

Aristotle, slavery and us
ARISTÓTELES, A ESCRAVIDÃO E NÓS

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RESUMO

Os leitores modernos da *Política* de Aristóteles ficam compreensivelmente constrangidos com sua defesa da escravidão. Frequentemente, tentamos minimizar esse constrangimento atribuindo seu apoio à escravidão a um mero reflexo de sua época e de seu lugar. Neste artigo, defendo que essa abordagem retrata erroneamente o projeto de Aristóteles e não capta o que temos de aprender com ele. Uma atenção minuciosa ao texto mostra que o tratamento da escravidão por Aristóteles é um trabalho filosófico inovador e uma revisão substancial da escravidão tal como ela existia no mundo grego antigo. Eu mostro como Aristóteles desenvolve a sua defesa em um estreito diálogo com algumas críticas radicais à escravidão. Surpreendentemente, a posição de Aristóteles revela ter alguns pontos de afinidade com tais críticas, especialmente no que diz respeito às insuficientes defesas padrão da escravidão que a fundamentam em convenções legais decorrentes da guerra. Uma vez abertos à argumentação de Aristóteles como um trabalho filosófico sério, o problema essencial que encontramos é o de reconhecer que ele é, ao mesmo tempo, intelectualmente engenhoso e moralmente abominável.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Aristóteles; escravidão; convencionalismo; naturalismo.

ABSTRACT

Modern readers of Aristotle's *Politics* are understandably embarrassed by his defense of slavery. We often attempt to minimize the embarrassment by presenting his endorsement of slavery as a mere reflection of his time and place. I argue that this approach misrepresents Aristotle's project and fails to grasp what we must learn from it. Careful attention to the text shows that Aristotle's treatment of slavery is an innovative piece of philosophical work and a substantial revision of slavery as it existed in the ancient Greek world. I show how Aristotle develops his defense in close dialogue with certain radical critiques of slavery. Aristotle's position turns out to have surprising points of affinity with these critiques, particularly regarding wholly insufficient standard defenses of slavery that ground slavery in legal conventions arising from warfare. Once we open ourselves up to engaging with Aristotle's argument as serious philosophical work, the essential problem we encounter is to recognize that it is at one and the same time intellectually ingenious and morally abhorrent.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle; slavery; conventionalism; naturalism.

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In book I of the *Politics*, Aristotle notoriously offers a defense of slavery, grounded in the idea that slavery is a natural and mutually beneficial institution. As Agnes Callard has recently reminded us, “Aristotle did not merely condone slavery, he defended it; he did not merely defend it but defended it as beneficial to the slave. His view was that some people are, by nature, unable to pursue their own good and best suited to be ‘living tools’ for use by other people” (Callard, 2020). For modern readers who appreciate aspects of Aristotle’s political thought, his treatment of slavery is typically a source of embarrassment. I know of no modern reader who defends it.¹ Instead, our strategy is usually to ignore it and simply focus on those parts of the *Politics* we find more promising, not to say acceptable, in the modern world. When we are confronted with it and cannot ignore it, our usual strategy is to historicize it, that is, to treat it as a mere reflection of Aristotle’s time and place.

Callard provides a representative example of this historicizing response. As a philosopher who admires and draws on Aristotle’s work, Callard worries that his treatment of slavery will lead us to “cancel” Aristotle, to dismiss him wholesale as a thinker worth taking seriously. In order to prevent this conclusion, Callard deploys the historicizing response, arguing that we can defuse the threat posed by Aristotle’s defense of slavery by recalling Aristotle’s historical surroundings. As she writes, “when he looked around him he saw a world of slavery.” According to Callard, it

¹ Closest is Fortenbaugh, who goes so far as to say that “Aristotle’s view of slavery is neither psychologically foolish nor morally repulsive.” (1977: 137) He immediately qualifies this defense by noting: “Of course, there are no natural slaves in the world, so that the view remains theoretical”

was this pre-existing institution of slavery that “he then inscribed into his ethical theory.”²

The appeal of the historicizing response is understandable. It situates this uncomfortable aspect of Aristotle’s thinking in a foreign context and holds it at a distance from us, Aristotle’s modern readers. It invites us to see Aristotle’s defense of slavery as essentially an accident arising from the historical context in which he happened to live. Insofar as it presents his view of slavery as merely a reflection of that context, it enables us to separate this view from Aristotle’s core philosophical project and to imagine that this project could be carried on in another context without the defense of slavery. Ultimately, it reassures us that we can inherit his political thought in our very different context – one that abjures slavery – without feeling tainted by Aristotle’s defense of the institution.

