Aristotle on the Ethics of Workplace Relations

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Aristotle begins the second paragraph of Book One of his Politics with the following sentence.

Those who suppose that the same person is expert in political [rule], kingly [rule], managing the household and being a master [of slaves] do not argue rightly.\(^1\)

The Politics is about the political community, that most authoritative community that ‘embraces all the others … and aims at the most authoritative good of all.’\(^2\) Aristotle called this the City (Polis); we call it the State. The Politics is about the possibilities of this kind of life that raises human beings above mere subsistence and isolation and that allows them to thrive economically, intellectually and morally. It investigates the structures, ends and needs of the city and the knowledge and virtue required to make this arrangement work. The book is written at a time when the experience of the new Greek democracies is fresh and Aristotle’s insights remain acute and relevant.

And so, Aristotle distinguishes four essentially different kinds of arrangement that call for different kinds of expertise in rule or leadership or exercise of authority. Political rule is of those who are free and equal, and it has the characteristic that citizens take it in turns to rule and be ruled. Kingship is a carry-over from tribal societies, in which hereditary status, family relationships and seniority support a kind of rule. Household management includes both the relationship between husband and wife and parents and children and overseeing economic life of the family. In Aristotle’s time, economic life was most commonly the work of maintaining a farm, but it was also the activities of artisans and traders living in the city. The fourth kind of rule is management of slaves, or of those who engage in labour, and is a function of economic life.

The interest of this essay is with the economic aspects of household management and with the management of slaves. While to the modern reader Aristotle’s terms seem archaic and in the case of slavery objectionable, our purpose is firstly to penetrate Aristotle’s understanding so as to find what might be helpful in his analysis and secondly to apply what is helpful to the context of modern workplace relations. It is our expectation that he will help us make better sense of our situation than do some current modes of thought and language. There will need to be some terminological shifts, and we will find ourselves using terms like business, servants, workers and managers, and so ultimately dealing with workplace relations. Our sources will be Book One of the Politics, which is largely given over to economics, and the fragmentary text, the Economics.\(^3\)

Two preliminary remarks are necessary. First, Aristotle recognises the importance and value of economic life. ‘It is evident, therefore, that economics is prior in origin to politics; for its function is prior, since a household is part of a city.’\(^4\) This is often forgotten due to the priority given to political life, in which human beings are able to act in relation to one another, and to that part of life engaged in the liberal arts, where culture can flourish. The complementary priorities are of end and origin. A city is for the sake of a better life; without economic activity there will be no life at all; and the more complex the city, the more complex will economic activity need to be. Secondly, agriculture will be the paradigm of economic or business activity for the purpose of this essay, because it is fundamental to life and because it is in the area of perishables that the nature of labour is clearest.


\(^2\) Politics I, 1 (1252a4), p. 35.

\(^3\) Aristotle, Economics, translated by E.S Forster, in The Complete Works of Aristotle, edited by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), vol. 2, pp. 2130 – 2151. While the authenticity of this work is questioned, the main difficulty is that we have only a few fragments of the original text. The style and thought of what we have are clearly Aristotelian.

\(^4\) Economics I, 1 (1343b1), p. 2130.
Agriculture ranks first because of its justice; for it does not take anything away from men, either with their consent, as do retail trading and the mercenary arts, or against their will, as do the warlike arts. Further, agriculture is natural; for by nature all derive their sustenance from their mother, and so we derive it from the earth.5

There are basic principles expressed here that we in the Twenty-first Century tend to forget, but we will also note some shifts in due course.

**Aristotle on Labour**

Contemporary scholars tend to affect scandal and to avoid Aristotle’s discussion of slavery, but this is a faint hearted approach to his thought. He could not but deal with it, since it was foundational to ancient economic life. Slavery took many forms from the brutal to that of a benign domestic arrangement, but the Greek language did not distinguish differences, for instance, between slaves and servants. Still, at root, slavery implied the possession of one person by another. Aristotle does ask whether slavery is justified, and it is worth examining his arguments.6

Aristotle concludes that there are human beings that are free by nature and others that are slavish by nature, and he does this on three grounds. First, the natural slave is one ‘who participates in reason only to the extent of perceiving it, but does not have it’.7 In other words, the slave does not have the ability to know ahead of time what is to be done, yet is capable of understanding commands from a master and acting on them. This is identified with deficiency in the ability to deliberate and so a lack of practical wisdom.8 The second reason is that some people are less spirited than others, and that human beings will not be free unless they have a passion for freedom. The free will have both this passion and an ability to command.9 Aristotle holds that the differences at the base of these two arguments are present at birth, so that the deficiencies cannot be simply overcome by habitation or education.10 The third argument is from the general human condition.

