Nature, Custom, and Reason as the Explanatory and Practical Principles of Aristotelian Political Science

James Bernard Murphy

According to Aristotle, nature (*physis*), habit or custom (*ethos*), and reason (*logos*) are the first principles of social explanation as well as the first principles of moral excellence. Just as we explain the order found in a polity as the product of natural, customary, and rationally stipulated kinds of order, so we become excellent persons through our good natural potential, the development of that potential in right habits, and sound ethical reflection upon those habits. For Aristotle, nature and convention are not mutually exclusive; rather, nature, custom, and reason form a hierarchy such that custom presupposes nature, but cannot be reduced to it, while reason presupposes custom, but cannot be reduced to custom. It is argued that Aristotle's account of social order is superior both to the prior Sophistic accounts and to the account in Aquinas. Because Aristotle roots the order of deliberate human action in the order of nature and the order of custom, he focuses his ethical analysis not on the abstract freedom of choice but on the concrete freedom of the person who must act.

The best and most illuminating approach to Aristotelian political science would be an actual empirical investigation of politics oriented to a pressing normative concern—for example, a study of the effects of economic polarization on democratic participation. Such an Aristotelian political science would be at once empirical and ethical—in stark contrast to both our contemporary philosophical ethics, which generally lacks a concern for the empirical context of moral excellence, and our contemporary social sciences, which either lack a normative dimension altogether or degrade practical reason into an instrument for the satisfaction of desire ("rational choice"). Presumably an Aristotelian political science would reject both our apolitical ethics and our amoral political science; it would combine a rich empirical analysis of how the concrete circumstances of choice shape the capacities of individuals to variously realize or ruin the genuine goods of human fulfillment. Such a political

science would attempt to interpret and explain individual ethical choices in their political contexts: How does our democratic regime, for example, shape our marriages and our families, our ways of teaching and worshiping? Or, more generally, how do our political and economic institutions promote or frustrate excellence of practical deliberation among our citizens? At the same time, Aristotelian political science would attempt to interpret and explain the political choices of communities in terms of the ethical character of their members: Does our political reluctance to send troops abroad reflect a lack of martial virtue among our citizens or a healthy popular skepticism about foreign adventures? Do political proposals for tax-cuts reflect widespread greed among our citizens or prudent doubts about the wisdom of government spending? Or, given the reluctance of our citizens to sacrifice a measure of individual liberty for the common good, do proposals for universal mandatory national service make sense?

In lieu of such an actual study, I will merely identify three basic principles of Aristotle's political science and show how they are at once explanatory and practical. Political science, on his account, is explanatory because it has as its object of inquiry the natural, customary, and rationally stipulated kinds of order found in human affairs; at the same time, political science is practical because it makes citizens good by enabling them to deliberate wisely about the natural, customary, and rational dimensions of human excellence. Put briefly, according to Aristotle, the first principles of explanation are the variety of kinds of order found in human affairs: natural, customary, and rationally stipulated order; at the same time, the first principles of moral excellence, are nature, custom, and reason. Many interpreters of Aristotle have observed that his political science combines explanatory and practical dimensions, but no one has yet shown how Aristotle's account of nature, habit, and reason bridges these two dimensions. A focus on how these three principles function in his ethical and political thought will greatly advance our understanding of how Aristotle links the explanation of social order to the quest for human excellence. To reveal what is distinctive about Aristotle's understanding of social order and of practical deliberation, I will sometimes compare the views of Aristotle and of Thomas Aquinas on these topics; Aristotle and Aquinas agree enough to make a comparison possible, yet they differ enough to make the

comparison illuminating. What we shall discover is that in both thinkers there is a close connection between their understanding of the kinds of order in human affairs and their understanding of ethical and political deliberation. I will offer my own critical appraisal of that comparison as well as engage in some broadly Aristotelian reflections on political science.

Political Science as Explanatory: The Kinds of Human Order

In the very language Aristotle uses to refer to "good social order" we see the close connection between his explanatory and his normative concepts. He speaks, for example, of various kinds of "good social order" with terms such as *eukosmia, eunomia,* and *eutaxia*: here *kosmos* (*Politics* 1299b 16) connotes natural order, *nomos* connotes customary or legal order (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1112b 14), and *taxis* connotes deliberately stipulated order, as in the order of battle (*Politics* 1326a 30).[1] These kinds of good social order both describe the complex order of a polity and evaluate that order.

Aristotle has a number of terms for various species of order but no generic or abstract term. Thomas Aquinas learned from Augustine's *De Ordine* to consider generic "order" as the object of scientific inquiry. As he says in the prologue to his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "to be wise is to establish order. The reason for this is that wisdom is the most powerful perfection of reason, whose characteristic is to know order."[2] According to Aquinas, order, in the sense of a pattern, system, or structure, provides a basis for descriptive and explanatory inference. A leading contemporary theorist of order understands it in the same way. Order, says F.A. Hayek, is "a state of affairs in which a multiplicity of elements of various kinds are so related to each other that we may learn from our acquaintance with some spatial or temporal part of the whole to form correct expectations

1. Bekker numbers from Greek text: *Ethica Nicomachea*, ed. L. Bywater (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894); *Politica*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957). All translations and all paraphrases from the Greek are mine.

2. *S. Thomae Aquinatis Opera Omnia*, ed. Robertus Busa SI (Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1980), vol. 4, *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* (Prologue, n.1). All translations and all paraphrases from the Latin are mine.

concerning the rest, or at least expectations which have a good chance of proving correct."[3] This broadly philosophical conception of order contrasts sharply with the narrowly ideological conception of order in mainstream social science, where order in the sense of social stability or peace between nations is usually assumed without argument to be the goal of all scientifically informed public policy. We might contrast the philosophical and the ideological senses of order by observing that there are kinds of order that are not in the least orderly.

