (LS-5, 2). “I say such a thing is shameful, Polus,” Socrates says pointedly, “because it guesses at what is pleasant with no consideration for what is best” (Plato, 25). Gorgias concedes to Socrates that orators have to learn justice separately from oratory, either “beforehand” or “afterwards” (Plato, 19), because knowledge of it is not contained therein. Because of this internal lack, oratory, while valued by the Greeks above all, is not the best method for determining public policy.

Still, the powerful effectiveness of oratory means that it cannot be ignored. As Callicles explains, oratory is effective to the point where orators gain the power to get what they want. He suggests that without this power, a philosopher like Socrates is ill-equipped, either to sway the public or even to defend his own life against charges before an assembly (Plato, 57), as history then demonstrates. We still see the use of oratory today, from closing arguments in the courtroom to policy debates on the election trail. So while golden oratory alone is nothing to base public policy on, even the best policy still needs a powerful delivery system to engage the public at large. Oratory was, and remains, one of the most effective means of engagement.

A third method of formulating public policy proposed by this inquiry is asking and answering questions, or as we know it today, “the Socratic Method.” This involves asking probing questions which challenge conventional assumptions, gradually widening in scope. The Socratic Method has its deficiencies as a way of choosing public policy. As with the previous methods, it lacks “internal knowledge” of the just. Socrates demonstrates this in *Gorgias*, asking questions which show the shortcomings of others’ positions, without providing positive examples of his own. As our lecture notes state, “In the dialog, philosophy shows us the flaws in oratory, but doesn’t produce much new knowledge” (L6, 10). Despite this limitation, this method of inquiry is still an important part of figuring out the truth. In *Gorgias*, Socrates is able to draw concessions from Polus and Gorgias

about the limits of oratory. Similarly, this method is used in *Republic* by Glaucon as he plays devil’s advocate for “the unjust life” (Plato, 123). Glaucon anticipates that by debating the matter with him, Socrates can begin to build a positive case for justice. Unlike the previous two methods, asking and answering questions is an activity that brings us closer to answers. While far from sufficient for choosing public policy, the Socratic Method remains a vital step on the way to formulating it.

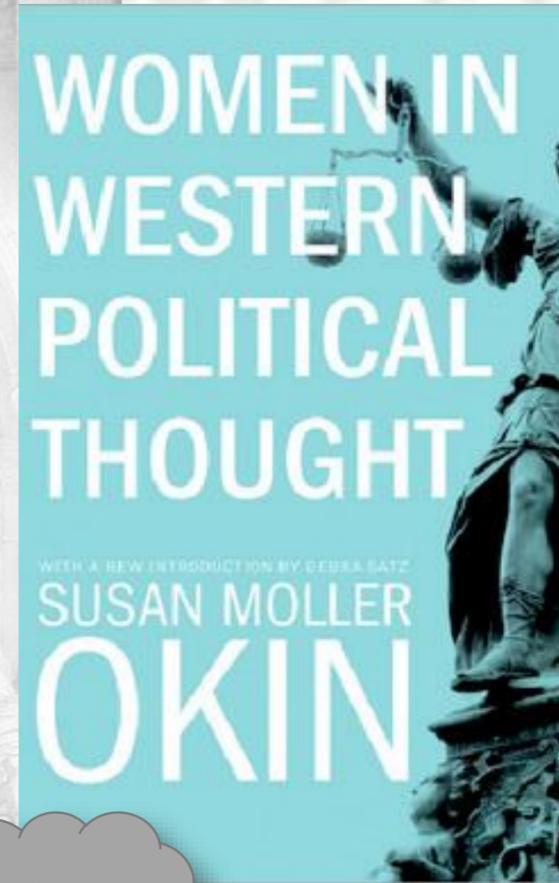
Finally, the last proposed method for choosing action, both public and personal, is Aristotle’s virtue system, and this is truly where the proposed begins to constitute an actual system. In Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, his method is an exploration of what good in life really is, and how to move closer to it, ultimately achieving the happiness of human flourishing. “We ought to make an attempt to determine at all events in outline what exactly this Supreme Good is,” he says, suggesting that, like archers who identify their target, this will make us better able to hit the mark (Aristotle, 5). Aristotle himself is quick to point out that his system is far from perfect. As he says in the opening of *Ethics*, there is no way to mathematically calculate virtue, because it concerns matters of “much difference of opinion and uncertainty” (Aristotle, 7). He explains that he is being as precise as his subject will allow. Similarly, even Aristotle considers the level of virtue he describes to be rarely found in humans. For example, when he describes the most virtuous friendships, he explains that such friendships are

doing the things that we shall have to do when we have learnt it" (Aristotle, 73). In other words, humans attain higher virtue by practicing it. While aspirational, his practicality makes his superior to other systems.