I feel the attraction of this response. However, I want to see what happens when we forgo the comfort it offers and instead takes the risk of engaging with Aristotle’s defense of slavery more seriously. We might see Aristotle’s treatment of slavery not as a mere reflection of his times but as a significant piece of creative philosophical work. The difficulties in the way of achieving this view are considerable. First, Aristotle’s discussion belongs to a political and intellectual world that is in many ways quite unfamiliar to us and difficult for us to reconstruct. Second, the very idea of a serious philosophical inquiry into slavery is unfamiliar to us: we are accustomed to think that slavery is wrong, and that is the end of it. Third,

2 For other versions of the idea that Aristotle’s argument is based on observation of the world around him, see Lloyd 1968, Kraut 2002, and Schofield 1990.

by engaging in such an inquiry, and in particular by doing so alongside Aristotle, we risk being morally tainted by an apparent willingness to consider the ethics of slavery an open question. As soon as we leave behind the reassuring distance of the historicizing response, we are immediately confronted by all these dangers and difficulties.

Despite these risks, I am moved to engage with Aristotle on slavery, because I fear that the historicizing response sells us short in two ways. First, it sells us short in our understanding of Aristotle. Attention to the details of Aristotle's discussion reveals that it is in no sense a naïve reflection of his times but, in fact, a creative intervention in a sophisticated philosophical debate. Aristotle's defense of slavery, properly understood, turns out to be – not a reiteration of the institution of slavery as he found it – but a sharp and multifaceted *critique* of that institution.³ We do him a fundamental disservice, as readers, if we fail to acknowledge his critical aims and the originality of his view. This critique, however, does not represent moral progress. Aristotle does indeed offer a defense of slavery, one that seeks to rationalize and systematize the institution, and to that degree makes it actually worse than the slavery of his own time. The historicizing response seeks both to acknowledge Aristotle's defense of slavery and to contain it as an artifact of its historical context. In so doing, it fails to grasp both the creativity of it and the full horror of it. The creativity and the horror turn out to be deeply connected.

³ This point has been rightly emphasized by Ambler 1987, Nichols 1983, and Nussbaum 1980.

The historicizing response also sells us short in terms of what we have to learn, morally and intellectually, from Aristotle's argument. By learning from his argument, I do not mean accepting his conclusions. To be clear, I regard his conclusions as repugnant, and I am in no sense proposing a defense of them. To me, the morality of slavery is not an open question. But I am concerned with the question of what we do with Aristotle's *Politics*, and especially with how we negotiate the tension we feel when we admire Aristotle, on the one hand, and yet find certain aspects of his thinking unthinkable for us, on the other. In the case of his defense of slavery, we have much to learn from understanding his argument. In particular, I take his argument to offer a powerful illustration of the dangers that come with a certain kind of intellectual sophistication. We usually assume that the philosophical critique of institutions is bound to improve them, that institutions made more rational and systematic are thereby necessarily made better. But it need not be so, as Aristotle's argument illustrates. Aristotle recognizes the force of certain anti-slavery arguments and, under the pressure of those arguments, he rightly perceives that the pro-slavery ideology of his time was, in a certain, way incoherent. With great intellectual ingenuity, he proposes a revision to the institution that would avoid this form of incoherence. However, he does so in precisely the wrong direction and in a way that, in fact, intensifies the evil of slavery. When we properly grasp the true contours of his argument and come to see the ways it departs from the slavery of his own time, we find that it stands as a powerful warning. What his argument most fundamentally has to offer us is a lesson in the utter insufficiency of mere intellect to approach justice.

In order to enter into the intellectual work of Aristotle's thinking about slavery and to appreciate the degree to which it is not a naïve reflection of his times, the first step is to recognize that Aristotle thinks of slavery as the subject of active and fundamental debate. Slavery is not something he or his contemporaries simply observe around them. It is something they worry about, argue about, and disagree about, even to the point of questioning whether it can ever be just. Aristotle aims to defend a certain form of slavery as just, but his way of doing this is highly sophisticated. It involves rejecting as insufficient the justifications of slavery that were standard in his time, listening carefully to the institution's critics, finding certain truths in their criticisms, and proposing a reform of the institution that he recognizes departs significantly from current practice. For experienced readers of Aristotle, it is uncomfortable to see him deploying in this context many of his familiar philosophical methodologies, including the survey of existing views on a given question, the mapping of intellectual terrain according to two extreme positions, and the attempt to find a third alternative that avoids each of those positions.

