

Aristotle's Defensible Defense of Slavery¹

Aristotle's discussion of slavery is found in chapters 4 to 7 of book 1 of the *Politics*. It is introduced by some remarks at the end of chapter 3 (1253b14-20). There Aristotle says the aim of his discussion is twofold: first to see what relates to the use of slaves, and second to get some better understanding than current conceptions. The first aim recalls his assertion from chapter 2 (1252a31) that the slave is needed for the sake of preservation. The second recalls his assertions from chapters 1 and 2 (1252a7-9, 30-34) that slavery is by nature and that knowing how to rule slaves is different from knowing the other kinds of rule, for current conceptions deny both assertions. This twofold aim enables us to give a fairly neat division to the succeeding chapters: chapter 4 deals with the first aim of the use of slaves or of what slaves are for, and chapters 5 to 7 deal with the second aim of getting a better understanding than current conceptions. The content of the chapters enables us further to say that chapters 5 and 6 show that slavery is by nature and chapter 7 shows that mastery is a distinct kind of rule. Of chapters 5 and 6 the former argues directly for the naturalness of slavery and the latter answers certain counter arguments. So much is, at any rate, a schematic division of the chapters. For purposes of the present talk, however, I will focus on chapters 5 and 6 only, since these contain the central and most controversial of Aristotle's theses.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5, following the schema from chapter 3, deals with the question of whether there are any natural slaves. Such is how the chapter opens (1254b17-20). It ends by concluding that the question has been answered in the affirmative (1254b37-1255a2). We must understand and analyze the arguments accordingly. Aristotle begins by saying that the answer can be found both "by reason"

1. This essay is a reworking and restatement of what I wrote in my *A Philosophical Commentary on the Politics of Aristotle* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1998): 28-46.

and "from what actually occurs" (1254a20-21). This suggests that he is going to give two arguments or forms of argument and that these arguments will differ according as one is taken from facts of experience and the other from first principles. Despite the absence of clear indications in the text and the doubts of commentators,² two such different arguments can be found.

Aristotle first lays down four propositions (1254a21-26):

- (1) Ruling and being ruled are necessary and beneficial.
- (2) Some things are separated into ruler and ruled immediately at generation.
- (3) There are many kinds of rulers and ruled.
- (4) Rule over better subjects is always better.

There then follows what looks to be an argument for (4) (1254a26-28):

- (5) From better materials a better work is completed.
- (6) When one thing rules and another is ruled, there is always some work they have.

I take (6) to mean that the work of ruler and ruled is what rule is about or what makes it to be the sort of rule it is, and that the ruler completes this work by acting as agent on the ruled as patient or material.³ A conductor ruling his orchestra, for instance, works on his musicians to produce from them the work of musical performance. Manifestly the better his musicians the better a performance he can in principle, as (5) says, get out of them. So his rule qua producing musical performances will in principle, as (4) says, be better the better the musicians he rules.

Propositions (1) to (4) are, as such, empirical claims. They are claims about "what actually occurs." Accordingly they should be understood as constituting the basis for this one among the two arguments for the natural slave that Aristotle promised at the beginning of the chapter. These propositions are, however, not uncontroversial and are stated at too general a level to be immediately

2. Something remarked on by Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1887-1902): 2:140, Saunders, *Aristotle. Politics. Books I and II*. (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995): 75, and Schütrumpf, *op.cit.* 1:250.

3. Cf. 4(7).4.1325b40-1326a8, and *Ethics* 1.13.1102a7-12.

clear. What Aristotle says next serves to confirm and illustrate them.

He lays down the following propositions (1254a28-32):

(7) In everything that is fashioned into a common unity from the combination of several parts, whether the parts be continuous or discrete, a ruling and ruled part are apparent.

(8) This inheres in things from the whole of nature.

