Telos and Determinism: Two Ways of Knowing

Classical understandings of empire are attached to inflated appetites for wealth and prestige, but contemporary understandings of empire are clouded by the post-Kantian agenda of proselytizing human rights on a global scale. Thinking about this, it struck me that the “secret king” of modern universalism probably is Hobbes, because in Hobbes we find a powerful articulation of a singular formula for political organization. Hobbes is no defender of human rights in the way that we understand them now, but he does found his new political science on a premise that all human beings are the bearers of natural rights to defend themselves. Hobbes makes claims for an infallible, universal and scientific basis for comprehending human motivations, and for organizing political communities.

By contrast, Aristotle gives us a view of what is “natural” for human beings, but one that does not lead to any universal prescriptions. Aristotle’s recommendations for organizing political communities are varied and pragmatic, attuned to cultural, geographical, and historical considerations. There is no single “science” of government for Aristotle, though certainly Aristotle has a sense of what human beings are fitted for. There are no “rights” in Aristotle’s political thought, but there are ethical considerations on how people ought to treat one another when they inhabit together a particular kind of life. In this paper, I want to look at Aristotle’s political thought as a realistic alternative to the rights-imperialism of the modern West, and as a way of thinking about politics that is open to
cultural diversity without necessarily sinking in to relativism. I realize of course that there
is a massive body of political theory that seeks to redress the problems of liberalism by
calling on Aristotle’s “communitarian” sentiments, but I am more interested in this paper
in exploring the underlying epistemological differences between Aristotle and Hobbes.

Knowledge of any kind for Hobbes has to be tracked back to sensation. Hobbes tells us at
the beginning of *Leviathan* that all our thoughts can be tracked back to sense response,
and sensations always arise in us as a consequence of collision and friction. Something
impacts on our nerves “and other string and membranes of the body, continued inwards to
the brain and the heart”, causing a “resistance or a counter-pressure”.¹ We exist in the
world as a bundle of sensations, and our most formative experiences are ones of conflict
and resistance, to the elements, to other human beings and to the world in general.
Hostility is our primal mode of being. Prudence, Hobbes defines as the simple adding up
of experiences that cautions us against dangers and allows us to measure more accurately
how to preserve ourselves. This is something we share with all sentient beings; it is not
peculiarly human. What is unique to human beings is the capacity for speech.

Speech has two purposes, according to Hobbes. One is to facilitate memory, so that by
having a bank of words, we can recall past experiences better, which in turn, will allow us
better to anticipate the future. A second advantage of speech is its ability to put a name to
a desire or fear, or some other passion. [Hobbes, *Lev*.13]. Importantly, speech and words
are the servants of the passions. They are clarifiers and organizers of primal sensations,
and the better they are at performing these tasks, the more accurate they are. Indeed,
Hobbes defines science as the “right definition of names”. (Hobbes, Lev.15). Hobbes expends much effort explaining how it is that words can deceive. “Natural sense and imagination are not subject to absurdity. Nature itself cannot err”. [Hobbes, Lev.15] But as human beings develop a greater sophistication in language, their capacities for both wisdom and folly abound. With letters, a man can become “excellently wise” or “excellently foolish” [Hobbes, Lev.15] Words are the “money of fools” and Hobbes warns us against taking countenance from such word wizards as Aristotle or Cicero or Thomas Aquinus. [Hobbes, Lev.15] The Greeks erred, Hobbes assures, in identifying reason and speech in the common term of logos. For reason and speech are clearly distinct in Hobbes’ account. Reason is a response to the senses, is prudential concern for self-preservation and inherently suspicious of external threat; speech is the collection of names that we acquire to facilitate our getting by in the world, and since we are creatures inclined to fear, diffidence, and sometimes glory, we will use words to manipulate and deceive. Speech alone cannot be trusted to give an accurate account of things, for “one man calleth wisdom what another calleth fear, and one cruelty another justice, one prodigality what another magnanimity, one gravity what another stupidity, etc.” [Hobbes, Lev.17]

So we have a situation where we all begin from universal experience of sensation (rooted in collision with external forces), but we have varying accounts in speech of our depictions of reality, because we manipulate words to enhance our own advantage. Nature does not lie, but people do. How do we address this conundrum? Hobbes says that we can get out of this predicament once we understand that reason properly employed is a
matter of industry, not prudence: “first, in apt imposing of names and secondly, by
getting a good and orderly method in proceeding from the elements, which are names, to
assertions made by connection of one of them to another, and so to syllogisms, which are
the connection of one assertion to another, till we come to a knowledge of all the
consequences of names appertaining to the subject at hand”. [Hobbes, Lev.21] Once we
set ourselves to this task, we are doing science. More simply put, Hobbes says that
“science is the knowledge of consequences.” [Hobbes, Lev.21] Enlightenment for human
beings is “perspicuous words”. On the road to enlightenment, “reason is the pace;
increase of science the way; and benefit of mankind, the end”. [Hobbes, Lev.22]
Scientific knowledge, it is important to note for Hobbes, is described as “conditional”
[Hobbes, Lev.40], not absolute, and that is because science is attendant on the
consequences it produces. If the benefit of mankind is the end, and science is the way,
then we need to know more about what the benefit of mankind is.

