

Reading Notes: Aristotle and Economic Growth

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Who Aristotle Was

Let me remind you about Aristoteles son of Nikomachus of Stagira. He lived from -384 to -322, in the Greek-speaking communities around the Aegean Sea. He spent most of his time in Athens. For the next two millennia, he would be, for a large chunk of the world, THE Philosopher: capital “P” and capital “THE”. 1650 years after his death, poet Dante Alighieri would call him “the Master... of those who know”, “il Maestro di color che sanno”. Aristotle’s was, even at so long a distance in time, the most powerful intellectual name that one could conjure with.

Reading Aristotle

I have assigned the beginning of Aristotle’s *Politics*.

Aristotle was a deep thinker—perhaps the deepest thinker millennia. Aristotle was trying hard to get it right. As a result, Aristotle is the most respected intellectual landmark from his day at least up to the day of Isaac Newton. But you are going to read Aristotle, and you are going to hit a wall and think: “this is weird”—and a lot of it is weird, and even repugnant.

Yet we read him. For how could we learn if we only read people who we found not-weird? We read him as a mighty, flawed thinker whom we can learn from. And we can learn from him for two reasons:

- First, his thought is mighty, therefore we should pay attention to his arguments and his conclusions.
- Second, many have taken his thought—even where it is flawed—to be mighty. That fact means that his thought and its reception has a lot to tell us not just about Aristotle the intellectual and his doctrines, but about what those who received Aristotle so favorably were thinking as well.

Thus we have a lot to learn from reading Aristotle—even if often what we have to learn is not what he set out to teach.

The Beginning of Aristotle’s *Politics*

Aristotle’s *Politics* is about how Greek men do order and ought to order and must order their households and city-states. And a Greek man to have a functional household, and for Greek men to have a functional city-state, they need resources. *Politics* Book I is the preliminary chapter in which Aristotle talks about those necessary resources. It contains what Aristotle believes people thinking about politics—the ordering and the right ordering by Greek men of their households and their city-states—need to

know about acquiring, maintaining, and managing resources. It is thus what Aristotle has to say about what we would call the *economy*. That makes it an excellent place to start our history of economic growth, for it sheds enormous light on the question: What was and what did smart people think of the *economy* in the distant past—2.5 millennia ago?

Moreover, the answer to that question ramifies, and suggests answers to related questions, like: What light can be shed on what Aristotle thought about *economic growth*? What were the broader intellectual currents both generated by and the result of people's reflections on the *economy* of their day in which Aristotle was then swimming? What light can be shed on the structure and functioning of the economy in which Aristotle was embedded. And what can we say about its process of growth—or of not-growth?

We Will Ask You Questions

We want you to do more than just passively read. Passive reading does not work. As knowledge system and cognitive science guru Andy Matuschak ranted last year <<https://andymatuschak.org/books/>>:

Have you ever had a book... come up... [and] discover[ed] that you'd absorbed what amounts to a few sentences?... It happens to me regularly.... Someone asks a basic probing question... [and] I simply can't recall the relevant details... [or] I'll realize I had never really understood the idea... though I'd certainly thought I understood.... I'll realize that I had barely noticed how little I'd absorbed until that very moment...

The problem is that our brains are very good at forgetting irrelevant information. And our brains take information that we do not find ourselves using and reusing to be irrelevant—to be thrown out so that we can focus on information relevant to the continued life and reproductive success of

the East African Plains Ape. The things that we remember are things that we think about over and over again in our inner monologue, and that we then think about yet again as we apply the ideas to other things out there in the world. The people who do absorb and retain books are people who think about what they are reading as they read, and whose inner monologue sounds like “does that really make sense?”, “but what about?”, “didn’t I see an analogous point last month?”, and “that reminds me of.” I am rarely just reading: I am generally also analyzing, compressing, synthesizing, and summarizing.