Propositions (1) to (4) follow from these two propositions. Proposition (8) asserts that (7) is a truth of nature or a principle naturally inherent in all composite things qua composite and not, for instance, something imposed on them by force from without. Hence, in the case of such things, it will follow that: (1) one part ruling and another being ruled must be necessary and beneficial (what is natural for things is necessary and beneficial); (2) these parts will be separated into ruler and ruled immediately at generation, or as soon as they come to be (what is natural to things exists in them as soon as they have their nature, that is, as soon as they come to be such); (3) there are many kinds of ruler and ruled (there are naturally many kinds of composite things); (4) rule over better subjects is better (some things are naturally more fit for certain kinds of work than others and composites made of these things will, following propositions (5) and (6), be better with respect to completing that work).

Aristotle then gives illustrations, taken again from "what actually occurs," of the truth of (7) and (8) (1254a32-b14). But a warning is in order. Propositions (7) and (8) are about a principle of nature. Instances to illustrate them must be taken from what accords with nature. Anything contrary to nature will obviously prejudice the result and must be dismissed as irrelevant from the start. A thing is manifestly contrary to nature when it is not as its nature requires it to be but is losing or has lost that nature. Disease, for instance, is contrary to nature in this sense. The diseased animal or organ is, precisely qua diseased, ceasing to be what it was. The cancerous lung is ceasing to be a lung and to convey oxygen to the blood, and the animal whose lung it is is ceasing to move easily and freely and beginning to die. Similarly vice is contrary to nature. The vicious man is, precisely

qua vicious, ceasing to be a man. His gluttony is corrupting his body, his ignorance and folly are corrupting his mind, his cowardice is corrupting his power to act as he chooses instead of as his fear compels him. Only healthy bodies and healthy souls, or only the best, are relevant to determining the truth of (7) and (8). The sort of random sampling that makes no prior judgments about better and worse and that we moderns prefer as the way to truth is here precisely the way to error. It may tell us what, in a given population, is common or average; it will not, unless the population includes only the best, tell us what is natural.

Taking the best as guide, then, we can readily see how Aristotle's instances establish (7) and (8). As regards the continuous composites of body and soul and of intellect and appetite, we see that, in the best, these divide into ruler and ruled respectively and do so according to the principles of their nature. The soul naturally rules the body with despotic rule (the body has no principle of action apart from the soul and, in the best, does whatever the soul commands without impediment or distortion); and the intellect naturally rules the appetite with political or royal rule (the appetites, which do have their own principle of action, listen, in the best, to the judgment of reason and act accordingly). Things are otherwise, of course, where rule among these parts is equal or reversed. The diseased and paralytic, the vicious and incontinent all suffer damage in their parts.

As regards the discrete composites of humans and animals and male and female, we see that, in the best, these too divide into ruler and ruled respectively and do so according to the principles of their nature. Humans naturally rule tame animals whose nature is better than the wild ones (it is possible to get better things out of them, as work and not just food), and tame animals are better off being thus ruled (they live longer and are more safe from predators and disease). The rule of humans over animals is evidently despotic (oxen, for instance, belong to farmers as tools for life in the way that slaves belong to masters). As for male and female, males are naturally better and rulers, at least as regards those animals where male and female come together to form a lasting composite. In the case of men and women, for instance, or those of the best sort, the man possesses deliberation along

with control and authority while the woman does not (1.13.1260a13). She is, we may suppose, naturally more subject to bodily functions and the passions attendant thereon (as during menstruation), and must find it harder to impose the results of deliberation on herself. She is also naturally weaker in body and must find it harder to command the strength and summon the will to impose the results of deliberation on others. Still, she does possess deliberation and, as such, can contribute to decision-making. Hence the man's rule over her must be political. It is a mark of barbarism for a man to rule his wife despotically (1.2.1252a34-b7).

So much is said in illustration and proof of (7) and (8) and therewith also of (1) to (4). Aristotle next applies these propositions to slavery (1254b14-20). Since these propositions are universal they must hold of all cases of composites formed by human beings, including the composite formed by master and slave. Consequently this will be: a natural composite, from (7) and (8); beneficial and necessary, from (1); and of the despotic kind, from (3)--provided it is between humans who, according to what they are or have become, from (2), are related to each other as humans and animals and soul and body (the natural patterns of despotic rule), or in other words whose best work is the work provided by animals and the body, from (4) along with (5) and (6). This work is, of course, the use of the body (chapter 4). Hence natural slaves will be those from whom the best work one can get is the use of the body.