A second reason his system is better is because practicing virtue allows humans to realize their "natural function" of using reason. Functionality is very important to Aristotle; he feels that as people serve functions by their trades, or as the various parts of the body serve specific functions that other parts do not serve, that humans must have some specific "business that belongs to them" (Aristotle, 31). In contrast with plants, which live without reacting, and animals, who react without thinking, Aristotle feels what sets us apart is the human capacity to use reason to determine our actions. Because of this, the exercise of virtue is an "active exercise of the soul's faculties in conformity with rational principle (Aristotle, 33). Like a good harp is made by a well-played harp, so acting on this capacity makes us into good people. Most importantly, a third reason Aristotle's virtue method is the best is that, unlike the other proposed methods, Aristotle's Virtues at last possess "internal knowledge." That is, the Virtues do more than suggest that humans should be good. They actually explain specifically *how* to be good, by describing what good character traits look like, including courage, friendliness, even good conversation (Aristotle, 245). However the specific virtues Aristotle cites are just

examples. His guide is no mere list of dos and don'ts. Instead, his method is more like an algorithm for finding the correct action in any situation. Aristotle finds that virtue is the middle way, or "golden mean," between the extremes of vice, too little being "deficiency" and too much being "excess." His contention was that "excess and deficiency destroy perfection, while adherence to the mean preserves it" (Aristotle, 93). Furthermore, where Socrates and Plato could only note that people sometimes go against their better judgment, Aristotle's system provides an explanation for why this occurs, in his discussion of temperance and continence. Aristotle's method is a real-world system, based on human reasoning, which contains real guidance, making it the best of these methods for choosing public policy.

Inventing an operating system for civilization from the ground up was not easy. We have been applying patches and updates ever since, and there is no guarantee the current version is stable. So it helps to know what works. While the methods of scary supernaturalism, oratory and Socratic questioning lack the internal knowledge necessary to be great systems for choosing public policy, they each have their uses in helping to understand and to get the public on board. For choosing policy itself, clearly the defined and systematic Virtues proposed by Aristotle are a far better method. Practical and based on reality, Aristotle's algorithm of virtue is a toolkit for life that still works to this day. ■



And what about me?



## Okin on Plato

Okin seems to be suggesting that a woman's role in a man's life is described by his relationship to property. Socrates / Plato's original suggestion, that the Guardianship of the City be shared by men and women, seems predicated on the suggestion that men have no private property to manage or inherit.

Rather than the ideal city proposed in *Republic*, Okin says that by *Laws* Plato is resigned to describing a lesser, but more realistic, "second-best city." Plato does not think mere humans are capable of holding property in common and so invents an easier system. However in the "second city," the re-introduction of private property immediately necessitates the reversion of women to their previous subordinate role. For one thing, as Okin specifically notes on page 44, it is primarily "the need for a property-holding man to have an heir" that requires he take a private wife and control her reproduction to the extent that he is satisfied her children are his. For another, Okin emphasizes that it was considered a woman's proper role to manage a man's household, sort of as his head servant.

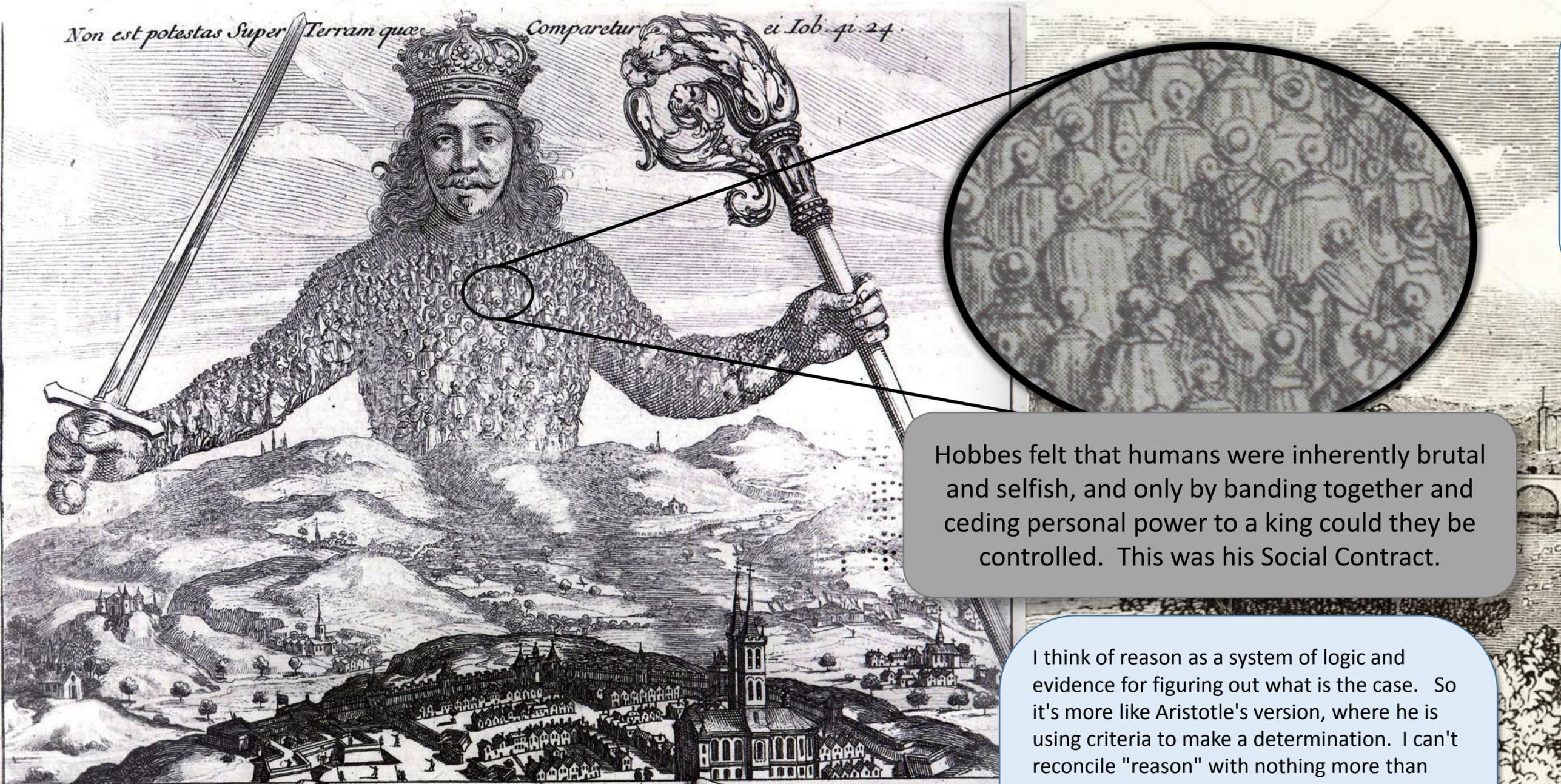
Only in the absence of private property can Plato conceive of a world where women are not counted among it.

