

Penguin Classics



ARISTOTLE THE POLITICS



THE PENGUIN CLASSICS

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ARISTOTLE was born at Stageira, in the dominion of the kings of Macedon, in 384 B.C. He studied at Athens under Plato, at whose death he left, and some time later became tutor to the young Alexander the Great. When Alexander succeeded to the throne in 335, Aristotle returned to Athens and established the Lyceum, where his vast erudition attracted a large number of scholars. After Alexander's death he was regarded in some quarters with suspicion, because he had been known as Alexander's friend. He was accused of impiety, and in 322 B.C. fled to Chalcis in Euboea, where he died in the same year. His writings were of extraordinary range, and many of them have survived. Among the most famous are the *Ethics* and the *Politics*.

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ARISTOTLE

THE POLITICS

TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

T. A. SINCLAIR



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IN MEMORIAM J.A.K.T.

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INTRODUCTION

LIFE AND WORKS

ARISTOTLE was born in 384 B.C. at Stageira in Chalcidice which was part of the dominion of the kings of Macedon. He was the son of a physician who attended the family of King Amyntas. Later the throne was occupied by Philip, who spent his life augmenting the power and territory of Macedon and making it dominant among Greek states, whereas prior to his reign it had lain somewhat on the fringe. At the age of about seventeen Aristotle went to Athens and became a student in the famous Academy of Plato. Here he studied mathematics, ethics, and politics, and we do not know what else besides. He remained there, a teacher but still a learner, for twenty years. At this period he must have written those works which Plutarch called Platonic, dialogues on ethical and political subjects, which were much admired in antiquity for their style but which are now lost. After the death of Plato in 346 he left the Academy, possibly disappointed that he had not been chosen to succeed him as head. In any case it was quite time that he left. The Academy offered little scope for his rapidly extending intellectual interests. With a few companions he crossed the Aegean Sea to Asia Minor and settled at Assos in the Troad. Here he continued his scientific studies, especially in marine biology. It is doubtful whether he wrote anything at this period, but the experience had a profound effect on his general outlook on the physical world and his view of man's place in it. Man was an animal, but he was the only animal that could be described as 'political', capable of, and designed by nature for, life in a *polis*. It was at this period of his life also that he married his first wife; she too was a Macedonian. In 343 he returned to his native land whither he had been invited to teach King Philip's young son, the future Alexander the Great. He did this for about two years, but what he taught him and what effect either had upon the other remain obscure. We know very little about the next four or five years but by 336 B.C. he was in Athens with his family.

Politically much had happened at Athens during his ten years' absence. The eloquence of Demosthenes had not been sufficient to stir up effective resistance to the increasing encroachment of Aris-

totle's own King Philip. After winning the battle of Chaeronea in 338 Philip had grouped most of the Greek states into a kind of federation firmly under the control of Macedon. Preparations were set afoot for an invasion of Asia, but Philip was assassinated in 336 and it was Alexander who led the expedition. At Athens opinion about Philip had long been divided. Macedonian supporters were fairly numerous among the wealthier upper classes and among these Aristotle had friends; he also had the useful backing of the Macedonian Antipater whom Alexander left in charge. So he had no difficulty in realizing his ambition of establishing at Athens a philosophical school of his own. He was a foreigner, not a citizen, and so could not legally own property there; but arrangements were made for a lease, and his school, the Lyceum, with its adjoining Walk (*Peripatos*), was successfully launched. Thus the most important and productive period of Aristotle's life, that of his second sojourn at Athens, coincides with the period when Alexander was conquering the Eastern world – a fact which no one could guess from reading his works. The news of Alexander's death in 323 was a signal for a revival of anti-Macedonian feeling at Athens, and Aristotle judged it prudent to retire to Euboea, where he died in the following year at the age of about sixty-two.