Such is the first of Aristotle's arguments for the natural slave. It is complete and valid as it stands. Aristotle immediately follows it with his second argument and lays down the following propositions (1254b20-23):

- (9) He is a slave by nature who has the power of belonging to another,
- (10) and who shares reason sufficiently to perceive it but not to have it.

Proposition (9) repeats the definition from chapter 4 in summary form. The slave was defined there as someone belonging to another as a tool for life and I take it that "power" here in "power of belonging" is meant to refer to the slave's power as a tool for life. If so this is evidently the

way to begin an argument from reason for it is to begin the argument from the first principle grasped by reason in the case of anything, namely the definition. The conclusion of this argument, if it really is the second of Aristotle's two arguments, must be the same as that just stated for the first argument, namely that slaves by nature are those whose best work is the use of the body. The question is how this conclusion will follow from proposition (9). Obviously we need another proposition to the effect that:

(11) He whose best work is the use of the body has the power of belonging to another (in the sense meant).

Aristotle states no such proposition but the proposition he does state (10) entails it when taken along with another that he states shortly.

There are two parts to proposition (10): that the slave by nature (a) shares reason sufficiently to perceive it but (b) not to have it. The force of (10b) seems clear. It relates to the part of the definition of the slave that involves belonging to another. For not to have reason is effectively to belong to another. It is to be subject to those who can do the thinking in one's stead. Conversely to have reason of oneself is to be able to rule oneself by one's own thinking, which is the mark of self possession. Accordingly we can, by a process of elimination, assume that (10a) relates to the part of the definition of the slave that involves being a tool for life. Recall, then, that a living tool is supposed to act by perceiving and obeying the master's command (like the machines of Daedalus and Hephaestus). But the master's command comes from his reason. Hence to perceive his command, which a living tool must do, is somehow to perceive reason. The question then is how the slave does this perceiving. Certainly he cannot perceive reason *as* reason, for that would require him to possess reason of himself which, *ex hypothesi*, he does not. An answer can be found in Aristotle's next remark (1254b23-24):

(12) The different animals give of their assistance not perceiving by reason but by what they feel.

Most translators and commentators do not translate the Greek thus. They say instead that it means something like:

(12a) The other animals (sc. in contrast to the slave) do not follow reason but their passions.

The Greek cannot, as it stands, sustain this translation. Something has to be taken away or added. Corrections to a text are, of course, sometimes required. But one should not correct unless one has to. Here the Greek can be given a grammatically correct translation as it stands, namely what I write in (12).⁴ The only question is whether this translation, while grammatically correct, is also logically correct. Does it make sense of Aristotle's reasoning? The answer is that it does while (12a) does not.

What (12) does is describe how animals assist their masters as living tools. They must do so, of course, by perceiving what their masters want, because that is how living tools operate. But they cannot perceive what their masters want *by* reason, since they do not have reason. They can only perceive by what they feel. Horses and oxen, for instance, perceive by feeling the tug of the reins and sheepdogs by hearing shouts and whistles. Slaves by nature, who are, after all, as animals to their master and give the same bodily help in the supply of necessities that animals give (1254b24-26), must perceive their master's commands in a similar way. Proposition (12) thus shows that those who have reason sufficient to perceive it (though not to have it), which is proposition (10a), are living tools like animals. We can thus formulate the following argument:

(13) He who shares reason sufficiently to perceive it but not to have it belongs to another as a living tool.