I think that until very recently, the lack of ability to control fertility did have a somewhat dampening affect on the ability of women to participate fully in political life. Elanor Roosevelt - not an elected official but extremely active and influential in American politics - remarked of her child-bearing days: "For ten years I was always just getting over having a baby or about to have one, and so my occupations were considerably restricted during this period." Never knowing when the next pregnancy was coming, and then having a several-year commitment to another kid, would have relegated women to less-important roles no matter what their talents or ambitions.

I don't think it's a coincidence that reliable birth control and women's lib are practically simultaneous in history.



*Non est potestas Super Terram quae Comparetur ei Iob. 41. 24.*



## Hobbes' Leviathan

*Having read some of Aristotle and Hobbes, which approach to choosing actions do you think is more influential in current politics....Aristotle's approach of using reason to discern good actions, and then taking them, or Hobbes's understanding that reason is just a calculation of what we like (attraction) and don't like (aversion)?*

Hobbes felt that humans were inherently brutal and selfish, and only by banding together and ceding personal power to a king could they be controlled. This was his Social Contract.

I think of reason as a system of logic and evidence for figuring out what is the case. So it's more like Aristotle's version, where he is using criteria to make a determination. I can't reconcile "reason" with nothing more than assessments of likes and dislikes. Where is the logic in that?

However, while I don't think it is a good system, I think that today's politics, or at least today's politicians, are taking more of a lead from Hobbes than Aristotle. To me this harkens back to Callicles, unapologetically leading Athens around by its appetites with no concern for the good.

So this brings me to my main question about this unit - is Hobbes supposed to represent an advancement in political theory, or a regression? Is political theory supposed to tell us how to get power, or how to make good societies?

As might be surmised from my other post, I am wondering most about Hobbes' treatment of reason. In particular, I disagree with his idea that reason is useful for "math" but not for figuring out what is just. Figuring quantities is a very important part of choosing the right thing to do...isn't it? Not just for figuring out how much a social policy will cost - though that is part of it - but also, amounts like, how many people will this help? How much suffering will this alleviate...a little or a lot? How effective is this policy, in what sorts of circumstances? What portion of benefit for this group is fair?

I think what is just and good *can* be figured out, based on an examination of how policies affect lives, for better or worse. If we can't reason our way to what is good in life based on examination of life, just how ARE we supposed to find it?

# Hobbes' Leviathan cont.

*Remember, social order based on the Old Philosophers had collapsed. Hobbes's response was to try to re-imagine politics without a greatest good. What do you do with a bunch of people who can't agree about what's good?*

Well I'm not a political theorist, but I think this is where reason comes in - modern reason, the system of logic and evidence. There may not be a "greatest good" but there are obvious and measurable goods, and bads. Some systems obviously work better than others. Surely that is not just a matter of "agreement" about the good, but of actual benefits. That there is no "greatest" good, doesn't mean there is no better or worse.

Is the only determination of what gets done, who has the most will to power? Or could there be a system where we do things for reasons, because they work?

*in general terms, the problem at the center of Hobbes's dispute with Aristotle remains: the notion of a widely-shared vision of the "greatest good" is behind us, and probably not coming back...*

Perhaps it ebbs and flows. In my *U.S. History WWII-90s* class we learned about the Liberal Consensus, a time during the post-war period when there seemed to be widespread agreement in America about how we should go. Granted, that was another prosperity marked Whites Only, and covered deep schisms. But, there was broad support for science-based policy, like environmental conservation and vaccines, which has now evaporated.

I think if people were not having their appetites and prejudices stoked by demagogues, we might be able to make real policy around evidence-based analysis of working systems. But, is that even important? Could we make it important?

*However, those questions are not really about what's better or worse, they're about what's more and less.. That still might not help much when tougher questions come up. Like, should Colorado still have the death penalty?*

I am glad you brought up this example because I think this is exactly the sort of dilemma that reason is perfect for solving. First of all, there are plenty of measurable numbers involved. You can measure the crime rates in places with and without the death penalty and see that there is no deterrent factor. You can count the number of DNA exonerations and see how often innocents are wrongly executed. That is evidence against using a system that doesn't work.