Human beings need sustenance on a daily basis, and the food that sustains them is perishable. There is no relief, therefore, from the daily grind of attending to the perishables necessary to life. We can call this labour.11

Before we deal with these arguments, it will be useful to see what Aristotle rejects. First, he completely rejects conventional slavery, which was most commonly that imposed on those who had lost in war. His grounds are that it is unjust to treat as a slave one who is not naturally slavish.12 Secondly, he does not allow that the children of slaves should necessarily be slaves, because children will not always be born with the deficiencies of their parents.13 Between these two positions rule out the real possibility of institutional slavery, and Aristotle proposes a form of manumission to rectify unjust enslavement.14 His solution is that a household is bigger than a family and includes servants, who provide labour under the direction of a master. Each does what he is good at, and there are benefits for both. A slave shares in and enjoys the excellence and achievements of his master, something that is lacking in the lives of freely living artisans.15

Without necessarily accepting Aristotle’s solution, it is important to note his insight. He recognises that in the human condition there is a tendency towards subjection of some persons to servitude by others. He gives three grounds for this. First, human beings are dependent on the fruits of the earth for survival, and their perishability places heavy demands on human labour. Secondly, human beings have different capacities, which are not reducible to differences of opportunity for upbringing and education, and this puts them into unequal relationships with one another. Thirdly, in many, particularly the strong and spirited, there is a drive to dominate others.

With these three observations, Aristotle pinpoints also for today the issues underlying the relationships between workers who labour, managers who direct them and the corporations that employ them. The challenge to recognise all

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5 Economics I, 2 (1343a27-b1), p. 2131. In Politics I, 9 (1257b19-24), Aristotle draws a hard distinction between production and trading. Other distinctions are between primary production and the making of artefacts and between different kinds of primary production. He expects that once formal lines are drawn for the paradigm case, appropriate adaptations will be made for other cases, even if this is not necessarily easy.

6 Politics I, 5 (1254a18).

7 Politics I, 5 (1254b23) p. 41.

8 Politics I, 13 (1206a12).

9 Politics VII, 7

10 Politics I, 5 (1254a23); I, 7 (1255b20-22).

11 See Politics I, 8 and 9. Aristotle distinguishes three human activities: ‘doing’ is daily labour with perishables; ‘making’ is work that presents some enduring product; ‘action’, which is the human being at its best, has no external product, but is found in such things as study or political speech making. Hannah Arendt based her monumental work, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) on this distinction.

12 Politics I, 6.

13 Politics I, 5 (1254b1-2 and 27-33).

14 Politics V, 10 (1330a33).

15 Politics I, 13.
human beings as intelligent agents able to act in their own right and yet to provide institutions in which people of different abilities can thrive remains as pressing as ever.

Lest we think that the modern world has freed itself from the difficulties that confronted Aristotle, it is instructive to look at the thought of John Locke, who was one of the foundational thinkers in the development of modern political and economic institutions. In Chapter Four of his Second Treatise, Locke accepts a form of conventional slavery, which he describes as ‘nothing else but the state of war continued between a lawful conqueror and a captive’. 16 It was this view along with changes in the understanding of property that made American slavery so brutal. In the same chapter, he notes that people may sell themselves into drudgery without accepting a condition of slavery, and later in Chapter Seven, he says, ‘A freeman makes himself a servant to another, by selling him, for a certain time, the service he undertakes to do, in exchange for the wages he is to receive.’ 17 The not insignificant difference is a matter of time and wages, but the servitude remains.

Modern industrialisation has done much to deal with the problems associated with the perishability of food. Technologies of preservation and transport have made life easier. But have we not replaced one perishable with another? In Australia in 2005, the Howard Government introduced Work Choices, its major reform of industrial legislation. This reform was widely rejected, the Government was defeated at the next election and alternative legislation was introduced by the new Government. One of the provisions that was deemed unacceptable was the removal of compulsory penalty rates of pay for workers required to work at night or on weekends. There is a profound reason for this rejection. Modern factories need to work around the clock because of either continuous processes or the capital that is invested in their construction. This is done at human cost especially in terms of familial and social activity, which until Work Choices had been recognised in financial compensation. The removal of this compensation suddenly valued capital and industrial process above human worth. It would seem that the modern perishable is money or capital, pressed by competition, rather than food, as it was for Aristotle, and that similar problems need to be faced despite the change.

Aristotle on the Management of Wealth

In Aristotle’s world, life begins, is sustained and ends in the household, and the second function of household management, after the management of familial relations, is the management of wealth. Aristotle called this business, and so do we, though by and large we have taken it out of the household. In the Economics, he lists four functions of business – acquiring wealth, guarding it, ordering possessions rightly and making proper use of them. 18 Wealth he takes to be the sum total of material possessions and, in the case of slaves, human possessions. These include both things that are necessary for life and the instruments that are used in their management. The conduct of business requires specific knowledge, skills, virtues and spirit or energy, but the activity, as has already been claimed, is essential to life.

