

Aristotle - Philosophy of Politics II

By G. E. Gorfu

The Greeks lived in cities and Aristotle observed ‘the city naturally comes into existence as a result of physical necessities, as a natural completion of the smaller partnerships of households forming a village, and a collection of villages forming a city.’ Yet he turned to human nature to find the deeper purpose as to why the city existed at all. In *The Ethics* he said: ‘Man is social, and therefore naturally political. With the faculty of speech man can discern between the advantageous and the harmful, and hence between what is just and what is unjust.’ Are justice and what is advantageous the same or related?

To Aristotle justice and what is advantageous go hand in hand. How different that is from Nietzsche who asked: “What if the truth turns out to be against our self interest?” For Aristotle there can be no self interest that is unjust, and the whole essence of his book, *The Politics*, is really a dialogue on justice, which he considered as the highest of all virtues.

Aristotle pointed out: ‘...the city exists for the purpose of living well... providing man with a space to fully exercise his social and physical needs, and a forum to debate justice, and thereby to fully exercise virtue.’ He followed this line of thought in *The Ethics* to explore the ultimate purpose of life. Reason is a special faculty of human beings, he said, and the ultimate good for human beings, is to live virtuously and in contemplation of the highest truths of the universe. In stark contrast to Nietzsche, there is no self interest here.

That also explains why Socrates, the teacher of Plato, would rather drink hemlock and die in prison than escape into exile, leaving the arena of the city, where he debated on what is virtuous and just. The pursuit of virtue and justice to Socrates and his followers was far more important than wealth, than self interest, or even life itself. These philosophers very early identified the owning of wealth and property as the main cause of corruption of public officials. Their thoughts may be more than two thousand years old, but they are still valid today, and human nature seems to have changed very little since that time.

And Plato, the teacher of Aristotle, in *The Republic*, advocated the ‘breeding’ of public officials who would not own any property, would live communally, and share even their women. That may be going a bit too far, but there is no doubt that Plato saw corruption and the amassing of wealth as a major problem which caused the resentment between the rich and the poor. And that was the recipe for all revolutions. Two thousand years later it was Proudhon, the French socialist philosopher who asked his famous question: “*What is Property?*” and answered it in three simple words: “*Property is Theft!*”

And so we see how the problem of corruption persists today all over the world, among the developed as well as in the developing countries of Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Aristotle said education and moderation were the solution for watching out against greed and excessive wealth. But corruption and the amassing of wealth by public officials seem to go on forever. Now, it does not mean all public officials are corrupt. Of course not! There are some upstanding and honest officials, but these are not the norm. They are few and far between.

To be continued...