At the Lyceum, Aristotle had a staff of lecturers to assist him. These included the botanist Theophrastus, author of *Characters*, a man whose learning must have been as diversified as that of Aristotle. Perhaps, like the Regents in Scottish Universities in the eighteenth century, the staff were expected to teach a variety of subjects, theoretical and practical, and their surviving writings are a reflection of what they taught. But the distinction between *theoretikè* and *praktikè* was not at all the same as between theory and practice. They were two separate branches of knowledge, not two different ways of dealing with knowledge. The former, regarded as truly philosophical and truly scientific, was based on *theoria*, observation *plus* contemplation. This branch included theology, metaphysics, astronomy, mathematics, biology, botany, meteorology; and on these subjects Aristotle lectured and wrote extensively. To the practical branch belong the works entitled *Ethics*, *Politics*, *Rhetoric*, and *Poetics*. Of course these subjects, no less than the 'scientific' group, must be based on collecting and studying the available data. But the data, arising as they do out of human endeavour, are of a different and less stable kind. Moreover these sciences have a practical aim and the students were expected to

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become in some measure practitioners. In *Ethics* and *Politics*, for example, it does not suffice to learn what things are; they must find out also what can be done about them.

ARISTOTLE'S *POLITICS* IN THE PAST

There was a story current in antiquity that after Aristotle's death his unpublished works (that is most of the Aristotle that we have) were hidden in a cellar in Scepsis in the Troad and remained there unknown till the first century B.C. The story is probably untrue but there is no doubt that his *Politics* was not much studied during that time. Polybius, who was well read in Plato and would have had good reason to read the *Politics*, shows no real acquaintance with it. Cicero too, who *might* have read the *Politics* if the story is true that the manuscript reached Rome in Sulla's time, seems not to have done so. But Cicero knew Aristotle's earlier and published works, the now lost dialogues, including 'four books about justice'. Besides, teaching at the Lyceum continued to deal with *Politica* after the death of Aristotle, and the works of the Peripatetics Theophrastus and Dicaearchus were well known. Thus in various ways the political philosophy of the Lyceum may have been familiar to the men learned among Romans. Still, there is no denying the fact that both for Greeks and Romans the fame of Plato's *Republic* quite outshone that of Aristotle's *Politics* during classical antiquity. The same is true of Aristotle's work in general; it was little read in the days of the Roman Empire. Some of it (but not the *Politics*) became known in the West through the Latin translations of Boethius in the sixth century A.D. In the East, translations were made into Syriac and thence into Arabic. Some of these Arabic translations eventually found their way to Europe by way of Spain, where they were closely studied by learned Jews, and Latin translations were made from the Arabic before the twelfth century. But again the *Politics* was not included. The influence of the *Ethics* and the *Politics* does not begin to appear in Western Christendom till the thirteenth century; and that beginning was due to three members of the Dominican Order – William of Moerbeke (in Flanders), Albert of Cologne, and, most of all, St Thomas of Aquino.

William of Moerbeke knew Greek sufficiently well to make a literal translation into Latin for the use of Albert and Thomas. His versions of the *Ethics* and the *Politics* are extant, barely intelligible

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but interesting as exercises in translation. St Thomas made constant use of them, and everything that he wrote touching upon politics, rulers, and states was strongly influenced by the *Politics*. The state itself was for him, as for Aristotle, something in accordance with nature, something good in itself and needed by man in order to fulfil his nature. St Augustine had seen in the state the institutions and laws of the Roman Empire, certainly not good in themselves, but necessary as a curb on man's sinful nature; and this view was not abandoned when the Empire broke up. St Thomas in discarding it does not, of course, accept Aristotle's view of the state in its entirety. He may agree with the philosopher about property and about usury and the need to control education; but to be a good citizen in a good society, to be well-endowed with property, virtue, and ability – this ideal could not be made to fit the contemporary outlook merely by the addition of religion. The good life must needs now be a Christian life and a preparation for Eternity. St Thomas reproduces much of the six-fold classification of constitutions which Aristotle sometimes used and sometimes ignored; but he really had little use for it. He found (as we find) that Aristotle has no clear-cut answer to give to the question 'which is the best form of constitution?' But he found plenty of warrant in the *Politics* for saying that the rule of one outstandingly good man, backed by just laws, is most desirable, if only it can be attained. Besides, here he was on familiar ground. For centuries monarchical rule of one kind or another had occupied the central position in political thought; the contrast between the good king and the bad tyrant had been part of the stock-in-trade since classical antiquity; obedience and disobedience, legal status and legal rights, these were the topics; and above all how to build up what they called a 'Mirror of Princes' for the monarch to copy. We must not forget that the *Policraticus* of John of Salisbury (A.D. 1159) was just as much a precursor of St Thomas's *De regimine principum* as was the *Politics* of Aristotle, which John had not read.