But I don't think you even have to have hard numbers to have reasoned examination. You can talk to people in the system, and people who have been victims and their families. You can characterize whether their suffering has been alleviated or increased by the process. You can examine the lives of the people who have to carry out the death penalty, see the consequences for their suffering. You can have psychologists and social workers describe what they encounter in the lives of those involved and assess whether the death penalty increased or decreased their happiness. You can listen to what people have to say about how it affected them.

Would all this reveal that the death penalty is working? I doubt it, but maybe it would. The point is that *after* all this has been done, *that* is when people should claim we need the policy, despite whatever costs it may have, because it can be shown that having the policy *works better* than not having it.

Public policies are not like chocolate and vanilla, just a matter of opinion, are they? Either they work to do what they are intended to do or they don't. Why implement policy for any other reason?

# Hobbes' Leviathan cont.

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*We all make a lot more market choices these days than we do political choices. So aversion and attraction is not just an option, but is the **dominant** kind of reasoning we have to do while our material lives (eating, housing, movement) are governed by capitalist organization.*

Well look how great that is working out. Market forces governed by the attractions and aversions of monkeys who evolved in scarcity have resulted in hoarding and heart disease. The earth can't take it; we have to do better.

I doubt it, but maybe it is when people should

shown that having the police

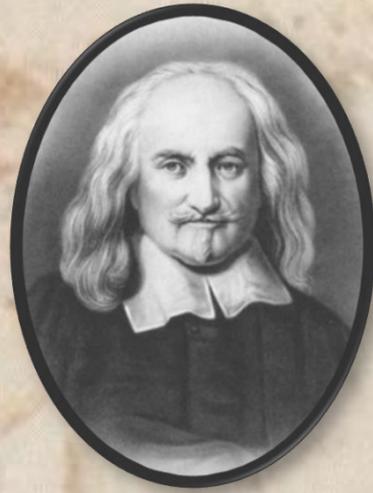
*I am skeptical that any amount of data analysis or logic will completely make the questions of good and bad go away.*

Public policies are not like

they? Either they work to do what they are intended to do or they don't. Why

We don't have to make the question of good and bad go away completely, but we do have to answer them with reasoned examination of what works. What else is there? That won't tell us everything, but it will tell us enough to make better decisions than ravenous monkeys. P.S. Thanks so much for sharing this discussion with me Professor Torrente!

# Aristotle and Hobbes



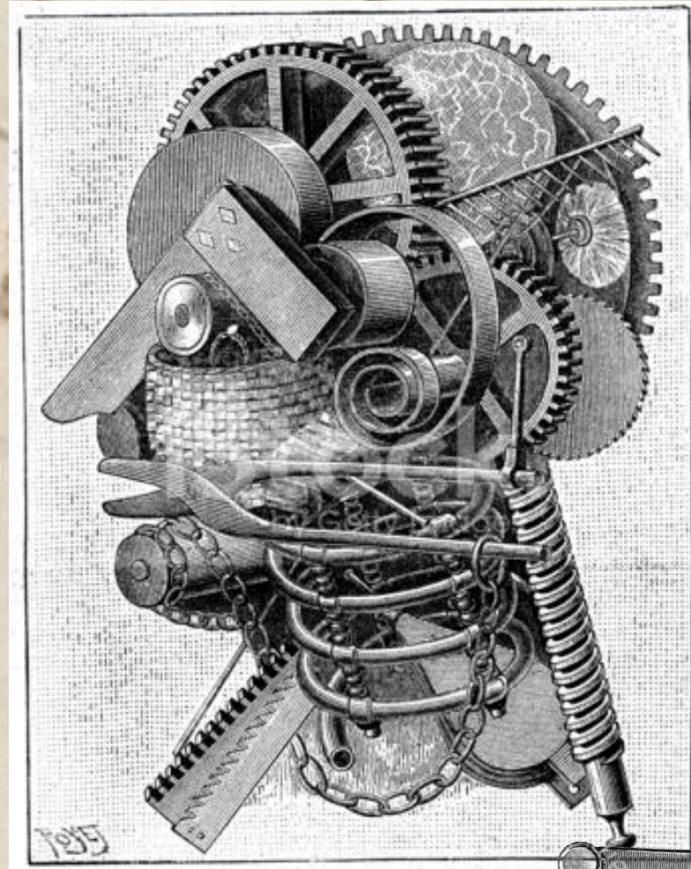
## Thomas Hobbes

*Compare Hobbes's idea of how political communities are constructed (Leviathan ch. X-XII or so) to Aristotle's description of the origin of the city (Politics Books I-III).*

First of all it strikes me as odd that Hobbes sees humans as mechanisms, but also without telos or purpose. What kind of mechanism has no purpose? There is no reason to make one. Every mechanism has the purpose for which it was designed.

As for political communities, Aristotle seemed to look at it as a matter of division of labor, the city being required to provide the variety of craftsmen it took to supply the sophisticated man with everything he needed. We lived together because it was convenient - for Aristotle, at any rate.