In the Aristotelian tradition, the kinds of sciences of human affairs are grounded in the kinds of order in human affairs;[4] thus, the adequacy of an account of the diverse kinds of human sciences depends upon the adequacy of the prior account of the diverse kinds of order. In the first part of this article, I will outline an account of the kinds of social order—an account rooted in Aristotle and developed by the Spanish Jesuits of the sixteenth century, the economists of the Scottish Enlightenment, and their heirs.[5] I will then attempt to show the superiority of this broadly Aristotelian account of social order both to the prior Sophistic accounts and to the subsequent account in Aquinas. In the second part, I will argue that because Aristotle roots the order of deliberate human action in the order of nature and the order of custom, he focuses his ethical analysis not on the abstract freedom of choice but on the concrete freedom of the person who must act. Where Aquinas emphasizes the radical freedom of human choice and the autonomy of ethics from politics, Aristotle emphasizes the limited

3. F. A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 36. Hayek here draws on Stebbing: "When we know how a set of elements is ordered we have a basis for inference." L. S. Stebbing, *A Modern Introduction to Logic* (London: Methuen, 1950), p. 228. It is surprising that Hayek, a leading modern theorist of order, should nowhere, to my knowledge, cite either Aristotle's triadic conception of order or the seminal contribution of Thomas Aquinas. Hayek is thus clearly not within the Aristotelian tradition even if he can be illuminating of it.

4. Aristotle lists a variety of human sciences when he says that, in addition to ethics, we need to consider legislative science and constitutional law "to complete the philosophy of human affairs *(peri ta anthrōpeia philosophia)*." See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1181b15.

5. In the analysis of Aristotle's account of the three kinds of order, I draw freely on my book, *The Moral Economy of Labor: Aristotelian Themes in Economic Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), chaps. 2 and 4.

freedom of the human person and, hence, the dependence of ethics on politics. In the third part, I offer a few broadly Aristotelian reflections about why political science must combine explanatory and normative principles. Finally, I note that although Aristotle distinguishes theoretical (or explanatory) inquiry from practical (or normative) inquiry, his own inquiries always combine both elements. What is distinguishable in thought is not always separable in reality: *distinguer pour unir*.[6]

In book seven of Aristotle's *Politics* we find this cryptic passage: "In order to become good and wise (*agathos kai spoudaios*) requires three things; these are nature, habit, and reason (*physis, ethos, logos*)."[7] Few sentences in the Aristotelian corpus, I think, are as richly suggestive as is this one or as much in need of both interpretation and imaginative reconstruction. Obviously each of these terms, *nature, habit, reason,* is at the center of Aristotle's conceptual vocabulary; what is less obvious is that this ordered triad is echoed throughout his writings. From the immediate context we can see that Aristotle is speaking in the first place of the components of moral and intellectual self-realization: we must begin with the right natural powers and dispositions, we must cultivate these powers and dispositions into the right habits of character, and we must use reason to reflectively adjust our habits in light of our stipulated moral ideals. In this model of human self-realization, our habits presuppose human nature but cannot be reduced to it, just as our stipulated rational ideals presuppose our habits but cannot be reduced to them.

Aristotle extended his triad beyond individual self-realization to the actualization of the political community. Thus, he says in many places (*e.g., Politics* 1332b 8-11), the legislator, in the deliberate stipulations of law (*nomos*), must take into account the natural capacities of his citizens as well as their social customs (*ethē* or *agraphoi nomoi*). In the subsequent Aristotelian tradition we find this triad employed in the analysis of several other social

6. Throughout this paper I interpret Aristotle according to a procedure of philosophical reconstruction, which combines literal exegesis with a more creative exploration of his thought in the contexts of the Aristotelian tradition (chiefly Thomas Aquinas) and of contemporary debates in social theory. See the discussion of the method of "reconstruction" in Fred D. Miller's *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's* Politics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 21-22.

7. *Politics* 1332a38.

institutions. In jurisprudence we find many variants of expressions for natural, customary, and stipulated or positive law.[8] In logic we find John Poinsot (John of St. Thomas) asking "whether the division of signs into natural (*naturale*), stipulated (*ad placitum*), and customary (*ex consuetudine*) is a sound division."[9] By natural signs he means those signs that relate to their objects independent of human activity: smoke is a sign of fire. By customary signs he means those signs that arise from the collective and nonreflective practices of human communities: napkins on a table are a sign that dinner is imminent. By stipulated signs he means those signs whose meaning is deliberately appointed by an individual, as when a new word is introduced. Although Poinsot does not refer to Aristotle in his discussion of the threefold division of signs, I argue that he is offering here an interpretation and extension of Aristotle's nature, custom, and reason.[10]

Finally, F.A. Hayek employs this triad, at least implicitly, in his analysis of the three kinds of order: "Yet much of what we call culture is just such a spontaneously grown order [custom], which arose neither altogether independently of human action [nature] nor by design [stipulation], but by a process that stands between these two possibilities, which were long considered as exclusive alternatives."[11] Hayek's distinction between the spontaneous order of custom and the designed order of stipulation is drawn from Adam Ferguson: "Nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of

8. Thus the author of the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* (II, 19) lists the departments of *ius* as: "natura, lege, consuetudine, indicato, aequo et bono, pacto." Ulpian famously distinguishes (*Digest* 1. 1. 1) *ius naturale, ius gentium, ius civile*. And Cicero (*De Inventione* 2. 53. 160) deploys the Aristotelian scheme in his famous passage on the evolution of law from principles of nature to deliberate statutes: "Law (*ius*) initially proceeds from nature, then certain rules of conduct become customary by reason of their advantage; later still both the principles that proceeded from nature and those that had been approved by custom received the support of religion and the fear of the law (*lex*)."

9. John Poinsot, *Tractatus de Signis* [1632], ed. and trans. John Deely (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 269.

10. For a critique and reconstruction of Poinsot's doctrine of signs, see James Bernard Murphy, "Nature, Custom, and Stipulation in the Semiotic of John Poinsot," *Semiotica* 83 1/2 (1991): 33-68.

11. F. A. Hayek, "Kinds of Order in Society" [1964], in *The Politicization of Society*, ed. Kenneth Templeton, Jr. (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1979), p. 509.

any human design."[12] Hayek gives pride of place, however, in the discovery of spontaneous social order to the Spanish Jesuit Luis Molina, who explained that natural price "results from the thing itself without regard to laws and decrees, but is dependent on many circumstances which alter it, such as the sentiments of men, their estimation of different uses, often even in consequence of whims and pleasures."[13]

Following the lead of the theorists of order from Aquinas to Hayek, therefore, I will now reconstruct Aristotle's triad in terms of three fundamental concepts of order: there is the natural order to physical, chemical, and biological processes; there is the customary order of habitual social practices; and there is the stipulated order of deliberate design. In Aristotelian political science, the unit of analysis is an institution or practice (some stable pattern of human action or interaction) and the level of analysis is natural order, customary order, or stipulated order. Our three kinds of order form the three dimensions of every human practice or institution, meaning that explanation must involve analysis at the levels of the sciences of nature, the sciences of custom, and the sciences of rational stipulation. Thus the study of language involves the natural sciences of psychology and physiology, the customary sciences of linguistic drift and analogy-formation, and the rational sciences of grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Each of these levels of analysis is crucial to the explanation of the complex order we find in language. We can now see that, despite his seminal contributions to the sciences of order, Hayek tended to confuse the unit of analysis with the level of analysis: he thus assigned the "market" (which is not itself a single institution but a metaphor embracing a huge range of institutions and practices) exclusively to the spontaneous order of custom.[14]

12. Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh: A. Millar and T. Caddel, 1767), p. 187.

