Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics and Politics

1. Overview of the two works: NE and Politics form basically a single enquiry, the whole of which could fairly be entitled ‘Politics’ (NE I.2). The point of the work is to consider the mode of life in which human happiness consists (happiness, or eudaimonia, is the highest good, for we choose it for its own sake, not for the sake of anything else, and other good things that we choose for their own sake, such as honour, pleasure and intellect, we also choose for the sake of happiness [NE I.7]). For Aristotle, human happiness requires that we be good at being a human being, i.e. be good at performing the characteristic activity (ergon) of a human being. We are born with the capacity to achieve this, but only fulfil our potential (realise our telos) through habituation or practice (NE II.1). So Aristotle’s first task is to investigate human character (ethos: custom, usage, manners, habit) and establish its virtues, i.e. what it is that makes up human areté, that is, distinctively human virtue or excellence (which NE does) – and then he can move on to think about the kind of social circumstances that would allow as many people as possible to achieve this human arete and thus live in happiness (which Politics does).

2. So what kind of creatures are human beings? To Aristotle, human beings are by nature ‘political animals’ (NE I.7, Pol. I.2) i.e. they are naturally social, live together in more or less self-sufficient communities (poleis or city-states) and ‘have as their function (ergon) some single thing that they all do together’ (Historia Animalium I.1). Humans are not the only political animals: bees, wasps, ants and cranes also live in poleis. But humans are the ‘most political of all’ because they have logos, that is, verbal reason or language (Pol. I.2), which allows them to discuss among themselves how to organise their polis. Only humans are able to set forth ‘the expedient and the inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust’ (Pol. I.2). The human social world is thus open to debate and disagreement. To Aristotle the world is divisible into things that can be changed by humans and things that can’t: our political world falls into the first category, so we have lots of choice about how to do things (and lots of agency), but since we have a particular goal in mind (that is, realising eudaimonia in both individuals and the polis as a whole – NE I.2) there are better and worse ways of organising the polis with regard to that end, and we need both practical wisdom or phronesis (which is the result of experience) and political science (which Aristotle is working on here) to work out how best to do it (NE VI.7, 8).

3. Human virtues and the concept of the mean: To Aristotle, we are not born with any particular virtues (partly because being virtuous requires that we choose it consciously, which children, who lack logos, cannot do). The way we become virtuous is by doing virtuous acts: we ‘learn by doing,’ as with any other skill, e.g. building or playing the flute (NE II.1). However, we are not totally in the dark when it comes to thinking about how to act: we can inculate a particular virtue in ourselves (or a legislator can inculcate one in a polis – NE II.1) by aiming at certain targets, which we can be helped to do by education or good luck (NE II.4). If we become practised at doing just acts, for example, in this way, eventually we will become just ourselves (and for
Aristotle virtues such as justice are not abstract ideas: they explicitly consist in people acting in a certain way. The target we aim at is the middle ground or ‘mean’ between two excesses in respect of a particular way of being: e.g. courage is the mean between recklessness and timidity in the sphere of fear and confidence, temperance is between intemperance and lack of appetite/insensibility in the sphere of bodily pleasure and pain, etc. We may not feel that everything Aristotle discusses benefits from being described as a mean – see e.g. his treatment of justice (NE V). But it is this sort of discussion that makes up most of the NE: human aretê is made up of the virtuous ‘means’ of courage (III.6-9), temperance (III.10-12), generosity (IV.1), magnanimity (IV.2), greatness of soul (IV.3), ‘honour on a small scale’ (IV.4), even temper (IV.5), friendliness (IV.6), truthfulness (IV.7), wit (IV.8), justice (V), and friendship (VIII-IX).

4. Aristotle’s method: The way Aristotle typically goes about discussing a subject is to consider what people usually say about it (often referring to Plato, the Pythagoreans, the Sophists, poetry or proverbs), assess what seems inconsistent or false, prune that part away, and treat whatever is left over as more or less the truth. He rejects Plato’s idea that the study of human affairs, i.e. things that are inherently changeable, is analogous to the study of mathematics, the truths of which are eternal and abstract (NE VI.8). Instead he says plainly that political knowledge is by definition imprecise: the objects studied by political science (hê politikê epistêmê, that is, the study of poleis) take the shapes they do only by on account of human convention (nomos: law, convention, custom), not by nature (physis), so we cannot expect to produce eternal laws on politics (NE I.3). We therefore cannot reason a priori about politics (that is, from first principles to political realities); we have to go the other way, from political realities to (perhaps vague) generalisations about politics (NE 1.3, VI.3). To this end he set his students to write up historical descriptions of different political systems (about 150), from which conclusions about politics could be drawn (NE X.9, Pol. II.1). (Sadly we only have one of these – the one on Athens, first discovered in a rubbish dump in Egypt in 1890).