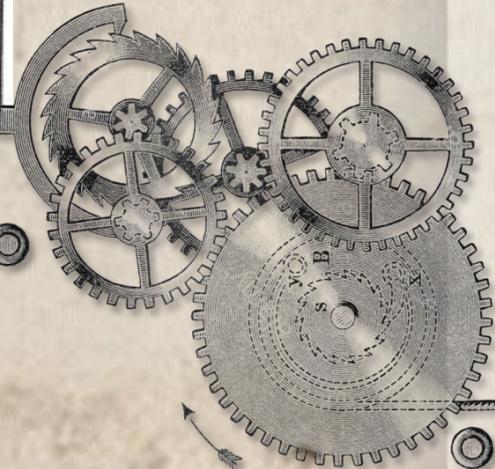
Hobbes seems to be suggesting that humans band together out of desperation, to avoid being unaffiliated in a world where there is strength only in numbers.



mentions "the savage people in many parts of America." Yes, he has heard of them, and clearly he is basing his ideas of what humans would be like without "politics" on caricatures of Native Americans designed to justify colonialism.

The truth is that humans live in groups because we evolved as social animals, but you could hardly expect either man to understand that.

I don't think his idea that humans would ever live in a "war of all against all" is true, however. I wondered as I read, had he ever heard that tribal people have organized lives too? Then further along - page 70 in the online text - he



*Well, neither Hobbes nor Aristotle really gives us a lot of foundational evidence for their assumptions. I suppose we could say that Aristotle observed a lot of communities and "saw" that everywhere, human beings only fulfilled their complete purpose within a city. So he has a bit more of a leg to stand on there. Hobbes is asserting his assumptions about human nature without as much empirical study. Maybe the fresh memory of the English Civil War seemed to be enough to him.*

*As for the end of telos, it's worth noting that the concept had been abused and misused for a long time before Hobbes put it out of its misery. Lots of folks, from the old philosophers to the Scholastic teachers that Hobbes had in the 1600s, thought they knew the answer to human purpose/telos, but clearly their authority had broken down. The Reformation shook the philosophical authority of the church, and the authority of the kings was falling apart too. At some point, it became too difficult to claim, "we know what the good life is!"*

## Calvin and Hobbes



John Calvin (1509-1564) was a French theologian during the Protestant Reformation and was a central developer of Calvinism — an approach to the Christian life that emphasizes God's sovereignty in all things. The system is perhaps best known for its doctrines of predestination and total depravity, the fallen state of man as a result of the general condition of sinfulness into which human beings are born.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was an English philosopher, today best remembered for his work on political philosophy. Hobbes's account of human nature as self-interested cooperation has proved to be an enduring theory in the field of philosophical anthropology.

Calvin and Hobbes is a comic strip written and illustrated by Bill Watterson, following the antics of an imaginative six-year-old boy and his sardonic — albeit stuffed-tiger. The pair are named after John Calvin and Thomas Hobbes.

Text excerpted from the Wikipedia articles John Calvin, Calvinism, Total depravity, Original sin, Thomas Hobbes and Calvin and Hobbes. 30 April 2007

*You could even say that Hobbes didn't really kill the idea of telos, but rather he just announced it was dead.*

*That's not to say he was right, or that we should be happy about the political theory he designed around that lack of human purpose. It does mean that if we want to find a theory that does use some kind of teleological concept, it has to offer some new explanation of what the human purpose is and how to discover it.*

# What is The Social Contract?

The "social contract" is a metaphor for the trade-off we make to live in society. For all of society to work, we have to agree to keep certain forms of social order. But, this is really a post-hoc way of looking at it. Apes live in groups and you might say that theoretically they were 'ceding some of their individual power' to be ruled by the strongest among them. But, they certainly aren't doing it by contract. They don't even know they are doing it, and are doing it instinctively, not by conscious choice. And it often looks less like agreement, and more like the strongest doing what they want.

It has great evolutionary benefit for the group in an emergency to line up behind the big guy. That comes at a cost for the weakest.

Eventually I think the social contract metaphor will be replaced by more of a family-explanation. We are here with these people because we were born here, and we try all kinds of ways to make it work. But we can't shed the genetic programming. We still line up behind the big guy when threatened. It's important to understand this, to separate real emergencies from demagoguery.



## Confucian Thought

*Explain how Confucius is different from the Greeks on ethics.*

For the Greeks, ethics was central to the philosophers' views. The political ideas they espoused were derived from their ideas of how to get humans to behave virtuously, for the purpose of creating happiness.