13. Luis Molina, *De iustitia et iure* (Cologne, 1596-1600), tom. II, disp. 347, no. 3. Cited in Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, 1: 21 and 151.

14. "Such spontaneous orders we find not only in the working of institutions like language and law...but also in the relations of the market" (Hayek, "Kinds of Order in Society," p. 509). True, Hayek does not explicitly deny that markets involve stipulated order, but his explanatory claim that markets were essentially spontaneous underpinned his normative claim that market order ought to be left alone. For Hayek to admit as a matter of description that markets always also embody stipulated order would weaken his normative arguments for laissez-faire.

Yet market practices involve all three kinds of order: natural propensities toward exchange, customs of fairness and good faith, as well as deliberate stipulations defining what can and cannot be exchanged.

How does this triad differ from the more familiar dichotomy of nature and convention? First of all, the concept of convention collapses the important distinction between the tacit social order of custom and the individually designed order of stipulation; when something is described as conventional we do not know if the claim is that it was deliberately stipulated or that it arose spontaneously. Second, ever since Antiphon set nature and convention in opposition, they have usually been treated as mutually exclusive alternatives; some Sophists championed nature while others championed convention.[15] Indeed, no set of concepts has so dominated social theory, from ancient times through the present, as the nature-convention dichotomy. One prominent contemporary social theorist, G. A. Cohen, asserts: "The Sophists' distinction between nature and convention is the foundation of all social criticism."[16] Yet Aristotle insists that nature, custom, and stipulation are mutually inclusive and form a nested hierarchy such that every social institution or practice has a natural, customary, and stipulated dimension. Finally, the opposition of nature and convention serves a reductive explanatory strategy: either the claim that what seems to have rich symbolic and moral meaning, for example, marriage, is really just a biological strategy for reproductive fitness; or the claim that what seems to be rooted in a strong natural impulse, for example, marriage, is really just a cultural construct. Aristotle seems to reject such reductionist strategies as when he observes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "Now some think that we are become good by nature (*physei*), others by habit (*ethei*), others by being taught (*didakē*)."[17] As we discover from the parallel passage in the *Politics*, Aristotle thinks that each of these views is right but also incomplete: we need nature, habits, and reason.

15. Antiphon and Callicles champion *physis* over *nomos*; for Antiphon see *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. Hermann Diels and Walter Kranz (Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1954), frag. 44A.

16. G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 107.

17. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b20.

In accordance with Aristotle's explicit logic of classification, I have thus far treated nature, custom, and rational stipulation as three species of the genus "order." But this genus-species logic does not indicate the serial and hierarchical relations among our three concepts: nature is prior to custom and custom is prior to stipulation. Aristotle, however, offers an alternative logic of classification, which is most clearly illustrated by his analysis of the kinds of souls. Here, instead of defining the genus "soul" and the species of plant, animal, and human souls, Aristotle says that the plant soul is living (that is, nutritive and reproductive), the animal soul is living plus sensitive, and the human soul is living and sensitive plus rational.[18]

Aristotle implicitly treats nature, custom, and stipulation as such a hierarchy: "In every case the lower faculty can exist apart from the higher, but the higher presupposes those below it."[19] Nature represents the physical, chemical, and biological processes of the cosmos; nature can and did exist apart from human custom and stipulation. Human custom is rooted in the physiology of habit but transcends habit by becoming a social system of norms. Custom presupposes nature, but custom can exist without being the object of rational reflection and stipulation: language existed before grammarians. Stipulation is the synoptic order deliberately imposed upon the pre-reflective materials of custom; reflective stipulation always presupposes custom.

We have thus far treated "nature" as the causal properties that are actualized by custom and stipulation, but does not Aristotle also describe the full-blown actualization of a thing's potential as natural?[20] A full discussion of Aristotle's many senses of "nature" would be out of place here, but I will only observe that Aristotle does sometimes distinguish what is "by nature" (*physei*) from what is "according to nature" (*kata physin*).[21] What is broadly "by nature" might be either according to nature (if it realizes its end) or contrary

18. *De Anima* 414a29-415a13.

19. R. D. Hicks, *Aristotle: De Anima* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), p. 335.

20. Ronald Beiner brought this passage to my attention (*Politics* 1252b32): "nature is an end: what each thing is—for example, a human being, a horse, or a household—when its coming into being is complete is, we assert, the nature of that thing."

21. See, for example, *Physics* 193a1-2 and *Generations of Animals* 770b9–17.

to nature (*para physin*, if it does not). Thus fire is "by nature" whether the flame goes up (according to nature) or is blown down (contrary to nature); birth is "by nature" whether of a normal baby (according to nature) or of a deformed baby (contrary to nature). Nature, as employed in his progressive hierarchy, corresponds most closely to Aristotle's concept of natural potential (*dynamis physei*).[22]

By examining our triad in a variety of contexts, we will see that this progressive hierarchy is pervasive in Aristotle's thought. First, for Aristotle, nature, custom, and stipulation articulate the hierarchy of the *scala naturae*: "The other animals for the most part live by nature (*physis*), though in some respects by habit (*ethos*) as well, while man lives also by reason (*logos*), for he alone has reason."[23] One fascinating aspect of this comment is that *ethos*, habit or custom, is the bridge between animals and man; thus, as we shall later see, the sciences of custom must mix causal explanation and the interpretation of meaning.

Second, nature, custom, and stipulation form the same progressive hierarchy in individual development as they do in the scale of nature: ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. Aristotle says that there are three kinds of human faculties (*dynameis*): those that are innate (*suggenēs*), those that come by practice (*ethos*), and those that come from teaching (*mathēsis*).[24] These three faculties form a hierarchy: "The contribution of nature clearly does not depend on us...while argument (*logos*) and teaching (*didakē*) surely do not influence everyone, but the soul of the student must have been prepared by habit (*ethos*)."[25] Our nature, he says, is given at birth while our natural potentials are trained by habit; teaching invites us to reflect on our habits and perhaps stipulate new ones.