5. The Politics: The second part of Aristotle’s enquiry into politics, the work that we know as the Politics, does not follow on perfectly from NE. Like all the works we have from Aristotle, it appears to be lecture notes (probably written by students) rather than polished prose, but it is probably the most weirdly put-together of all his corpus, does not have a single straightforward argument and often appears to contradict itself. Book I may be regarded as a general introduction to the idea of a polis, arguing that it develops naturally out of the family and then the village, and discussing three different kinds of power relation: master-slave, husband-wife, and political ruler-ruled. Book II seems to start again, following on from where NE left off, asking what kind of polis would be the best, and here Aristotle criticises aspects of the poleis described by Plato in the Republic and Laws (such as holding women in common, the equalisation of property, and unity through similarity: for Aristotle unity can be made up of differences), as well as those planned by Hippodamus (Pol. II.8) and then he discusses the real politeia (constitution, administration, government, daily life of a citizen, citizenship) of Sparta and Crete at length, and of some other places very briefly. Book III starts again with the question of what the polis is, this
time approaching it not as composed (semi-historically) out of the development of smaller groups of people but as the unity of its citizens (politeis). **Book IV** returns to the question of what knowledge about politics consists of, and contains the most famous part of Aristotle’s political analysis: the division of the whole body of politeiai into 6 types, the three ‘correct’ forms of kingly, aristocratic and ‘constitutional,’ and three ‘deviations’ from these, namely tyrannical, oligarchic and democratic (Pol. IV.2). He doesn’t like democracy if it entails numerical equality, rather than equality proportionate to merit; but note that Greek democracy meant assigning offices by lot, not electing the most meritorious people: that would be for Aristotle an aristocracy or ‘rule of the best’. Yet Aristotle also thinks that governments can be ‘mixed’: for example, Sparta has both democratic and oligarchic elements (Pol. IV.9). Ultimately in Book IV Aristotle thinks that the perfect politeia will be one with a substantial number of ‘middling’ citizens, *i.e.* he follows his idea of the mean as introduced in **NE** (Pol. IV.11); he also thinks that it will have the greatest admixture of elements, *i.e.* incorporate elements of all three different ‘correct’ constitutions (although he seems not to like the way they go about it in Sparta).

In **Book V** he discusses the ways that poleis end up suffering revolutions or being preserved, while in **Book VI** he talks more about the different elements of the state (in terms of offices) and how these are constituted or allocated first in a democracy and then in an oligarchy. In **Book VII** he appears to start again (again), discussing in more detail the conditions of the perfect state in terms of population, territory, distance to the sea, and the character of the citizens – including especially in what ways they should differ in order to make a more perfect union (which Aristotle distinguishes from an ‘aggregate of persons,’ for a union is self-sufficient – Pol. VII.8). He identifies 5 (or possibly 6) key classes of people that a polis must have: farmers, artisans, a ‘warlike and a wealthy’ class, priests, and judges. In **Book VIII**, his attention turns to education, which fits with his approach in **NE**: children must be habituated in virtuous acts in order to become virtuous.

How to make sense of this strange and difficult text (probably the trickiest in the whole of political philosophy)? One thought is that it fits together so oddly because Aristotle couldn’t decide on a single best way of ‘dissecting’ either the idea of the polis or the body of politeiai (constitutions) that he studied – that is, analysing this object of study by way of breaking it down into its component parts – but that he was too much of a natural scientist not to try to do this (as he did with frogs, for example – see also Pol. I.1).

Perhaps the best study advice is not to try to make sense of the Politics as a whole, but focus on **NE** I, II, V and X and **Pol.** I, II, III, IV and VII, paying special attention to the idea that politics is a kind of human activity aiming at the good, in groups because that is natural to humans, but that when it comes to saying exactly how that group should be organised, human beings are so variable and self-creating that exactly how to go about achieving this good – or even how to go about discussing it – was not obvious even to Aristotle.