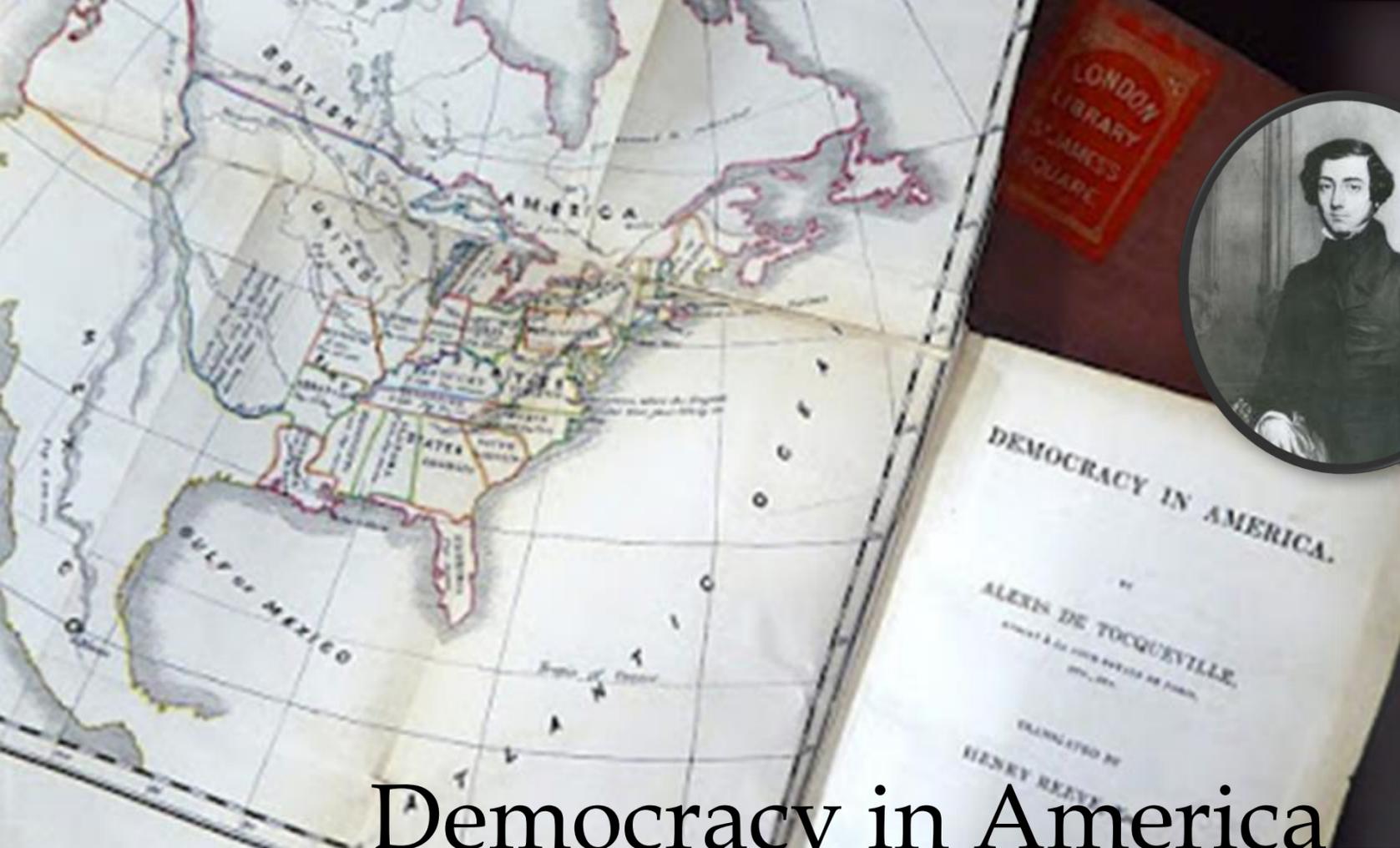
El Amine presents two lines of thinking in Confucianism. The first is the idea that Confucian ethics are derived from Confucian politics.

The second is that Confucian politics are derived from Confucian ethics. In either interpretation the idea that Confucian wisdom is a form of ethics is central.

El Amine offers a different interpretation, that neither Confucian ethics or political theory is derived from each other and neither, when examined closely, are greatly concerned with ethics per se. These systems are both concerned with keeping social order, and not greatly concerned that people act ethically except as it is necessary for order.

El Amine explains that the Warring States period in China probably created a desire for stability, much as the English Civil War would have convinced Hobbes that there was no greater purpose to be sought than order in society. Having lived in prosperity and far from the world's troubles my whole life, perhaps I take it for granted how important it is to maintain order. It's easy to forget how fragile it is.





# Democracy in America

Tocqueville felt that the modernizing forces of history were bringing an inevitable change to society. He saw the great democratic revolutions as the latest development in history's march toward equality. Tocqueville describes many forces he sees responsible for this equalizing effect. He claims that during feudalism, the Church was the first institution of meritocratic rise, where even a serf taken into the clergy, if clever and adept, could rise to hold the ears of kings. He felt that new social positions, like civil servant and businessman, created ranks between the old orders, and that talent and intelligence were becoming more important determiners of social station than birth. He saw the invention of the firearm and even the parcel post, which delivered indiscriminately, as equalizing trends. Tocqueville thought that every turn of history was toward a more level playing field.

While this transformation had left much of the world reeling, Tocqueville felt that one country seemed to be successfully surfing the waves of change, the newly-founded United States of America. One reason might be because of the different people the Europeans encountered upon their arrival in this land. In Chapter I Tocqueville describes "the Indians" at length as people who were, while "poor," were also "free" from the inequalities of European societies.

Why did Tocqueville feel that American democracy differed from democracy elsewhere, and other traditional institutions?



Then in Chapter II Tocqueville describes how, like the child grows into the man, the founding character of the early United States dictated its later destiny. He felt that the early introduction of slavery in the South led them to very different "manners and social conditions" from the North, to put it mildly.

New Englanders, on the other hand, were Puritans, a religious and political system of thought with more democratic leanings, leading to the early establishment of democratic institutions which then shaped American equality. Tocqueville felt the religious and political worlds, rather than being in conflict, actually complemented each other in America, advancing in tandem even as the separation of church and state kept their spheres from converging.

To be fair, Tocqueville suggests that American equality is far from perfect. He notes that the criminal justice system depends on bail, which is nothing to a rich man and insurmountable to a poor man. But, he says, while some old aristocratic attitudes persist, in America "it is the poor who make the law" and therefore they can shape the system to their own advantage, and often do.