(14) He whose best work is the use of the body shares reason sufficiently to perceive it but

4. My translation takes *hyp_retei* absolutely and in its primary sense of "give assistance" (picking up on the word for assistant, *hyp_ret_s*, in the last chapter), and not in its other sense of "follow" or "obey" and as governing "feelings" (*path_masin*). The same way of taking the Greek was already suggested by Koraes, *Aristotelous Politikon ta Sozomena* (Didot, Paris, 1821): 236. Susemihl, *De Politicis Aristoteleis Quaestiones Criticae, Jahrbucher für classische Philologie*, 1886: 343, noted Koraes' suggestion but rejected it because he failed to see its force in the context.

not to have it.

(15) Therefore he whose best work is the use of the body belongs to another as a living tool.

Proposition (13) is (10) and (12) combined. Proposition (14) is evident from what it means to be someone whose best work is the use of the body. Such a person cannot have reason, since having reason would make him capable of a better work (some work of reason and not merely of the body), but he must share reason sufficiently to perceive the master's commands, else the master would not get out of him the best work of which he is capable. Proposition (15) is (11) worded differently. From (11) and (9) the conclusion follows that he is a slave by nature whose best work is the use of the body. This is what Aristotle intended. Proposition (12a) will not enable one to construct this pattern of reasoning. In fact, as far as it goes, it undermines it. It makes those who perceive reason but do not have it to be unlike instead of like animals, and it implies that they have reason in some stronger sense than animals do. Hence it implies that, unlike animals, they are not living tools belonging to another. We should reject (12a).

Note that the reason which the slave is said to lack need not mean that slaves have no capacity at all to work things out and develop skills. Some animals can, up to a point, work things out and develop skills, and Aristotle does allow later that slaves can be taught skills (1.7). What is excluded from the capacity of the slave, as also of animals, is discernment of the good and the noble. The slave lacks the foresight and deliberation possessed by the master (1.2.1252a31-34, 1.13.1260a12), and these must be of the good and noble since the master must foresee and deliberate about the end, which is the good and noble. Note, too, that Aristotle speaks of the slave by nature as someone who has a certain *condition* (1254b17). He refrains from saying how this condition comes about. The phrase "by nature" and proposition (2), that some things are separated into ruler and ruled immediately at generation, are often taken to imply that this condition comes about at natural birth so that the natural slave is someone born a slave. This does not follow. The relevant condition could come about by birth, no doubt, but there is nothing to prevent it coming about in other ways--as by

accident, say, or upbringing, or even by choice. To be a slave by nature is, for Aristotle, simply to be in a certain condition, that of having no better work than the use of the body. The origin of that condition is irrelevant to the course and structure of Aristotle's argument.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 is concerned with certain objections to the view that slavery is sometimes natural and just. The objections turn on the fact that there is slavery by law as well as by nature. The first objection seizes on slavery by law and, condemning this, condemns slavery absolutely. The law in question says that what is conquered in war belongs to the conquerors. The objectors counter that (1255a9-11):

(1) It is a terrible thing if what is forced into submission is to become slave of the stronger.

Hence, since this is what the law in question is effectively saying, they conclude that the law is terrible and unjust. Since, further, they suppose that slaves become slaves through this law, they also conclude that slavery is terrible and unjust.

This reasoning assumes that those forced into slavery by conquest are not slaves by nature. There is nothing in Aristotle's account of natural slavery that prevents those who have become slaves by conquest from also being slaves by nature. What makes the slave by nature is a certain condition of soul and this condition could exist in those who are not yet serving anyone as slave. They could be roaming free somewhere. Making them one's slaves would first require conquering them. The use of force in their case would not be terrible or unjust but the opposite (1.8.1256b24-26). The argument of the opponents of slavery only works on the assumption that there are no natural slaves around who deserve to be conquered. It only proves the injustice of slavery by assuming the injustice of slavery. It is sheer sophistry.