Third, this hierarchy plays a parallel role in the political development of a community as it does in the moral development of an individual. The first task of a legislator, says Aristotle, is to regulate the biological nature of the citizens through eugenics (*eugeneia* or *aretē genous*); his second task is to instill the proper habits in each citizen through an educational regime aimed at developing the right political disposition (*euhexia politikē*); his final

22. For a fuller discussion of the distinction between *physei* and *kata physin*, see my *Moral Economy of Labor*, pp. 124-29.
23. *Politics* 1332b2.
24. *Metaphysics* 1047b31.
25. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b21.

task is to reflect on his first two tasks by studying political science.[26] "We have already considered what natures are likely to be most easily molded by the hands of the legislator. All else is the work of education; we learn some things by habit and other things by being taught."[27] Just as the legislator is responsible for attempting to shape the natural potentials and the tacit customs of his city, so every mature person is responsible for making the best he can of his natural potentials and his habits of character. Yet neither the legislator nor any individual person has complete rational control over either social customs or moral habits.

The student of Thomas Aquinas who completed his commentary on the *Politics* of Aristotle certainly understood the hierarchical structure of Aristotle's three concepts of order: "There ought to be harmony among them, namely, nature, custom, and reason: for always the latter presupposes the former."[28] And in his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas analyzes the mutually complementary roles of nature, habit, and doctrine in the moral development of an individual.[29] Yet in his formal account (in the prologue to his commentary on the *Ethics*) of the kinds of order, Aquinas does not refer to the Aristotelian hierarchy. He says that there are four kinds of order: the first is the order that reason does not make but only beholds, the order of nature; the second is the order that reason makes in its own acts, as when it arranges concepts and signs of concepts; the third is the order that reason makes in the operations of the will; the fourth is the order that reason makes in the external things it produces.[30]

In terms of our Aristotelian triad, Aquinas's four orders actually reduce to two: order independent of human action (namely, the order of nature) and order made by deliberate human action (namely the order stipulated by reason in thought, deeds,

---

26. See *Politics* 1334b30ff and 1336a4.

27. *Politics* 1332b8. "Now in men reason and mind are the goal of nature, so that the birth and training in custom of the citizens ought to be ordered with a view to them" (*Politics* 1334b). 15.

28. The commentary on *Politics* 1332a38 reads: "*Quare hoc oportet consonare inter se, scilicet naturam, consuetudinem, et rationem: semper enim posterius praesupponit prius.*" In *In Libros Politicorum Aristotelis Expositio*, ed. Raymundi Spiazzi (Turin: Marietti, 1951), p. 386.

29. See Aquinas, *In Decem Libros Ethicorum Aristotelis Ad Nicomachum Expositio*, ed. Raymundi Spiazzi (Turin: Marietti, 1949), Lib. VII, lec. 10. l. 14 [2143 ff].

30. *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* (Prologue, n.1).

and artifacts). There seems to be nothing corresponding to the order of custom, an order that is the product of human action but never wholly the execution of any design. Yet this kind of order—an order powerfully illustrated in natural language, in common law, in market exchange—is precisely the order that is the primary object of inquiry in social theory. Here Aquinas tends to assimilate custom either to nature, as "second nature" or to rational stipulation, as "unwritten law."[31] But such attempts to reduce custom either to nature or to law obscure what is distinctive about customary order. For, as Hayek and others have shown, the complexity of the evolving order exhibited in language, markets, and law surpasses the stipulative capacities of any person or persons—even if aided by supercomputers. That the order found in these core institutions of social life cannot be understood merely as the product of deliberate human reason is clear when we reflect upon the unpredictable pattern of their evolution: because of the complex path-dependence of the evolution of custom, the sciences of customary order tend to be historical and retrospective rather than deductive and predictive. When one considers that every utterance made by a speaker of English shapes the language, that every purchase shapes the market price, that every act of litigation, adjudication, and legislation shapes the law, we begin to appreciate the complexity of social order. By contrast to this kind of social order, Aquinas focuses in the prologue on the order found in an army, as does John Finnis in his exposition of Aquinas.[32] But the deliberately stipulated order of battle is a very misleading exemplar of the complex and evolutionary order found in core social institutions. Indeed, the attempt by several modern societies to reorder language, law, and the market on the model of military command shows how dangerous it is to confuse the spontaneous order of custom with the order of deliberate stipulation.

Although Aquinas explicitly distinguishes the order found in action from the order found in production on the grounds that action (*actio*) is perfective of the agent while production (*factio*) is perfective of the artifact,[33] he nonetheless frequently compares

---

31. Aquinas is here following Aristotle who, despite his triad, often reduces custom to either nature or law; for many examples, see my *Moral Economy of Labor*, chap. 4.

32. Aquinas, *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* (Prologue, n.5); John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral Political, and Legal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 32-35.

33. Aquinas, *Sententia Libri Ethicorum*, Prologue, n. 13.

the stipulated order found in human actions to the stipulated order found in artifacts: "When, however, human reason has to order not only the things that are used by men but also men themselves, who are ruled by reason, it proceeds in either case from the simple to the complex: in the case of the things used by man when, for example, it builds a ship out of wood and a house out of wood and stones; in the case of men themselves when, for example, it orders many men so as to form a certain society."[34] And rather than contrast the order reason discovers in custom from the order reason makes in stipulation, Aquinas describes both social and political order as something reason brings about: "the state is a certain whole that human reason not only knows but also brings about (*cognoscitiva et operativa*)."[35]

Social Order and Ethical Deliberation: From Politics to Ethics

Aristotle does not explicitly link ethical and political science (or the other sciences) to his three kinds of order. True, he does distinguish theoretical from practical sciences on the ground that the objects of theoretical science do not change while the objects of practical science do change; this difference means both that the objects of theoretical science are of a higher dignity than the objects of practical science and that the theoretical sciences admit of greater precision than do the practical sciences.[36] Aquinas more precisely links diversity of kinds of order to diversity of sciences: to the order that reason beholds but does not make (which Aquinas limits to nature) belongs natural philosophy; to the order that reason makes in its own acts, belongs what he calls "rational philosophy" or logic; to the order that reason makes in the operations of the will belongs moral philosophy; and to the order that reason makes in external things belong the mechanical arts.[37]