For Hobbes, the benefit of mankind is simple to understand, if harder to achieve.
Happiness for us consists in “continual success in obtaining those things which a man
from time to time desireth, that is to say, continual prospering.” [Hobbes, Lev.30] There
is no stasis of happiness, no “perpetual tranquility”, because “life itself is but motion and
can never be without desire, nor without fear no more than without sense”. [Hobbes,
Lev.30] Science applied in light of considerations on the benefit for mankind leads us
directly to consider political arrangements, for if happiness consists in “continual
prospering”, in the quenching of desires, and the maintaining of motion, we need to
secure the foundations for these pursuits.
Hobbes’ prescriptions for political commonwealth are well known. People must forfeit their natural liberty as autonomous agents in the natural condition, for the security of the state. All must submit equally to absolute authority in exchange for peace. Given Hobbes’ assumptions that human beings are first and foremost creatures of sensation and passion, that they are secondarily creatures of calculative prudence (able to add up experiences to predict what is in their best interest), and that they are thirdly, capable of speech acts that can be wildly deceptive, the only way that people can live together in peace is by relinquishing their natural liberty in a contractual act that will bind them by universal law, discovered by the pace of reason, pursued by the way of science, and intended for the benefit of all mankind.

Let us be clear about the universalism of Hobbes’ political science. It requires that we accept a number of assumptions. Human beings are first and foremost appetitive creatures whose primal response to the world is a sensual, not a reasoned, one, and whose appetites always incline toward the maximization of individual power, either because of a desire to dominate, or from a weaker desire simply to preserve one’s own territory and body. The variability in ethical claims that one finds in the world is due to the ingenuity of human beings in employing words to advance their own self-interests. Political communities, if they are to be secure, have to be built upon the transference of right on the part of autonomous, desire-maximizing individuals, who are willing to trade absolute liberty for peace. This is a formula that Hobbes claims provides the foundation for a secure commonwealth, in all circumstances, in all cultures. In the law of nature consists “the
fountain and the original of justice”. [Hobbes, Lev.71]. The science of natural law, as defined by Hobbes is “the true and only moral philosophy” [Hobbes, Lev.79].

There is no “true and only moral philosophy” for Aristotle, although moral philosophy certainly hinges on some understanding of truth. As in Hobbes, Aristotle’s moral and political teachings follow in an inductive manner from his “first thoughts” on how we know things. So we turn to these. Aristotle opens the Metaphysics with the claim that “all human beings by nature stretch themselves toward knowing”.² The first sign of this, he continues, is “our love of the senses; for even apart from their use, they are loved on their own account, and above all else, the one through the eyes.” (Aristotle, Met. 980a21)

Already here, we see a contestation with Hobbes, who contrarily asserts “as in sense that which is really within us is only motion, caused by the action of external objects (but in appearance, to the sight, light and colour; to the ear, sound; to the nostril, odour, etc); so when the action of the same object is continued from the eyes, ears and other organs to the heart, the real effect there is nothing but motion or endeavour, which consisteth in appetite or aversion to or from the object moving.” (Hobbes, Lev. 25) Aristotle claims we love the experiences of the senses for themselves; Hobbes rejects this, claiming that no sensation can be experienced except as either an attraction or an aversion to an external motion.

Aristotle’s depiction of sense as something we experience in and for itself, has parallels throughout the Metaphysics in the way that he accounts for knowledge, art and philosophy. Unlike Hobbes, who locates all human intention in the original chaos of
perpetual motion, Aristotle asserts that all human action, and all human thought and speech, incline toward purpose. It does not make sense, Aristotle tells us, to imagine the universe or ourselves as bundles of infinite reactions. “It is clear”, he says, “that there is some source of things and that the causes are not infinite either in a straight line or in kind. For it is not possible for one thing to come from another infinity, either as from material (such as flesh from earth, earth from air, air from fire, and in this way without stopping) or from where the origin of motion is (such as for a human being to be moved by the air, this by the sun, the sun by strife, and for there to be no limit to this).”

(Aristotle, Met. 994a)

Of course what Aristotle assumes, and what Hobbes explicitly disputes, is that there is purpose in the ordering of things, both in nature in its brutish manifestations, and in our artful constructions. To understand something is to attempt to grasp its *telos*. This is not easy, nor is it a precise science. Causality, for example, is multi-dimensional. If we want to understand the cause of something, we have to try to understand how it came into being, and how the origins are still extant in what we have before us, as for instance “the bronze of a statue, or the silver of bowl” (Aristotle, Met.1013a20) We also may try to grasp causality by reading patterns, and this is what we do in the “gathering in speech of what it is for something to be”, as for example the “two-in-one ratio or generally, numbers”. (Aristotle, Met.1013a20) We want to know “whatever makes a changing thing change”. And finally, causality “is meant as the end”. We need to inquire about that for the sake of which something exists.
For Aristotle, as human beings we exist both in motion, and in the context of purpose toward a final end, which is motionless (the matter of death). Aristotle challenges those who would claim that all things are at rest, or the reverse, that all things are in motion. (Aristotle, *Met.* 1012b) “For if all things are at rest, the same things would always be true and the same things false, but this obviously changes . . . but if all things are in motion, nothing would be true and everything would be false but . . . this is impossible.”