In the domination exercised by Aristotelian philosophy over scholastic thought in the later Middle Ages, the *Politics* had little part to play; its influence and prestige were very great but of a very different kind and in a different field. Dante, for example, in his *De Monarchia* (1311) differed utterly from St Thomas, but his work is just as much permeated by the thought and language (latinized) of the *Politics*. Even farther removed politically from St Thomas is

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Marsilius of Padua (*Defensor pacis*, 1324), yet here too the influence of the *Politics* is unmistakable. After the more general revival of classical learning in the fifteenth century, Plato and Cicero were more favoured than Aristotle by the majority of readers, but the *Politics*, which was first printed in 1498 (Aldine press), continued to be part of the essential background of political philosophers such as Machiavelli, Jean Bodin, or Richard Hooker. In the seventeenth century Thomas Hobbes poured scorn on the Aristotle of the Schoolmen, but his own *Leviathan* testifies to his reading of the *Politics*. In the eighteenth century a superficial acquaintance with the *Ethics* and the *Politics* could be taken for granted among educated Europeans. But it was not until the next century, and the publication in 1832 by the Prussian Academy of the great Berlin *Corpus* of his works, that the study of Aristotle as a Greek author was really taken seriously. The *Politics* shared in this, and soon began to profit greatly from the industry and application of German scholarship. Political philosophy in its turn derived benefit from the translations and interpretations of nineteenth-century classical scholars and was enabled to see its own ancient antecedents in truer perspective. In the twentieth century this work continued unabated but political philosophy itself began to lose interest for academic philosophers. On the other hand there was a growing interest in the newer disciplines of anthropology and sociology, and the comparative study of political institutions. Where in all this does the *Politics* of Aristotle now stand?

ARISTOTLE'S *POLITICS* TODAY

The *Politics* of Aristotle is still read as a textbook of political science in universities. It may be asked why this is so, why it has not been discarded, since all that is of value in it must surely have been absorbed and taken over by subsequent writers on the subject. Euclid was used as a textbook of geometry till well into the twentieth century, but his discoveries have been embodied in better textbooks for schools. For mathematicians the interest of Euclid is largely antiquarian; he is a part of the history of mathematics. Nor is Aristotle's biology any longer taught. Why is his *Politics* worth studying today for its own sake?

Broadly speaking the reasons are first, that the problems posed by ethical and political philosophy are not of a kind that can be

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solved once and for all and handed on to posterity as so much accomplished; and second, that the problems are still the same problems at bottom, however much appearances and circumstances may have altered in twenty-three centuries. How can men live together? The world has grown smaller and men are more than ever forced to live together. The problem is larger, more acute, and more complicated than it was when ancient philosophers first looked at it. How in particular can top-dog and under-dog be made to live together? Is it enough to say 'Give the top-dog arms and the under-dog enough to eat'? Or should there be only one class of dog? Then the under-dogs abolish the top-dogs, only to find themselves burdened with a new set. How perennial are the problems of government and how little they have changed are indeed all too clear. Recent events, the expansion of civilization, the spread of technological advances, and the growth of political power in all parts of the world have emphasized this. Western Europe no longer holds its former dominance either culturally or politically; but the *Politics* is not simply part of our Western heritage nor is it tied to the European political concepts which it helped to form. Just as it transcended the city-state era in which and for which it was written, so it has transcended both the imperialism and the nation-states of the nineteenth century. The nascent or half-formed states of Africa and Asia will recognize some of their own problems in Aristotle's *Politics*, just as the seeker after norms of behaviour will learn from his *Ethics*. Neither will find, nor expect to find, ready-made answers to his questions, but it is always illuminating to see another mind, sometimes penetrating, sometimes obtuse, working on problems that are fundamentally similar to one's own, however different in time, setting, and local conditions.