Yet, as we shall see, the Aristotelian account of the kinds of order in human society will enable us to develop a more adequate understanding of practical deliberation than will the Thomistic

34. *Ibid.*, Prologue, n. 4.
35. *Ibid.*, Prologue, n. 6.
36. Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1025b19-27 and 1065b1-5.
37. Aquinas, *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* Prologue, n. 2.

account. By defining the order of human affairs rather narrowly as "those that proceed from the will of man according to the order of reason," Aquinas must exclude from what he calls "moral philosophy" all those dimensions of human practice not directly subject to deliberate will: the equilibrium of markets, evolution of language and of law, the whole realm of tacit prejudices, values, beliefs, and practices. He says that "if some operations are found in man that are not subject to the will and reason, they are not properly called human but natural."[38] Yet, as we shall see, natural science alone is not adequate to the study of the order of custom; the order of custom requires human sciences, both explanatory and interpretive. Now one might defend Aquinas by supposing that his moral philosophy, rooted in the study of intentional human acts, provides him with the capacity to judge the morality of choices with respect to markets, language, law, and prejudice; perhaps the agent does not need to understand these phenomena in order to act properly with respect to them. But Aquinas's strong emphasis on prudence in moral choice, on the capacity to understand the implications of one's acts, not only on oneself, but on others as well, shows us that understanding the customary dimension of institutions will be of great moral urgency to citizens and especially to legislators. Thus Aquinas insists that a legislator may have to tolerate various moral vices and usurious lending practices, that a judge may have to enforce unjust laws, if, in his judgment, the disturbance of the customary order is too great.[39] But to make this judgment, or at least to make it well, depends upon one's understanding of systems of exchange and of prejudice well enough to roughly estimate the impact of deliberate interventions in these spontaneous orders. Aquinas is aware, in a very general way, of the danger that deliberate interventions in customary processes can have perverse effects; but he has no adequate grasp of the order of custom or of the sciences that might illuminate that order.

Aristotle's subordination of the study of ethics to the study of politics strikes us as odd. He opens his *Nicomachean Ethics* by arguing that the study of ethics must be ordered to the comprehensive science of human good, namely, political science;

38. *Ibid.*, Prologue, n. 3.
39. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae, 96.2c, 96.4c; IIaIIae, 78.1 ad 3.

and he ends his *Ethics* by insisting that the study of ethics culminates in the science of legislation. Moreover, he repeatedly refers to the subject matter of his *Nicomachean Ethics* as a "political inquiry."[40] What are we to make of this politicized ethics? I think we can best grasp the essential power and insight of Aristotle's understanding of the political nature of ethics by contrasting it with Aquinas's more modern notion of an autonomous science of ethics.

Moral philosophy, at least as Aquinas understands it in these prologues,[41] is relatively autonomous from political science because the unit of analysis is human will and choice rather than human persons. As we shall see, his focus on human choice deflects attention from the psychological, social, and political context of those choices. He opens the second, and by far the longest, part of the *Summa* by saying: "Man is said to be made in the image of God, according to which is signified that he is intelligent, master of himself, and with free judgment; now since we have agreed that God is the exemplar cause of things and that they issue from His power through his will, it remains to consider his image, that is to say, man as the source of his own deeds, having free judgment and power over his deeds."[42] This passage, and many others that follow, links self-mastery with freedom of choice between alternative courses of action in rational deliberation: a person is master of his actions (*dominus suorum actuum*) inasmuch as he has free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) through his faculties of will and reason: "Therefore a person is master of his acts through

40. See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b11 and 1095b5-6; for a very different view of the political dimension of the *Nicomachean Ethics* see Richard Bodéüs, *The Political Dimensions of Aristotle's Ethics*, trans. Jan Edward Garrett (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

41. These are the Prologues to the commentary on the ethics, to the commentary on the politics, and to the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa*. One could, no doubt, interpret Aquinas's account of the virtues in the *Secunda Secundae*, as an effort to understand human actions in the psychological and social contexts in which virtues and vices are acquired. I do not deny that there are resources within Aquinas's philosophy to understand ethics in a more political context.

42. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Prologue to IaIIae. Aquinas's explicit reliance on the theological premise of the *imago Dei* as the basis for his assertion of human free choice raises the question of to what extent the doctrine of free choice depends upon revealed truths. Finnis, who omits all reference to the *imago Dei* in his discussion of this passage, seems to deny the necessity of a theological premise (see his *Aquinas*, p. 20); Germain Grisez, by contrast, argues that "only believers accept the reality of free choice" (see his *Christian Moral Principles* [Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983], p. 67).

reason and will: whence his free decision is called a faculty of reason and will. Therefore those acts alone are properly called human which proceed from his own deliberate willing."[43] As John Finnis formulates Aquinas's teaching here: "One has this mastery or dominion (*dominium*) over one's own actions precisely in that one's will is not forced to one or another of opposing proposals."[44]

Yet this alleged link between free choice and self-mastery turns out to be largely illusory because the freedom of a person's choices tells us little about whether that person is free. As MacIver rightly observes: "What is free, however, is the choice between alternatives not the choice of what the alternatives shall be."[45] A slave may well exercise free choice among all the genuine alternatives of choice before him; but those alternatives are so radically impoverished that his self-mastery, his freedom for self-determination is a chimera. Why is this so? Because I cannot deliberate about potential courses of action unless I believe that each alternative can be realized by my conduct.[46] To will something is not merely to wish for it. Thus, the range of our deliberations, the range of the alternatives of action before us, depends upon many physical, biological, psychological, social, and political conditions beyond our direct control. Some of these conditions are natural necessities that must be accepted as merely a given in practical deliberation; they cannot be meaningfully said to constrain our freedom and self-mastery because these concepts assume the human condition. But the most profound, far-reaching, and morally troubling constraints on the capacity for individual self-determination can only be addressed by psychological, social, and political theory; indeed, addressing those unnecessary constraints on the capacity for full self-realization must be the main agenda of those sciences.