Aristotle understands the pro-slavery side in the debate as grounded in a conventionalist understanding of justice, of the kind we are familiar with from Thrasymachus in *Republic* I. According to Aristotle, the root of this view is that "it is precisely the rule of the more powerful that is just." (1255a 19, Reeve 1998, p. 1998, p. 10) As in Thrasymachus's argument, this view does not appeal merely to force but argues that the rule of the stronger is also sanctioned by law. This legal defense of slavery turns on the standard conception of slavery in the ancient Greek world, accor-

ding to which slaves are lawfully captured in war. As Aristotle describes the fundamental principle to which this side of the debate appeals, “the law is a sort of agreement by which what is conquered in war is said to belong to the victors.”⁴ (1255a5-6, Reeve 1998, p. 9) The pro-slavery side takes this legal principle to establish the justice of slavery. As Aristotle writes, “there are those who cleave exclusively, as they think, to justice of a sort (for law is justice of a sort), and maintain that enslavement in war is just.” (1255a22-24, Reeve 1998, p. 10). In sum, Aristotle understands the standard justification of slavery in his time to run as follows: slaves are captured by the victors in war; what is captured belongs to the victors by law; law determines what is just; so slavery is just.

Aristotle opposes this side with an anti-slavery argument, grounded in a naturalist understanding of justice. This view also has Sophistic antecedents, in the opposition of law to nature, such as we find in, e.g., the arguments of Callicles in Plato’s *Gorgias*. As Aristotle elaborates this argument, it reasons from the unnaturalness of slavery to the conclusion that it is unjust. Aristotle writes, summing up this view: “But others believe that it is contrary to nature to be a master (for it is by law that one person is a slave and another free, whereas by nature there is no difference between them), which is why it is not just either, for it involves force.”⁵ (1253b19-

4 Aristotle does not specify the law in question or its source. In the Roman law tradition, the relevant law is called “the law of all peoples”: it governs relations between nations, including the conduct of warfare, and establishes the legal basis of slavery. See Justinian’s *Institutes*, I.1 and I.3.

5 A scholium on this passage associates this argument with the fourth-century BCE Sophist Alcidas, who is reported to have said that “nature never made any man a slave.” (See Reeve 1998, p. 6 n.25)

22, Reeve 1998, p. 6) Like the pro-slavery view, Aristotle explains that this view is based on its own fundamental conception of justice. In the case of the anti-slavery view, this conception is that “justice is benevolence.” (1255a18, Reeve 1998, p. 10) This conception leads the anti-slavery naturalist to posit a deep opposition between justice and force and, thus, to reject the pro-slavery conventionalist’s conception of justice as the rule of the stronger. For the anti-slavery naturalist, where force rules, there is injustice and not justice. As Aristotle explains the anti-slavery position, “Their supposition is that it is monstrous if someone is going to be the subject and slave to whatever has superior power and is able to subdue him by force.” (1255a8-10, Reeve 1998, p. 9-10)

The anti-slavery naturalist similarly disagrees about the concept of law. He rejects the conventionalist view of law as a mere sanction for force and, instead, argues that law properly understood is on the side of his alternative conception of justice. Aristotle describes the anti-slavery naturalists as being aware of the conventionalist appeal to law but, nonetheless, challenging the legal validity of that position. As he writes, “many of those conversant with the law challenge the justice of this [the law according to which what is conquered in war belongs to the victors]. They bring a writ of illegality against it, analogous to the challenge brought against a speaker in the assembly.” (1255a6-8, Reeve 1998, p. 9) As Reeve explains in a note to his translation, Aristotle here refers to an Athenian legal principle, according to which “a speaker in the Athenian assembly was liable to a writ of illegality or *graphē paranomōn* if he proposed legislation that contravened already existing law.” (Reeve 1998, p. 9 n.38) In

the context of a modern constitutional system, this anti-slavery argument is analogous to appealing to the constitution in order to overturn an existing law. A law might be duly passed and adopted by the legislature and, to that extent, belongs to the body of conventional law and, nonetheless, be legally invalid on the grounds that it is incompatible with the constitution. For the anti-slavery naturalist, it is their fundamental conception of justice as benevolence that does the work analogous to a constitution, serving as an underlying, more authoritative law. They argue that the conventional law appealed to by the pro-slavery side is, in fact, legally invalid in light of this more fundamental principle.