Perhaps the greatest equalizing force Tocqueville presents are the laws of inheritance. In Chapter III he suggests that in Europe, *primogeniture*, or the system of passing the entire estate to one's eldest son, keeps aristocratic power entrenched through the generations. However in America, estates are divided among heirs, making them smaller with each successive split.

This means family fortunes rise and fall by the industry of the current generation, instead of rising and then coasting along from there. Clearly, Tocqueville makes a connection between generational wealth and the unequal social outcomes which result. What's more, he notes that in America, the smart and the dumb, the strong and the weak are generally treated equally. Tocqueville describes an American passion for equality, a motivating spirit which excites people and gets them energized to act to make things more accessible and fair. While aspirational in some ways, this was the American story he saw. It was the desire of sovereign people for their society to have equality, Tocqueville said, and they were using their liberty to make sure it happened.

Perhaps one reason we are in such a divided and troubled America today is because we don't have our animating story anymore. With the rise of neoliberal capitalism, it can be pretty hard to convince ourselves that our society is anything like "equal." To support this inequality, we have traded in that story for one of savage meritocracy, where the most ruthless gougers prevail and we celebrate their "productivity." Since our inequality is now actively damaging our democracy, not to mention the atmosphere, it might be time to come up with a better story.

# Ethics vs Order

## Or is it?

After 9-11, Americans abandoned our integrity in droves. We rushed to an unnecessary war based on false pretenses, and slipped any toehold we might have had on the moral high ground by imprisoning “enemy combatants” without due process and then torturing them.

At the time, this was accepted, even celebrated, as necessary for our safety. We simultaneously accepted increasing intrusion into our lives by a police state. As in many other places and times, it was considered important to abandon the values we know are right for the sake of “Social Order”. This tradeoff plays out so much in history that the question of how much security one must trade for virtue, ethics, and justice – in other words, for doing the right thing – remains a central concern of politics. If we respect their rights, aren't we enabling the terrorists? If we give too much liberty, aren't we risking anarchy? For safety's sake, we have to crack down – but how much do we need to crack down to get order so we can start being good again?

These questions simply assume that we need to force people to cooperate; that to get order, we must turn away from doing the right thing toward doing the forceful, orderly but wrong thing. So the dilemma becomes, how can these conflicting needs be balanced? I would suggest that this framing is incorrect. A more accurate

view would be to see that order arises from virtue, and in fact what has usually been pursued in the name of “order” is more like obedience to exploitation. Thinkers from ancient to modern times have glimpsed the truth, that order among humans does not need to be obtained at the point of the sword or the lash of the whip, but arises naturally, and we can create it through fairness.

El Amine raises this age-old puzzle in her discussion of Confucianism. She describes how Confucian scholars through the ages tried to show how their politics could be derived from their ethical system, or at least tried to relate power to merit and virtue, perhaps even showing that Confucian concern for the “satisfaction” of the people was a precursor to democracy. She quotes one scholar speculating that it “might well be translated into a communitarian form of democratic society” (El Amine, 6). However El Amine makes short work of this spin, adroitly demonstrating that democracy, and even ethics, were the furthest things from ruling minds when it was time to ensure a smooth succession. She shows that Confucian rulers instead preferred hereditary succession for the sake of order, seeking the blessings of “the people” only as a legitimizing afterthought. While her description might be more honest than the claim that Confucian

rulers were really ethical, it re-enforces the perception of ethics and order living at opposite ends of the political spectrum.

Because of this, I think that El Amine's framing is unfortunate and just serves to maintain existing power relations. What made “order” so important to Confucian rulers? The order being enforced on the peasantry was a highly exploitive one. This kind of “order” is unfailingly horribly unfair to those at the bottom – why else do we have to maintain it with force? Why else would we have to abandon our values in order to maintain it? It's because that kind of order is unjust, consisting mainly of extraction from the ignorant. The disorder the rulers feared was not some lack of organization; it was the unrest of the under-resourced masses. People would not be fighting the existing order or each other if everyone had enough. True fairness, justice, ethics and virtue would remove any need to overturn the social structure. The assumption that order can only come from force is just plain wrong.

For one thing, there is lots of evidence that humans maintain peace and order when conditions are fair, and the imposed orders prescribed by exploitation are unnecessary. Our study of the ancient Greeks suggested this. For example, in *Republic*, Socrates and Plato

Plato observed that what we most needed for order was justice. When Thrasymachus tries to assert that “justice is nothing other than what is advantageous for the stronger” (338c), Socrates disagrees for several reasons. He points out that “injustice surely breeds hatred, dissension and fighting among people, whereas justice brings concord and friendship; isn't that so?” (*Republic* 105). He says that people need justice in the group to work together, and that it's better for individuals too, suggesting that the unjust suffer for it. “The fact is that the just appear to be wiser and better and more capable of action, while the unjust cannot even cooperate with each other” (*Republic* 105). What's more, the disagreements seem almost entirely concerned with who gets what, to the extent that Socrates has to propose a city without property to envision a way around it. In the ideal city proposed in *Republic*, they saw that sharing among equals was really the only way to make a good life for everyone. They were right, even if they couldn't quite see how it applied to the people serving them.

