

Aristotle's Justification of Slavery: A Self-Contradiction

Aristotle (384-322 BC), the famous Greek philosopher was an epitome of his time. Like any other normal being he was a product of his circumstances. As a political philosopher cannot remain unperturbed and unruffled by encounters with learned and intellectual minds of his age, Aristotle, 'The Father of Political Science' was no exception.

Aristotle's association with Plato had a profound impact on Aristotelian philosophy. Aristotle was a disciple of the former for 20 years. But Aristotle's Realism led him to have a vast difference of opinion than agreement with Platonic philosophy.

Aristotle fully negated Plato's Idealism and refused to accept 'things as they ought to be' and took 'things as they are'. He refuted various Platonic ideas of an Ideal State and its unity, Philosopher King, Communism of Property, Communism of Wives etc. on the same ground while upholding his reverence for realism.

On one side, Aristotle is remembered for his immense contribution in the field of Political Science due to his scientific approach and several relevant theories like that of a State being a Natural Institution, Theory of Constitution etc, his conservatism in the form of his theory of Slavery is untenable. Aristotelian justification of slavery comes as an ill-woven thread in the realist fabric of his philosophy. Philosophers like Barker often accused him for considering things '*as they are*' only when the things are '*as they ought to be*'. This is best illustrated in his justification of slavery.

Aristotle defined a slave to be a '*Humanized Beast*' who held a middle position between the humans and animals. Thus according to him, a slave was somebody more than a beast or an animal since he possesses reason only up to the level of comprehending other man's reason. On the other hand, a slave was far less than a human being since he did not have an independent reason and personality of his own which could be used for having self-direction and foresight.

Aristotle justified slavery on three grounds. Firstly, *he considered slavery to be natural*. According to him all men are not born equal. At the time of their birth nature endows inequality in them whereby all possess different virtues, interests and skills. Nature has made them to be born with physical and mental dissimilarities. Rule of a superior over an inferior is a natural ordainment. All this points towards the naturalness of slavery.

For Aristotle, Family is a natural institution since it is based on two natural instincts of man namely sex and appetite. The various interconnecting components of a family and their mutual relationship like that of a master and a slave is as natural as that of a husband and wife. Aristotelian justification of slavery on natural grounds was directed against the sophists who considered it as a grave violation of nature.

The second point of Aristotelian justification rested on its *utility for the society*. According to the Greek philosopher, a mind which is endowed with foresight and intellect by nature is the superior being in the society as against the mind born with mere corporal excellence is bound to be inferior i.e. a slave. Possession of different qualities and skills leads to

performance of a variety of functions in accordance with that particular skill or quality. A master being a citizen is meant to be performing the functions of state activities. This is only possible if he has a slave to his aid who can perform all the menial tasks leaving ample time with his master to concentrate upon state affairs. Aristotle went a step further in considering the slave to be '*a living possession*' of his master who acts as an '*animate instrument of action*' for him.

Slavery is equally useful for the slave himself since he gets a chance to be in the vicinity of the Master and derive some part of his excellence. This can elevate his status to a better position than before. Aristotle also believed that if the slave has shown good conduct and reached that level of rationality, he can be emancipated from slavery.

Thirdly, he justified slavery on grounds of expediency. Nature has made and adapted different men for different types of work. A slave's personality is tailor-made for physical labor while being subservient to his master.

Aristotle's approval and justification of slavery is a self-contradiction on his part. It certainly does not go well with his '*Realism and Scientific approach*' in the domain of political science.

Aristotle had always adopted a scientific approach towards the study of politics by comprehensive collection and analysis of data and theory building by following inductive method. He is credited with allotting a separate status to Politics for which he has been called as the '*Father of Political Science*' in the annals of History. Therefore, his support to slavery on grounds like it being natural, useful and expedient is untenable.

Aristotle's views on Slavery are out of place in the modern society which is moving towards new horizons of man and his freedom. His equation of a slave with an animate object of action who possesses minimal amount of reason leading to performance of menial tasks for the master who would eventually get time to participate in public affairs are also in contradiction with the modern concepts of Liberty, Equality and Justice of Mankind.

On the outset Aristotelian interpretation and justification of slavery stands in opposition to the modern concept of equality which rests on the tenets of equal rights and opportunities with prohibition of discrimination even to the ones who are born in a physically, mentally or economically less-privileged category of society. Although the limited impact of Aristotle's theory of slavery on modern society is undeniable but still we cannot ignore the historical-evolutionary impact of crossing several stages of human history and reaching at the modern stage. Contributions of thinkers and intellectuals in the form of theories cannot be undermined and are equally important even for the people living in current times because it brings clarity in peoples mind regarding the evolution of societies and ideas irrespective of the fact that Slavery is no more acceptable in any just society.

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