Works written about the science of politics may be said very roughly to fall into two classes, one of which may be called prescriptive, the other descriptive. The one seeks to make a pattern of an ideal state and, in varying degrees according to the taste of the author, to lay plans for the realization of that pattern. The other examines the data of politics, looks at constitutions as they exist now or have existed in the past, and seeks to draw conclusions about the way they are likely to develop. It does not aim at describing an ideal state or at determining what kind of constitution is best. Both types of study have, actually or potentially, a practical use, the prescriptive with a blue-print for the future, the other analysing and comparing. Both may also move in the domain of

pure theory, the one deducing from a set of principles what human behaviour in society ought to be, the other evolving principles of human behaviour from the ways in which men do in fact behave. This does not mean that a descriptive writer suspends value-judgement altogether; he can hardly avoid appraising, by some standard or other, the work of the constitutions which form the data of his subject.

The *Politics* of Aristotle belongs to both these classes and moves in and out of them. It is the only work of an ancient author of which that could be said. All through antiquity (and in more modern times too) the utopian method of study predominated. Long before Plato or Aristotle, the Greeks for good practical reasons had been asking themselves 'What is the best form of constitution?' And after Plato the fame of the *Republic* and the *Laws* kept much of political thought fastened to the same topics. In later antiquity discussions of the ideal state took the form of discussions about the perfect ruler, the ideal king. The search for the ideal state and the best constitution are of course the very heart of Aristotle's *Politics*; he had inherited the topic from his predecessors and is constantly commenting on and drawing from Plato. But he also had the analytical approach; it was part of his scientific cast of mind. And it is this that gives the *Politics* part of its special interest today, when the prescriptive method, from Plato to Marx, is out of fashion.

It is difficult to be a thoroughly detached observer even of the data of the physical sciences, virtually impossible when it comes to the study of man. Among the ancients only Thucydides came near to it. He observed and analysed human behaviour as manifested by nations at war, and nothing of that has changed since he wrote; but he was not a political theorist and nothing could have been farther from his mind than constructing a form of constitution. Yet even in the pages of Thucydides it is not difficult to see in broad outline what kind of polity he would prefer and would regard as best for Athens. All the more then when we come to Aristotle; his views about what is best are constantly to the fore and not always consistent. He draws a distinction between the ideally best, and the best in the circumstances or the best for a particular people; but his own ethical standards and political preferences stand out clearly at all times, even in those parts where the methods of descriptive analysis and comparison are extensively employed. Hence although we may reasonably say that Aristotle carried over from his

biological studies to his political and analytical mind and a zeal for classifying and understanding all the data of his subject, we cannot claim that his observation is detached and unprejudiced. Nor of course must we fall into the common error of making such a claim for ourselves.

Again, Aristotle had more understanding than most ancient writers of the connexion between politics and economics. Just because the links between these two are nowadays so complex, it may be useful to study observations that are based on a much simpler form of society, however barren they may seem in themselves. The acquisition and use of wealth, the land and its produce, labour, money, commerce, and exchange – such topics as these are perpetually interesting and much of the first book of the *Politics* is devoted to them. Aristotle proceeds from a discussion of household management (*oikonomia*), regarding that as state-management on a smaller scale; goods, money, labour, and exchange play a big part in both. All that he has to say on these matters is strongly coloured by two obsessions, first, his prejudices against trade and against coined money and second, his reluctance to be without a labour-force which was either the absolute property of the employer (slave-labour) or so economically dependent on him as to make their free status positively worthless. In his thinking about these matters Aristotle was saddled with a piece of theory which because of its quasi-scientific appearance had been resting as an incubus on much of Greek thought for a century or more; the notion that whatever is good is according to nature. The *polis* itself was for Aristotle obviously good; it was made by man, but by man acting according to his own nature. But commerce and labour were not so easy. In the matter of trade Aristotle decided that exchange and barter of surplus goods were natural but that the use of coined money as a medium of exchange was contrary to nature, as was also usury. To own property was natural and indeed most meritorious, so long as the property was land. But in accordance with the principle ‘Nothing too much’ (to which the average Greek paid no more than lip-service) Aristotle lays it down that unnecessary accumulation cannot be allowed. What he has to say about money-making, about the responsibilities of wealth and the possibility of private ownership coexisting with public use of property, has a particular interest today, since the habits, methods, and ethics of money-making have become subjects of interest and importance for a much larger section of the population than formerly.