A second reason to suppose that order is natural, and you don't have to sacrifice ethics to get it, requires a critical look at the work of Hobbes. Hobbes went to great lengths to describe his view of the “State of Nature,” without kings to keep people under control,



which he saw as conflict “of every man against every man.” He imagined that when men live “without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in the condition of war” (*Leviathan*, 69). He was living in a time of chaos and must have assumed that this was typical of humanity in general. His views were reinforced by the European conceit that non-Europeans were savages who lived in brutality. Hobbes described “the savage people in many places of America” who “have no government at all” and live “in a brutish manner.” (*Leviathan*, 70). However Hobbes was simply wrong about this. Humans living in tribal cultures have lives as ordered as anyone else. The idea that indigenous people were brutal savages was a bigoted portrayal which worked to further colonial appropriation of the land they lived on. The truth is that humans evolved natural behaviors and proclivities toward ordering themselves and this can be seen in tribes, clubs, families and friendships. Similarly, Hobbes suggests that without fear of a king, “there is no place for industry because the fruit of it is uncertain, and consequently there is no culture of the Earth,” along with “no account of time” and “no arts” (*Leviathan*, 69). Again, all humans everywhere have been industrious, had culture, accounted for time and made art, with or without kings. In short, humans are self-ordering and do not require the over-awing

force Hobbes described to agree to live peacefully in groups. Unvirtuous force is unnecessary, except for exploitation.

That is why the third and most important reason to discount the demand for “order” is that it is almost always a code word for oppression. The societal orders of the thinkers we studied were exploitive and unfair. As Susan Moller Okin points out, Greek life was made possible by the backbreaking contributions of the utterly unenfranchised, like women and slaves. Women were viewed as property of their fathers and husbands and were denied all participation in social life, but were required to run their husbands’ estates for them (Okin, 18). In *Politics*, Aristotle found that some people were just “natural slaves,” believing that “for he is by nature a slave who is capable of belonging to another, and that is why he does so belong” (23). Slaves were therefore suited to laboring without a say in their own lives. As the Greeks exploited their women and slaves, the Confucians did their peasantry, finding them unable to develop virtue of their own due to the demands of “the material life associated with the social group into which they are born” (El Amine, 36). The greatest risk to these social orders was that people who toiled in service to others would realize how badly they were getting ripped off.

Control over resources almost always underlies the emphasis on social order. For example, El Amine quotes Sheldon Wolin describing the central challenge of political philosophy both East and West, and of humans living together in general, as “how to reconcile the conflict created by competition under conditions of scarcity with the demands of public tranquility” (El Amine, 10.) But the idea that these humans were living in scarcity is laughable. Agriculture produces overwhelmingly stable levels of subsistence, and these slaves and peasants toiled for comfortable, literate overlords in prosperous societies. Once modern markets had been established, it became even harder to maintain the illusion of any kind of scarcity, when there has been obvious, opulent plenty – for some – ever since. As usual, it is unfair distribution, rather than any kind of real scarcity of resources, which causes deprivation at the bottom.

Aristotle saw that what was needed for people to practice virtue was not order first, but *resources* first. As he says in *Politics*, “The best life, both for individuals and city-states collectively, is a life of virtue sufficiently equipped with the resources needed to take part in virtuous actions” (VII.1, 1232b40). This “sufficient equipment of resources” is the key. If the resources are being shared fairly, the order

would create itself. After all, a fair distribution makes more sense, according to Aristotle. As it says in our lecture notes, there is “only so much you can do with external goods. You cannot wear fifteen shoes” (*Politics, The Best Life #6*). The acknowledgment that people needed equal shares of the resources was made even earlier by Socrates and Plato in their description of the equality of the Guardians of the Good City. It is the unjust distribution of the surplus that requires unvirtuous “order”.

Perhaps the best evidence that resource justice supports order, rather than the other way around, is Alexis de Tocqueville’s reporting of what he saw in America. Tocqueville felt that the defining feature that made democracy work in America was equality, noting that inequality stokes resentment, “irritating” and “humiliating” people at the lower end (Tocqueville, 31). He described how in America, people treated each other with equality and expected equality from each other, regardless of brains or accomplishments, and this was deeply ingrained into the American culture, allowing democracy to function. As he describes it, “...although the capacities of men are widely different, as the Creator has doubtless intended they should be, they are submitted to the same method of treatment” (Tocqueville, 71). But most importantly, he was not blind to the source



of that equality, and laid it squarely at the feet of resource diffusion. Tocqueville specifically describes the American inheritance system, which mandated that all heirs get a share, saying that the “very nature” of family fortunes are “altered, since they are parceled into shares, which become smaller and smaller at each division” (pg 67). He compares this with the European system, where the oldest inherits the entire estate. This primogeniture ensures generational wealth and power remain entrenched in Europe, stifling the ability of

democracy to flower. By contrast, Tocqueville sees that fairer distribution begets equality, which begets democracy.

So order, rather than having to be forced on crazy savages from the top down by any means necessary, is actually naturally occurring, and people are prone to live in peace when they are given a fair share and are not struggling for survival amidst plenty. Fairness, equality and sharing are all virtues that underlie, rather than arise from, social order. So the question of



which we should favor, or how we should balance their competing requirements, puts us on the horns of a false dilemma. The answer is that we should behave virtuously, ethically and justly towards all, most importantly by making sure that everyone has everything they need and are not being exploited by others. . In these circumstances, our natural tendencies to live in peace and harmony would not need to be maintained by fear of force.