In this crude form the argument against slavery is a failure. But there is more to be said. Some of the wise also consider the law of conquest to be terrible and unjust, though others of them

disagree (1255a11-21). The interpretation of Aristotle's remarks at this point has been much disputed by scholars.⁵ I propose the following. The statement about virtue having a capacity to use force when it has equipment should be taken to imply that the conqueror in question, who is said to excel in some form of goodness, excels in the goodness of virtue and not, say, in strength alone.⁶ If he excelled in strength alone he could not be to those conquered as natural master to natural slave (virtue, not strength, marks the difference between natural master and natural slave). One would expect the wise to recognize that some conquerors might excel the conquered in virtue. That is, I take it, why Aristotle says that the force in question "seems not to be without virtue" (1255a15-16). For the wise are thinking of virtuous conquerors, not of any conqueror whatever.

What the wise disagree about is thus not the superiority of the conqueror in question, but "the just" (1255a16), that is to say, the law of conquest.⁷ Some of the wise take the law to be a "kindness" and not terrible (1255a17-18).⁸ They suppose it to apply only to cases where the conqueror is superior in virtue, that is, only to cases where natural masters are conquering natural slaves. Others of the wise take the law of conquest to be saying "that rule by the stronger is just" (1255a18-19).⁹ They take it to mean that it is just for any conqueror to rule, whether he is superior in

5. St. Thomas Aquinas, *op.cit.* 1.4, Newman, *op.cit.* 2:150-52, Schütrumpf, *op.cit.* 1:272-81, Susemihl and Hicks, *The Politics of Aristotle* (MacMillan, London, 1894): 163-66, 205-209. See also Barker, *Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle*, 368-69, Lord, *Aristotle. The Politics* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984): 248 n19, Saunders, *op.cit.* 80, and Schofield, in Patzig, *Aristoteles' Politik* (Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1990): 23-27.

6. My translation reads: "when virtue gets hold of equipment, it has a special capacity to use force, and also the conqueror always excels in some form of goodness."

7. Most commentators take "the just" (*to dikaion*) to mean the justice of the matter or something of the sort. But "this just" (*touto to dikaion*) was earlier used at 1255a7-8, as all agree, to refer to the law ("this principle of justice" as I translate it), so I take it to mean the same here as well.

8. All the manuscripts have "kindness" (*eunoia*), but the interpretations of some commentators require "kindness" to be emended to "folly" (*anoia*).

9. My translation at this point: "others think it [the law of conquest] is this, that rule by the stronger is just" differs from that of other commentators and translators and rests on punctuating the Greek thus *auto touto, dikaion to* ("it is this, that...is just"), and not *auto touto dikaion, to* ("this itself is just, rule...").

virtue or not. Their conclusion is that the law is terrible because it allows the enslavement of anyone who is conquered regardless of whether the conquered are natural slaves and the conquerors natural masters.

We can formalize the dispute between the two groups of the wise in the following way. Both groups accept that:

(2) The enslavement of natural slaves conquered in war by natural masters or conquerors superior in virtue is just, but the enslavement of the conquered is not just otherwise.

But one group adds to this the following:

(3) The law of conquest says that conquerors superior in virtue may enslave the conquered.

They therefore conclude:

(4) The law of conquest is just and kind.

The other group adds to (2) the following:

(5) The law of conquest says that any conqueror may enslave the conquered regardless of superiority in virtue.

They therefore conclude:

(6) The law of conquest is unjust and terrible.

These arguments "overlap" (1255a13) because they share proposition (2) in common. They disagree in their conclusions because they disagree about "the just," that is, the law of conquest and its interpretation, and add opposing propositions, (3) and (5), to proposition (2). The disagreement over interpretation is not surprising. The law only exists as an "agreement" and in what people "say" (1255a8-7), and what people say may not mean the same for all those who say it. Consequently some may say it in a just and others in an unjust way. The disagreement among the wise follows accordingly. But once set aside these arguments of the wise, in particular proposition (2), then the other arguments mentioned at the beginning, in particular proposition (1), have no weight. Proposition (1), unlike proposition (2), makes no distinction between virtuous and non-virtuous

conquerors. It condemns all enslavement in war, including the enslavement of natural slaves by natural masters. Since it totally ignores the arguments of chapter 5 it is neither strong nor convincing.