The second step in understanding Aristotle's argument about slavery is to recognize that, contra Callard and the historicizing response, his view of slavery is not based on observation, e.g., of the institution of slavery as it operated in his time, but rather on this debate and his critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each side.⁶ In effect, he combines elements from both sides of the debate in order to arrive at a third, heretofore unexplored alternative: pro-slavery naturalism. To grasp Aristotle's reaction to the debate, notice first that he regards the pro-slavery conventionalist position as remarkably weak. In his view, this position is manifestly untenable, to the point where its advocates will inevitably contradict themselves. In making this point, he draws on his own resistance to the conventionalist conception of justice as the rule of the

⁶ In emphasizing the dialectical character of Aristotle's argument, I am in methodological sympathy with the approach taken by Kamtekar 2016. For an alternative view, according to which Aristotle's discussion follows the scientific method Aristotle lays out in *Posterior Analytics* and follows in *Physics*, see Goldschmidt 1973 and Karbowski 2013.

stronger. In this way, his argument also captures what he takes to be a significant truth in the anti-slavery naturalist position.

He writes, regarding the pro-slavery conventionalist, that even as they “cleave exclusively” to the law as grounds for the justice of slavery, “at the same time they imply that it is not just.” (1255a23, Reeve 1998, p. 10). He explains: “For it is possible for wars to be started unjustly, and no one would say that someone is a slave if he did not deserve to be one; otherwise, those regarded as the best born would be slaves or the children of slaves, if any of them were taken captive and sold. That is why indeed they are not willing to describe *them*, but only non-Greeks, as slaves.” (1255a23-29, Reeve 1998, p. 10-11). The conventionalist claims that slavery is just because of a law according to which what is conquered in war belongs to the victors. Aristotle points out that this claim, if taken to its logical consequence, would have the implication that anyone at all could be justly enslaved, even “the best born.” He assumes that this is a consequence that the conventionalist is unwilling to accept, and so concludes that the conventionalist pro-slavery position fails. Aristotle presents this argument in an *ad hominem* form: strictly speaking, it only shows that the conventionalist’s position is untenable because he is unwilling to accept some of its implications. But it is clear that Aristotle himself regards those implications as unacceptable. As a result, he takes this argument to undermine conventionalism as such.

In making this argument, Aristotle is not only rejecting a certain justification of slavery but also urging a reform of the practice of ens-

lavement. Aristotle describes the conventionalist as willing to describe only “non-Greeks” as slaves. But historically this is quite inaccurate: as recently as the Peloponnesian War, about a century before Aristotle is writing, Greeks had enslaved other Greeks.⁷ Of course, they did not enslave members of their own societies, because they did not go to war against members of their own societies. But they understood their society to be the city-state, such as Athens, Sparta, and so on, rather than “Greece,” which is not a sovereign entity during this period. For Aristotle to insist that Greeks not enslave other Greeks, then, is a radical proposal: he suggests that – rather than basing eligibility for enslavement on possessing a distinct political identity – it should instead be based on possessing a distinct ethnic identity. He is thus proposing a significant reform of the practice, and one that can be seen as a kind of amelioration insofar as it removes one large class of people (Greeks) from eligibility for enslavement. On the other hand, this amelioration is bound to strike us as highly equivocal insofar as it also shifts the grounds of enslavement from an accident of war to an ethnic identity.

Aristotle’s argument against the conventionalist draws extensively on, and shows him to be in considerable sympathy with, anti-slavery naturalism. He agrees with the anti-slavery naturalist in rejecting the conventionalist’s conception of justice as the rule of the stronger. Like the anti-slavery naturalist, he argues that the conventionalist defense of slavery leads to untenable implications, that “it is monstrous if someone

⁷ For example, the Athenians enslaved the surviving Melians after the destruction of Melos in 416: see Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* V: 116.

is going to be the subject and slave to whatever has superior power and is able to subdue him by force.” He agrees that the conventionalist appeal to law is superficial and insufficient, and that a properly framed law must be consistent with underlying and more authoritative standards inherent in nature. And, as we saw above, he sympathizes with the anti-slavery position enough to advocate that slavery should be permanently abolished – for Greeks.