John Finnis insists that, according to Aquinas, "to deny that human persons are each masters of their own acts is to assert

43. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae, 1.1c.
44. Finnis, *Aquinas*, p. 20n 3.
45. R. M. MacIver, *Social Causation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1942), p. 241.
46. Aquinas follows Aristotle in distinguishing choice from mere wish and in arguing that no one chooses save what he thinks he can do himself: impossibilities cannot be objects of choice. See Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1111b20-25 and Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae, 13.4c, 13.5c, 14.4c. But, as Robert Audi reminded me, perhaps I can deliberately choose to do what is in fact impossible so long as I believe it is possible.

something 'impossible, and destructive of all moral philosophy and social-political life.'"[47] This astonishing statement is true only if free choice among given alternatives is sufficient for self-mastery; but, as we have argued, real self-mastery and real freedom depends upon the degree of control we have over the alternatives of choice. To see why substantial control over the agenda of deliberation is crucial for self-determination we can consider the experience of many political communities over time which have exercised "democratic" and "free" deliberation without control over the political agenda, which is set by a foreign power or ruling clique. Without substantial control over the agenda of political deliberation, that deliberation, however free, is a mockery of true self-determination; such a dependent political community is in the position of our slave.[48]

What this means is that politics, broadly understood, does not just provide a set of constraints and opportunities external to ethical deliberation; rather, politics, in the sense of the whole social context of action, is internal to the very act of ethical deliberation and choice. I can choose only what I think I can achieve by my efforts; and politics determines the range of what a given person can expect to achieve and so the range of his choice. We do not formulate our individual ethical ends and then look to see if they are feasible in a given political (including social and economic) context; rather, our understanding of political feasibility shapes our very capacity to formulate our ends.

Aristotle does not describe acts as being done freely or not,[49] but he does describe persons as free or not; more precisely, he describes persons as having degrees of freedom: a citizen has more freedom than a mere subject, a democratic citizen has more freedom than an oligarchic citizen, a master has more freedom than a slave, a master-craftsman more than a wage-laborer, a man more than a woman, an adult more than a child, and an educated person more than an ignorant person. And where Aquinas posits freedom and self-mastery as axioms, Aristotle sees them as goals subject to varying degrees of achievement; as we shall see,

47. Finnis, *Aquinas*, p. 20n 3, quoting from the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II c.60 n. 5.
48. On the importance of control over the agenda of deliberation for democratic politics, see Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 112-14.
49. Aristotle considers whether acts are voluntary, not whether they are free.

Aristotle's approach invites empirical investigation of the conditions that enhance or diminish freedom of persons.

Aristotle's conception of the freedom (*eleutheria*) of persons is complex: I will only attempt to outline some of its elements. Like many concepts, "freedom" gets much of its meaning by its implied contrast terms; and Aristotle's notion of freedom embodies a number of distinct contrasts. To begin with, a free person differs from a slave, in that a free person exists for himself and not for another; a free man does not live at the beck and call of another.[50] Thus, at a minimum, a free person is not subject to the arbitrary will of another person. Yet Aristotle insists that not only slaves, but also mechanics (*banausoi*) and laborers (*thētes*) are not truly free: the menial worker is a wage slave.[51] Workers are servile, not because they are subject to the arbitrary will of another person (they are subject to the citizen class, not to individual masters) but because they are utterly subject to necessity. Yet the free activities that make for free men and for free cities begin where necessities are already in place; free men and free cities require leisure. Aristotle even says that human beings did not pursue philosophy until they had attained a comfortable standard of living.[52] So we are free only insofar as we can concern ourselves with activities beyond physical survival or even comfort.

In short, one is free to the extent that one is subject neither to the will of another nor to necessity; does this mean that freedom is living as one pleases? No: just as leisure is not merely the absence of needful occupation, but the deliberate cultivation of one's moral and intellectual virtues, so freedom is not mere absence of constraint, but the rational ordering of one's passions and actions. Freedom is "living as one pleases" only for those who have achieved virtuous self-discipline; for those who have not, "living as one pleases" is a kind of slavery to mere whim.[53] Indeed, Aristotle rather paradoxically observes that in a household, the freemen are least at liberty to live as they please, while the slaves and the beasts are most at liberty to do so.[54] Freedom, thus, is not a given in the human condition, but is the highest achievement of

50. Aristotle *Metaphysics* 982b25; *Rhetoric* 1367a33.
51. Aristotle *Politics* 1260b1.
52. Aristotle *Metaphysics* 982b22-28.
53. Aristotle *Politics* 1310a 31-35.
54. Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1075a19-23.

rational discipline. The realization of freedom is precisely the aim of what is called a "liberal" education. Our education for freedom begins with our submission to the rule of law: because true freedom means the rational ordering of passions and actions, living under the law is not slavery, since law is pure reason.[55] But law can only take us so far in rational discipline; we also need the cultivation of the "liberal" arts, which is why Aristotle so often associates education with freedom and ignorance with servility.[56]

Thus, for Aristotle, the realization of free rational agency is possible only through prior submission to the authority of our parents, our teachers, and our legislators; these authorities play a crucial role in the cultivation of our passions so that they collaborate with reason in the exercise of virtue. In this developmental model of human self-realization, freedom is the fruit of obedience, and liberal independence the fruit of illiberal discipline. Freedom is emancipation through education. No doubt Aristotle's own politics was more concerned with emancipating well-born citizens from a servile warrior or commercial ethos than it was concerned with emancipating mechanics, women, and slaves from the arbitrary limits on their self-mastery.

We are now in a position to consider more precisely the relation between politics and ethics, political science and ethical science. Aristotle famously, though cryptically, says that "political science (*politikē*) and practical reason (*phronēsis*) are the same state, though to be them is not the same."[57] Politics and ethics are both about practical deliberation in the choice of what is most worthy in every occasion of choice; political science and ethical science are inquiries into the conditions, essential features, and consequences of such choices for the flourishing of individuals and communities. An individual acts ethically when he deliberates about what choices promote the best way of life as a whole for himself; an individual acts politically when he deliberates about how the community can create an environment that best promotes ethical deliberation among its members.

Ethics and politics are obviously intimately related in the Aristotelian tradition but they have distinct foci: ethics is focused

---

55. Aristotle *Politics* 1310a34-35; 1287a28-32.
56. *Ibid.*, 1342a19-21 and 1338a32.
57. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1141b23.

on the free choices; politics is focused on free persons and free communities. Ethical deliberation must generally take the alternatives of choice as a given; decisions often must be made now and cannot wait until new alternatives appear; moreover, individuals alone rarely have the time or power to discern substantially new alternatives of choice. Where decisions must be made soon, political deliberation also must take the alternatives of choice for a community as a given; but the political community has vastly more power than does an individual to expand the alternatives of choice both for itself and for its members. Thus the distinctive focus of political deliberation is about expanding the freedom and self-mastery of persons and of communities by expanding the alternatives of choice. The foci of ethics and of politics must be kept in view as related but distinct. Too much emphasis on the ethical act of choice abstracts from the concrete conditions of choice and can lead to a kind of moral and political complacency in which free choices are taken to mean free persons. And too much emphasis on the political conditions of choice neglects the ineliminable capacity of human beings to transcend their circumstances through free choice and can lead to a reductive determinism of ethical choice to its context. We need to understand choices in the context of the range of alternatives available in the personal and political circumstances; and we need to understand that range of alternatives (and how to expand it) in relation to the genuine freedom of choice.