Another objection is raised by those who go to the opposite extreme and say that all slavery in war is just (1255a21-36). Their position is easily refuted for they refute it themselves. Like everyone else when pushed, they are unable to say that someone who does not deserve to be a slave should be made a slave if conquered. But their view entails this, since nothing prevents the well born and the good from occasionally being conquered or captured. Hence they deny what they first said and confine slavery by conquest to barbarians alone. They are effectively forced into looking for a notion of natural slavery, like Aristotle. But they still differ from him. Aristotle has not identified natural slavery with being a barbarian. He has identified it with having a certain condition of soul. National or geographical origin is a derivative characteristic (4(7).7.1327b20-36). Still their clumsy attempt to identify slaves with barbarians is a step in the right direction. They are looking for something that makes one a slave everywhere and not just if one happens to be conquered somewhere. Good birth is similar. Natural or true good birth goes with its possessor everywhere, at home and abroad.

Such is also what Theodectes' Helen says when she appeals to her descent from the gods to deny that she deserves to be called a slave (1255a36-38). This appeal to the high quality or virtue of one's parents implies two things: first that vice and virtue make the difference between slave and free, and second that the high quality or virtue of parents is passed on to children. Aristotle readily assents to the first of these implications, since that is the way he has himself distinguished slave and free. He demurs about the second, since nature does not often succeed in making children like parents (1255a39-b4). Nature's failure here parallels her failure, mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, to match bodies and souls. The introduction of Helen is not incidental. Helen had a beautiful body but she had a base soul. She was an adulteress and adultery is base (*Ethics* 2.6.1107a8-17). She

was free by birth but by nature, or by the condition of her soul, a slave. When Aristotle quotes her as asking who dare call her slave, we must understand that it is he who answers "I dare."

Conclusion

Aristotle's position on natural slavery and his arguments for that position are neither fallacious nor ironical, contrary to the opinions of many commentators.¹⁰ The conclusions follow validly from the premises, and the premises, whether empirical claims or theses about reason and virtue, are plausible if controversial. There is no reason to think that they are premises Aristotle does not seriously accept. Nothing he says elsewhere contradicts or qualifies what he says here. Even his later claim that freedom should be held out to slaves as a reward (4(7).10.1330a32-33) is explicable of natural slaves. The condition that makes the natural slave need not be permanent. Some natural slaves could, perhaps, be educated out of slavery. Slavery under a truly virtuous master could be that education, if the slave began, by observation and imitation of the master, to appreciate the noble for its own sake. Such slaves would deserve to be set free. Aristotle nowhere says in his account of natural slavery that it is unjust to set free, or not to enslave, natural slaves. All he says is that it is unjust to enslave those who are not natural slaves. The latter is not the same as nor does it entail the former.

At all events, we may summarize Aristotle's views about slavery thus. The natural masters are fundamentally the virtuous, or those who have been perfected in their development, and the natural slaves are fundamentally the vicious, or those who have in some way been damaged or corrupted in their development. Many barbarians are in this condition, to be sure, but there is no need to suppose that all of them are. More to the point, some Greeks will be in this condition, in particular the many and whom the many admire. These views fit in with, and may in fact be said to fall out of, the teaching of the *Ethics* (where the many are certainly characterized as slavish and

10. See in particular the review by Dobbs, 'Natural Right and the Problem of Aristotle's Defense of Natural Slavery,' *Journal of Politics* 56 (1994).

bestial, as at 1.5.1095b19-20, 10.9.1179b10-18, 1180a4-14). They are not views peculiar to ancient Greeks or to Aristotle.¹¹

11. The same idea is found in *Proverbs* 11.29, "the fool (the moral fool, that is) will become slave to the wise." Compare Milton, *Paradise Lost* 12.97-101: "Yet sometimes nations will decline so low/ from vertue, which is reason, that no wrong/ but justice, and some fatal curse annex/ deprives them of their outward libertie./ their inward lost." See also St. Augustine, *City of God*, book 19, chapter 15, and Mill, *On Representative Government*, chapter 2.