For all of these points of sympathy, Aristotle nonetheless does not adopt the anti-slavery position. He takes the anti-slavery naturalist to err in inferring from the untenability of conventionalism to the untenability of slavery. For the anti-slavery naturalist, the viability of slavery as such depends on the acceptance of conventionalism. In this sense, Aristotle sees the anti-slavery naturalist as sharing a striking point of agreement with the conventionalist: that the conventionalist defense of slavery is the only one available. Like the conventionalist, the anti-slavery naturalist reasons from the premise that “it is by law that one person is a slave and another free.” The anti-slavery naturalist simply draws the opposite implication from this that the conventionalist draws: while the conventionalist sees slavery as instituted by this law without further ado, the anti-slavery naturalist looks for a further, natural justification of this law and, finding none, concludes that slavery is untenable.

Aristotle’s resistance to the anti-slavery naturalist turns on his understanding of how the anti-slavery naturalist arrives at the conclusion that slavery is contrary to nature. For Aristotle, the anti-slavery conclu-

sion does not follow merely from the observation that slavery is a legal institution, or that it involves the application of force. Rather, the efficacy of both these points in their argument depends on an underlying claim: that slavery is contrary to nature, since “by nature there is no difference” between master and slave. It is this claim that Aristotle takes as the target of his critique. In this respect, he takes a wholly different tack from the standard pro-slavery view of his day, whose argument rested on conventionalism about law. Aristotle took a decisive step by shifting the ground of pro-slavery argument from a question of law to a question of nature. He showed how it was possible for slavery’s advocates to follow the lead of its critics in this direction, and to find there a new and firmer ground for the defense of slavery.

Aristotle takes the anti-slavery naturalist to be correct in taking the question of natural differences to be decisive. But he takes their position to be arbitrary in assuming that there are no such differences to be found. In place of this arbitrary assumption, Aristotle is able to insert his alternative proposal: that the rule of master over slave, where it is just, is justified on account of natural differences.⁸ In particular – as his critique of the conventionalist implies – we find a natural ground for slavery in supposed differences between Greeks and non-Greeks. As he writes, summing up his take on the debate:

⁸ For helpful accounts of how this proposal is motivated by wider themes of Aristotle’s political theory and natural teleology, see Heath 2008, Kamtekar 2016, and Karbowski 2012. For a dissenting view, according to which Aristotle’s defense of slavery operates independently of his account of natural differences, see Ambler 1987.

It is clear, then, that the objection [to slavery] with which we began has something to be said for it, and that the one lot [those conventionally enslaved] are not always natural slaves, nor the other naturally free. But it is also clear that in some cases there is such a distinction – cases where it is beneficial and just for the one to be master and the other to be slave, and where one ought to be ruled and the other ought to exercise the rule that is natural for him (so that he is in fact a master), and where misrule harms them both. (1255b3-9, Reeve 1998, p. 11)

Aristotle is here especially explicit about the revisionary ambition of his argument, noting that in his view many who are conventionally regarded as slaves are being held in bondage unjustly, and that slavery is justified only where the rule of a master is “natural.”

We are rightly apt to see Aristotle’s response to this debate as odious. That should not preclude us from also seeing it as extraordinarily creative. Aristotle’s originality can be difficult for us to discern, accustomed as we are to the world of Trans-Atlantic slavery and the theory of natural differences between master and slave elaborated in its pseudo-scientific racism. But in Aristotle’s context, where the debate over slavery is organized by the positions of conventionalism and naturalism outlined above, the idea that slavery itself might have a natural foundation in supposed natural differences is a highly original intervention.

It is, at the same time, a disaster. With all his ingenuity, Aristotle saw that the anti-slavery movement of his day mounted a powerful attack on slavery, and he saw the total inadequacy of conventionalism to meet it. His response was to find a new ground for slavery, in supposed differences of nature: a ground that could appear as a humane reform of the institution, even as it intensifies slavery’s grip on its victims. This vision

was idiosyncratic and had little practical effect in Aristotle’s own time. But it became in modernity a template for racist justifications of slavery.⁹ We still struggle with the legacy of those justifications today. In this sense, Aristotle’s defense of slavery is hardly something we can confine to a distant historical context. It is still with us today.

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⁹ For the influence of Aristotle on modern race-based justifications of slavery, see Malamud 2011.

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