Aristotle, with his rich empirical inquiry into the conditions, person, familial, and political, that make for free persons and communities, provides better guidance than does Aquinas to the distinct focus of political science. Yet one may wonder if Aristotle does not sometimes neglect the ethical capacity of individuals on occasion to transcend their circumstances and even the settled dispositions of their characters. The first task of the legislator is to create the institutions that will inculcate the right habits in young people; failure to acquire the right habits in youth seems to make moral maturity impossible for Aristotle.[58] What would Aristotle make of those (admitted rare) instances when a mature adult manages, perhaps through Alcoholics Anonymous, against all

58. On legislative art, see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103b3ff; on right habituation in youth as being all important, see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103b 24.

empirical probabilities, to deliberately escape the destiny of his character? MacIntyre is probably right in answering: "the story of the thief on the cross is unintelligible in Aristotelian terms."[59] Yet we all know of persons who do manage to transcend the destiny of their bleak circumstances and even of their bad characters to choose the good.

Aquinas, by contrast, has virtually no interest in the empirical social and political context of free choices. From his vast writings we learn almost nothing about the political institutions and controversies of his day;[60] and it is revealing that he chose not to complete his commentary on the *Politics* of Aristotle. By treating free choice and self-mastery as theological axioms, Aquinas tends to neglect the political conditions of freedom for individuals and for states. Yet Aquinas's analysis of the complex interplay of reason and will in the stages of ethical deliberation goes far beyond Aristotle and is of unparalleled nuance. And Aquinas never loses sight of man's ineliminable freedom in ethical choice.

The Sciences of Politics as Explanatory and Normative

Nothing is more distinctive of Aristotelian political science than the fact that nature, custom, and reason represent at once principles of theoretical explanation and principles of practical reason. He discovers the kinds of order in human affairs by asking the question: How does one become good and excellent? Aristotle devotes considerable attention to the natural, customary, and stipulated conditions of human self-realization for goodness—whether of individuals or of states. Nature, custom, and stipulation provide either resources or obstacles in the quest of an individual or a state to realize self-determination for goodness. Because of the diversity of the kinds of order in human affairs, all the explanatory as well as the normative sciences will be necessary for the evaluation of the conditions for the exercise of proper freedom of self-realization. Let us begin with the natural conditions for human flourishing. In one place Aristotle says that we have no control over nature's role,

59. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 175.
60. On Aquinas's curious silence about the politics of his epoch, see Finnis, *Aquinas*, p. 3.

which is merely the result of divine fortune or misfortune; yet in another place, he says that nature offers many potentials for good or ill that must be actualized by habits.[61] For Aristotle, medicine plays a key role in aiding individuals to overcome the natural obstacles to happiness. Medical science helps us to discern which inherited, congenital, or acquired disabilities and diseases must be treated if individuals are to realize their full moral and intellectual potential; Aristotle explicitly tells us (in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) that individuals are best cared for by a doctor with scientific knowledge of medicine.[62] In what sense is medicine a matter of practical philosophy? Consider the practical deliberations of a person with a physical or mental disability. Unless his mental disabilities or diseases are quite severe, he may well exercise full freedom of choice among the options he considers; unfortunately, however, the range of alternative courses of action that he can choose among is very likely to be significantly reduced in ways he may not even be aware of; he may make free choices but he is not a free person. A doctor serves a crucial moral function in the lives of his patients even if he cannot cure their disability or disease: for he can help them think more clearly about what they can or cannot do; he can partially emancipate them from a false understanding of their actual limitations. Medicine, as the science most directly responsible for understanding and shaping the natural conditions of human flourishing, must be considered a branch of political science.

But medicine alone cannot make us good people. Our natural capacities must be cultivated by the right social customs so that we acquire the right moral habits. Aristotle says: "Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather, we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit." He also says that our rudimentary natural virtue must be transformed and perfected into habitual virtue.[63] Aristotle sees the unconscious and pre-reflective processes of the acquisition of habits and customs to be of decisive importance in the quest for moral goodness and self-mastery. A student, he says, will not even understand, let alone be persuaded by, rational moral argument unless his soul has been properly habituated to

61. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b21 and *Politics* 1332a40.
62. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1180b13.
63. *Ibid.*, 1103a23; for natural (*physikē*) and true habitual (*ethistē*) virtue see 1151a18 and 1144b3.

excellence.[64] Moreover, because we form our personal habits in the context of social customs, including social prejudices and ideologies, our capacity for moral self-determination is either fostered or constrained by pre-reflective patterns of thought and practice. Thus, says Aristotle, it is difficult to acquire the right moral habits if you have not been raised in a society with good customs and laws.[65] The main task of the legislator is to educate the citizens in virtue by habituating them to good laws and customs; and good customs may be even more important than good laws.[66]

Custom marks the bounds of reason because good custom contains the tacit conditions of reason; deliberate thought always rests upon the deeper currents of tacit and pre-reflective knowledge.[67] In Gilbert Ryle's expression, knowing "that" always presupposes knowing "how." Only the person who knows how to cook can formulate rules of cookery; and only the person who knows how to investigate the world can formulate hypotheses.[68] We could not understand a movie or a novel if we did not already know pre-reflectively how movies and novels work—which is why we are surprised when conventions are broken. Until the experience of surprise, we were not aware of knowing the conventions. Customs provide us with the tacit expectations that simultaneously open up and close off aspects of our new experiences. As Ruth Benedict observed, it is difficult to observe our customs directly since they are the lens through which we see the world—which is why we depend upon foreigners to describe our customs to us.[69] Thus, rational thought can never be

64. *Ibid.*, 1179b24ff.
65. *Ibid.*, 1179b32.
66. *Ibid.*, 1180a34 and *Politics* 1287b5.
67. As H.-G. Gadamer says: "We are always dominated by conventions. In every culture a series of things is taken for granted and lies fully beyond the explicit consciousness of anyone, and even in the greatest dissolution of traditional forms, mores, and customs, the degree to which things held in common still determine everyone is only more concealed" (*Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick Lawrence [Cambridge,MA: M.I.T. Press, 1981], p. 82).
68. "In short the propositional acknowledgment of rules, reasons, or principles is not the parent of the intelligent application of them; it is a step-child of that application" (Gilbert Ryle, "Knowing How and Knowing That," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 46 [1945-6]: 9).
69. Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* [1934] (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), p. 9.

wholly transparent (and self-mastery never complete) because it floats on the murky depths of tacit customary modes of thought we absorb unknowingly from the larger culture.

