

ARISTOTLE AND THE POLITICIZATION OF THE SOUL

In Book I of the *Politics* Aristotle argues that men are by nature the rulers of women. The conclusion of the argument, which has to do with relationships *between* people – in particular, political relationships between men and women – is said to be based on what is known about relationships *within* people: in particular, relationships between the rational and irrational elements of the human soul. That is, this part of Aristotle's political theory is said to rest on his metaphysics or theory of the soul. I hope to show that not the least of the reasons for examining Aristotle's argument is that doing so sheds light on the question of whether metaphysical positions are politically innocent. To ask this question is a defining if not necessarily a distinguishing characteristic of a feminist perspective in philosophy.

Aristotle's argument is outlined briefly in Part I. In Part II I begin examination of the argument by describing Aristotle's theory of the soul, noting especially the kind of authority which, according to Aristotle, the rational part of the soul has over the irrational part. In Part III I observe that when he tries to make use of his view about the authority of the rational part of the soul over the irrational part, to defend his view about the authority of men over women, Aristotle ends up contradicting his view about the authority of the rational part. In Part IV I argue that Aristotle's attempt to justify the authority of men over women by reference to the authority of the rational part over the irrational part is in any event circular: a close reading of the texts shows that both understanding what it means to talk about relations of authority between parts of the soul, and establishing that one part has authority over another, depends on understanding what it means to talk about relations of authority between classes of persons (including those between men and women), and on establishing or assuming that certain classes do have authority over others – in particular, that men have authority over women. Aristotle makes clear to us what the relation between the rational and irrational parts of the soul is, by reference to the very same political relationships he hopes to justify by reference to the soul. Part V concludes with some comments on the nature of Aristotle's argument and the nature of my response to him.

Aristotle's argument about the natural authority of men over women is very close to his arguments about the natural authority of masters over slaves, fathers over children, "intellectuals" over laborers, and is offered simultaneously with those arguments in the *Politics*. Though my examination focuses mainly on Aristotle's view of women, the scope of Aristotle's argument is a reminder that oppressive attitudes towards women have close connections to oppressive attitudes towards other groups or classes, that the oppression of women is related in theory as well as in practice to the oppression of other groups.

I

One of the requirements of a state is that some rule and some be ruled:

there must be a union of those who cannot exist without each other; . . . of natural ruler and subject, that both may be preserved. (P, 1252a25–32)

And this means in particular, Aristotle says, that men are to rule women, masters are to rule slaves, fathers are to rule children. But why? The mere principle that some are to rule and some are to be ruled doesn't itself tell us who is to rule whom. Aristotle is untroubled by the idea that humans are to rule animals, because he believes that animals' lack of reason establishes their inferiority to humans and disqualifies them from eligibility to rule. But all humans *qua* humans have reason and "share in the rational principle" (P 1259b27). So to what grounds must one move in order to establish the inferior and subordinate status of women vis-à-vis men, slaves vis-à-vis masters, children vis-à-vis fathers?

Well, says Aristotle, fortunately "the very constitution of the soul has shown us the way" (P 1260a5). The soul has two main parts or elements, the rational and the irrational, and it is "natural and expedient" for the rational to rule over the irrational (P 1254b4ff.).¹ Just so, men are to rule women, for in women the deliberative capacity of the rational element is without authority – it is easily overruled by the irrational element. In similar fashion, masters are to rule slaves, for while slaves, in virtue of the rational element in their souls, can hear and obey orders, they really don't have the capacity to deliberate. Indeed all that distinguishes slaves from non-human beasts of burden is that they, unlike beasts, have just enough reason to understand the results of the masters' deliberations; otherwise their capacities are identical to those of the beasts (P 1254b19ff.). Fathers are to rule children, because although children have the capacity to deliberate that is associated

with the rational element of the soul, this capacity is immature (P 1260a6–15).

It is, then, by reference to the relationships between the rational parts of the soul that Aristotle tries to justify his view that certain classes of beings are naturally subordinate to others. Just as one part of the soul stands in a certain relationship to another, so one class of beings stands in a certain relationship to another class. But this is a bare outline of the argument. In order to understand Aristotle's argument thoroughly, we have to understand in more detail how he describes the workings of the parts of the soul and their relationship to one another (Part II). We also have to understand just how he moves from a description of the parts of the soul to a description of the parts of the state (Part III).

II

We have to turn to the *Nicomachean Ethics* as well as to parts of the *Politics* to fill in the details of Aristotle's description of the relationship between the rational and irrational parts of the soul. A central feature of his depiction of that relationship is that it is a relationship of authority. The rational part is supposed to rule the irrational part. This is an authority intended for it and vested in it by nature (P 1254b7–8), though Aristotle both explicitly and implicitly allows that the rational part is not always fully empowered to exercise that authority: as we've seen, Aristotle says that in the case of women, slaves and children, the rational part does *not* rule the irrational part (as we shall soon see, we have to ask whether it is even *supposed* to, in the case of women, slaves and children). Even in adult male masters, sometimes the irrational part is not ruled by the rational part; if that weren't so, Aristotle presumably would not have thought it necessary, as he does in the *Ethics* and the *Politics*, to give instructions about the importance of the rational part remaining in control and command. Hence when Aristotle talks about the rule of the rational part of the soul over the irrational part, he cannot be said to be merely pointing out that what happens in one part of the soul determines what happens in another part in some mechanical fashion. In fact, if this is what Aristotle meant by the rule of the rational over the irrational part, then he would have to say that the irrational part sometimes rules over the irrational part; but he explicitly resists this when he suggests that sometimes the irrational part "appears" to rule over the rational part even when it really doesn't (P 1254b). So the rule or authority he ascribes to the rational part must have to do with entitlement: the rational part has

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