I was lucky enough to have an upbringing in which I acquired these habits of reading by pure luck, and so I automatically retain a great deal of what I read, and that has led me to my current position, in which I have a moderately well-paying job in which I spend little of my time kowtowing to annoying authorities and have virtually no heavy lifting and little boring repetition of mindless tasks. You, probably and mostly, do not, or do not have these skills and habits at the level I had when I was your age and was smarter and more energetic than I am now. But you are close—and you can build and have these skills and habits if you work at it.

Hence we have questions for you about Book I of Aristoteles son of Nikomakhos’s Politics. We are going to ask you questions, if we have time, at the first lecture and at your first section. So think about what answers you would give to these:

1. What assumption that Aristotle made—perhaps (probably?) without thinking about it, because it seemed most obvious to him—struck you as the most wrong or repugnant or weird?
2. What does Aristotle say are the four tasks of the Greek man in managing his household? Why these four?

3. What role do the “statues of Daidalos, [and] the tripods [robotic catering vessels] of Hephaistos” play in Aristotle’s argument about how the economy of his age is, must be, and should be structured?
4. What role does Aristotle’s claim that “Of the art of acquisition [ktêtike] then there is one kind which by nature is a part of the management of a household.... There is another... commonly and rightly called an art of wealth-getting [chrêmatistikê]... [with] the notion that riches and property have no limit...” play in his argument?
5. At the end of the first long paragraph of I.11, Aristotle writes: “Of the several divisions of wealth-getting I now speak generally; a minute consideration of them might be useful in practice, but it would be tiresome to dwell upon them at greater length now...” An alternative translation would say “detailed and exact discussion would be useful for the practical workings but to spend too much time on such things is crude...” (see **Josiah Ober** (2019): *Agamemnon’s Cluelessness* <<https://delong.typepad.com/files/ober-agamemnon-1.pdf>>). Aristotle considers knowledge of the art of wealth-getting “not unworthy of philosophy”, but spending your time practicing this art “illiberal an irksome”; philosophers should know how Thales of Miletos got rich by cornering the olive-press market on the island of Lesbos, but for Aristotle, his students, or his readers to dwell upon these matters at greater length would be “tiresome” or “crude”. What do you think is going on in Aristotle’s mind here?
6. Did you find any advice—even indirect and oblique advice—from Aristotle in this passage about what the economic policy of a city-state should be? If so, what was it? If not, why do you think he fails to offer advice here (he offers lots of advice as to the organization and policies of city-states later on in the book)?

7. Near the start of Book I Aristotle divided household management into four branches: (1) master-slave, (2) gender roles, (3) human reproduction, and acquiring material resources. he then skipped over (2) and (3) to talk about (1) and (4). Near the very end of the Book I, in I.12, he returns to (2) and (3). He says that “A husband and father, we saw, rules over wife and children, both free, but the rule differs, the rule over his children being a royal, over his wife a constitutional rule”. What is the distinction that you think Aristotle is drawing here? How important is it? (And do note that Aristoteles is here having an argument with Sokrates and Platon, who believed in gender equity: that the souls and thus “the courage and justice of a man and of a woman, are...the same...”)
8. What does Aristotle conclude, at the end of the book, is the proper way to rank in importance the different branches of the art of household management?

Further Reading

Dante Alighieri (1320): *Inferno* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/41537/41537-h/41537-h.htm>>

Aristoteles of Stagira (-340): *Nikomakhean Ethics*, V Justice <<https://delong.typepad.com/files/aristotle-nicomachean-5.pdf>>

Gustave Dore (1861): *Illustrations for Dante's "Divine Comedy"* <https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Doré_Illustrations_for_Dante_s_Divi/R2TkMiHSOjUC>

Andy Matuschak (2019): *Why Books Don't Work* <<https://andymatuschak.org/books/>>

Ian Morris (2005): *The Growth of Greek Cities in the First Millennium BC* <<https://www.princeton.edu/~pswpc/pdfs/morris/120509.pdf>>

Josiah Ober (2019): *Agamemnon's Cluelessness* <<https://delong.typepad.com/files/ober-agamemnon-1.pdf>>