Custom marks the bounds of reason on the other side of rational stipulation as well: our deliberate acts reverberate through the vast networks of custom with myriad effects, intended and unintended, known and unknown, welcomed and regretted. We rarely set out to make a custom, yet all of us shape custom willy-nilly every time we speak, spend money, bring forth a lawsuit, or tell a joke. By purchasing sneakers we affect the lives of workers in Indonesia for good or ill; by trying to help workers though wage-subsidies we help employers instead; by imposing liability on tobacco makers for cigarettes, we encourage efforts to impose liability on gun manufacturers for Saturday-night specials. In short, custom makes fully rational conduct impossible: we never fully know either the deeper habitual motives of our conduct or its consequences.[70]

Because custom forms the bounds of rationality, social action must be investigated, not just by the examination of the deliberate intentions of agents, but also by mechanisms of causal explanation. This is most obviously true in the case of the unintended consequences of actions, which by definition cannot be grasped by any interpretation of intentions or motives. We rarely intend to change the language we speak, but change it we do; and linguists require sophisticated statistical techniques and theories of language drift to measure the unintended evolution of language. Economics is largely the science of unintended consequences of decisions to purchase, sell, invest, or save. But the tacit conditions of rational action must also be investigated empirically for the same reason that they often escape the cognizance of the agent. Thus, statistical studies have recently found that the best predictor of the imposition of the death penalty is the race of the victim—a finding that surprised many closely involved in these cases, who thought that the race of the offender would be most salient. Here the customs of racial

70. As Giddens puts it: "The knowledgeability of human agents, in given historical circumstances, is always *bounded*: by the unacknowledged conditions of action on the 'one side,' and its unintended consequences on the other" (Anthony Giddens, *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982], p. 32).

hierarchy continue to operate behind the backs (as well as, no doubt, in the foreground) of the participants. An even more startling example was provided by another statistical study of the striking and seemingly arbitrary differences in how doctors evaluate black and white patients with the same symptoms.[71] Here the doctors involved are shocked and appalled by what has been revealed about their own actions. Myriad similar studies of the effects of race and class on professional decision-making by judges, lawyers, doctors, nurses, and others have shown that many customary biases are shaping these allegedly impartial decisions. Adopting an "internal point of view," in order to understand the aims and intentions of these agents, could not have revealed these biases so starkly.

Because social order is partly natural, partly customary, and only partly rational, to understand that order requires more than just the description, interpretation, and evaluation of the internal point of view or intentions of agents—if only because those intentions themselves partially rest on natural and customary causal mechanisms that must be directly investigated by statistical, experimental, and other external methods. Contrary to Aquinas, we do not have true mastery or dominion over our actions, our actions do not stem purely from our own will and deliberation, and human affairs generally do not proceed from the will of man. We are caught up in natural and customary causal relations that must be investigated independently of the conscious intentions of agents. Yet even these "external" and causal sciences of human conduct have a practical dimension because they are or ought to be oriented toward enhancing the capacities for sound practical deliberation by individuals and communities. To the extent that human sciences can make me aware of some of the unacknowledged conditions of my own deliberate actions, I have a better chance of acting according to my own moral principles; to the extent that social sciences can make me aware of the possible unintended consequences of my actions, I have a better chance of acting responsibly. Aristotelian political science must have full range over natural, customary, and rational order and the human sciences oriented toward those kinds of order.

71. See *The New York Times*, 1 March 1999, p. A21.

Conclusion: Theoretical and Practical Inquiry

I have emphasized how Aristotle's political science, especially its principles of nature, custom, and reason, weaves together a theoretical concern for the understanding of social order as well as a practical concern for moral goodness through excellence of deliberation. Yet Aristotle himself famously distinguishes theoretical from practical inquiry on the grounds that theoretical inquiry aims at disinterested understanding while practical inquiry aims at technical or moral excellence. But to distinguish these contrasting rational aims in thought does not imply that they can be separated in reality, or that Aristotle's own investigations can be neatly divided into the theoretical and the practical. His "theoretical" treatises are full of discussions of what constitutes practical excellence, just as his "practical" treatises are full of discussions of what constitutes a true understanding of a state of affairs. After all, his *Metaphysics* opens with a celebration of the intrinsic value of delight in sensual experience and then proceeds with an argument that technical knowledge is superior to mere experience; and the *Metaphysics* culminates with Aristotle's argument that the god is the best object of thought. Clearly, all of these are practical issues concerning the quest for human intellectual and moral excellence. Similarly, the *Ethics* and *Politics*, as we have seen, involve a theoretical concern for the kinds of order in human affairs so that we might become better individuals and better communities. And in both those "practical" treatises Aristotle claims that a true understanding of the god is essential for the achievement of excellence by individuals and by communities.

Whether, according to Aristotle, practical reason furnishes all of its own principles defining the goods of human flourishing and the virtues that lead us to those goods or whether practical reason adopts at least some of its principles from theoretical reason is a deep question that I cannot here address. At a minimum, we can say that according to Aristotle practical reason is not merely the application of theoretical principles: practice is not merely applied theory. Still, practical reason and practical philosophy must be informed by the theoretical sciences if only because, as Leo Strauss observed, sound practical reasoning is always

threatened by false theoretical views.[72] The accuracy and validity of our theoretical understanding of the world is crucial because practical and theoretical premises are so intimately intertwined in practical deliberation.

72. "The sphere governed by prudence is then in principle self-sufficient or closed. Yet prudence is always endangered by false doctrines about the whole of which man is a part by false theoretical opinions; prudence is therefore always in need of defense against such opinions, and that defense is necessarily theoretical. The theory defending prudence is misunderstood, however, if it is taken to be the basis of prudence" (Leo Strauss, "Epilogue," in *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*, ed. Herbert J. Storing [New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1962], pp. 309-310).