The part of business expertise of interest to this essay is the management of human beings. Here we should experience some discomfort with Aristotle’s view. Not only does he accept the fact of slaves, but as we have seen he also argues that for certain kinds of people (those without foresight or energy) and for certain situations (dealing with perishables) there is a natural movement towards slavery or servitude. Is it necessary that the business manager be a master of slaves? Aristotle’s description of the art of mastery is not very flattering. ‘This science has nothing great or dignified about it: the master must know how to command the things that the slave must know how to do.’ 19 Built into this mode of rule is the questionable moral assumption that the persons ruled are deficient intellectual and moral agents. Ultimately, if the moral dimension of the relationship is not respected, both servant and master, or in our world employee and manager, are degraded. Indeed, Aristotle himself argues that it is wrong to treat as a slave someone who is not by nature slavish. Modern sensibilities are stronger. Our understanding of democracy recognises all nationals as citizens and thereby free, and we have attempted by means of universal education to enable all persons to reach their full potential. 20

A way out of this dilemma is offered by the first sentence of the Economics.

17 Second Treatise ch. 7, n. 85, p. 45.
The sciences of politics and economics differ not only as widely as a household and a city (the subject-matter with which they severally deal), but also in the fact that the science of politics involves a number of rulers, whereas the sphere of economics is a monarchy.21

This distinction offers a solution to the question of the differences between politics and business and between the skills of a politician and those of a business manager. Both lead to action but in different ways. In political life, the community moves to action only with the agreement of those who are franchised and collaboration of the various officials and constitutional bodies. In business, action is more direct, because the processes demand it. If the crops have to be harvested, it is time to act rather than talk, and so the rule is monarchical.

The term, 'monarchy', sits uneasily in Aristotle. In one sense, it simply means the rule of one, and that could be all that is implied here. In another sense, it names one of the formal possibilities for the arrangement of political communities—the rule of one as opposed to the rule of a few (oligarchy and aristocracy) and the rule of all (democracy and polity). Even in the Politics there is ambivalence about the monarchical form of constitution, because it would seem to lack that essential component of political life, namely participation in decision making and action by all of those who are capable. Nevertheless, Aristotle says a great deal about monarchy both as a transitional form from tribal arrangement and as the form you might choose, if there were a leader of exceptional virtue. Some of what he says can give light, at least analogically, to the monarchical rule of business.

The corruption of monarchy is tyranny, in which the ruler rules only in his own interest. Such rule is generally brutal and relies on devices, such as spies, that fragment and disrupt the community.22 Much of the work of the Politics is about how to avoid this calamity. On the more positive side, Aristotle distinguishes many different forms of monarchy, which range from the traditional hereditary monarchy, in which familial affection ensures good treatment of persons, to those in which the king acts under the law, and to those in which people of capability are entrusted with significant authority.23 He also gives a good deal of advice to the monarch, whom, he says, should involve subjects in the activities of the kingdom, be moderate in use of funds and act with respect of all persons.

He should appear to the ruled not as a tyrannical sort but as a manager and a kingly sort, not as an appropriator of the things of others but as a steward. He should pursue moderateness in life, not the extremes; further, he should seek the company of the notables, but seek popularity with the many.24 This kind of rule will not only be more effective; it will also enhance the moral character of the monarch.

Where does this leave us? Aristotle has alerted us to the subtlety of relationships in the workplace. They are essentially different from other kinds of relationships that we enjoy. There is an ever-present risk that they will be degraded to the master-slave relationship, either because of the work and processes involved or because of the inadequacies of particular managers and employees. We no longer allow the possession of persons as slaves, but it is still possible to approximate this relationship, following Locke, during the hours of employment. This situation can be brought about by managers and corporations regarding employees as unintelligent about what they do and unwilling to foster the ends of the enterprise. It can be increased by the pressures of industrial processes, capital and the pressures of competition.

The challenge is to move away from this end of the spectrum so as to recognise employees as intellectual and moral agents, each with their own dignity. This requires specific attitudes, but it also requires action. Managers and Boards need to engage in serious discussion with employees about the projects in place and about mutual concerns. A workplace will be morally enhanced to the degree that it recognises and fosters the human development of its workers. It is arguable that this will also lead to a more profitable enterprise, because it will encourage the people involved to work at a higher capacity.

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21 Economics I, 1 (1343a1-5), p. 2130. The point is made also at Politics I, 7 (1255b19).
22 See Politics V, 10 – 11.
23 See Politics III, 14 – 18.
24 Politics V, 11 (1315a41-b3), p. 178. For the extent of his advice see 1314a30 – 1315b10. For more general advice see Politics V, 9.