(Aristotle, *Met.* 1012b) Something has to move the things that move, and “the first mover is motionless”. (Aristotle, *Met.* 1012b30) Readers will recognize in these passages Aristotle’s famous depiction of the “first mover”, a notion that forms the bedrock of the major religions of the world as well as Aristotelian metaphysics. It is possible, and even necessary, Aristotle thinks, to account for both stasis and motion, for both truth and variability, for constancy and for change. This is what we live as human beings, and it colours our ethics and our politics. We are “beings in motion”, capable of building a great variety of communities, cultures, ways of living and knowing, and yet we are at the same time beings who “stretch toward knowing” final causes and ultimate purposes. The variability of things in the world does not challenge for Aristotle the claims of teleological knowing, in the way they do for Hobbes.

Hobbes says that speech cannot be trusted to found or sustain political communities, because people simply give the names of virtues to the masks of their own advantage and interest. Because of the infinite variability in the naming of things, justice, Hobbes tells us, can exist only in the binding authority of a state that decrees what justice is. *Logos*, for Aristotle, as Hobbes rightly identified (yet disparaged) is the combination of reason
and speech, and logos exists in this space between motion and rest. As Stephen Salkever notes, “Aristotle’s claim that our ability to speak reasonably is the human need that explains and justifies the political order is not easy to grasp. The difficulty is caused by the fact that his sense of the function or place of human speech in human life differs radically from conceptions that are familiar to us... the place of speech in human life is that logos makes it possible for us to discover, through argument, conjecture and narrative, the kinds of goals in terms of which we can most seriously organize our lives.”

It is a problem, Aristotle recognized, that logos comes up with many variations on the organization of political communities and interpretations of justice, but it is not the case that the variability is infinite, or that it is not curtailed in some manner by reference to an ultimate ground. Of the political sorts of justice, Aristotle writes, “one kind is natural, and another is conventional”. What is naturally just “has the same power everywhere, and is not affected by whether it seems to people or not”. What is conventionally just is encapsulated in the specific practices and laws of particular communities, “such as being released for a ransom of one mina, or sacrificing a goat but not two sheep”. (Aristotle, *N.E.* 1134b20-30) There are some people, Aristotle warns, who take all of justice to be conventional because of the variability of practices and morals, and because they believe that if justice were real, it would be everywhere and always the same, just like fire that burns the same whether in Athens or in Persia. “But this is not the way it is”, Aristotle says, “though it is so in a certain sense, and while among the gods, no doubt, nothing changes at all, among us there is something that is by nature even though everything is changeable.” (Aristotle, *N.E.* 1134b20-30)
So what is justice, by nature? Aristotle does not give us a universal prescription for this, because it is impossible, but natural justice is the practice of virtue with a view to human happiness. Understanding justice simply, requires an investigation into causality: what our origins are, and the ends for which we are fitted. The *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* read together give us a good idea of what “natural” justice is, and it includes the exercise of the virtues – moderation, courage, prudence, and so on – in relation to others. While these virtues are always exercised in relation to others in specific contexts, and therefore their particular manifestations will vary, they are not without substance in themselves. For Aristotle, we can love the virtues, just as we can love the senses.

Aristotle’s political science, unlike Hobbes’ political science, does not lead to one monolithic prescription for all orders. Aristotle recognizes the plurality of moral doctrines, and the plurality of political communities, that necessarily characterize human existence. Strangely, perhaps, Aristotle’s “final cause”, and his commitment to the “first mover” that underscores flux and change, opens him to a far greater toleration of diversity than Hobbes. In the *Politics*, he writes that “the variety of regimes – how many there are and in how many ways they are combined – should not be overlooked. And it is with this same prudence that one should try to see what laws are best and what are fitting for each of the regimes. For laws should be enacted – and all are in fact enacted – with a view to the regimes, and not regimes with a view to the laws.”

How can Aristotle’s political science illuminate contemporary understandings of politics? We seem to slip easily into binary opposites in our thinking about politics on a global
scale. Either we are cosmopolitans, insisting that there must be one true account of human knowing that underscores just political institutions, and that way of knowing starts with the assumption that human beings are autonomous bearers of rights. Or we are post-modern critics of hegemonic rights theory, defending the integrity of cultural distinctiveness. Aristotle avoids these binaries. We can talk meaningfully about some goods that can be ascribed to all human beings, and those include the “stretching toward knowledge”, as well as the moral virtues that enhance our living together in communities. Any well ordered community has ways of recognizing courage, moderation, and justice in its people. Cruelty, violence and slavishness are disparaged. Well ordered communities require lawfulness, and this in turn requires that relations of commodious living transcend kinship ties and are bound to some reasoned articulation of association grounded in speech. There is no single “moral science” that can be ascribed to all forms of living together, no single set of laws that can be proscribed, but there are nonetheless reasonable grounds for distinguishing between better and worse sorts of political arrangements.

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