Aristopolitics:
The Quest for Political Excellence

Classic Ideals & Systemic Ideas

By

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Introduction

A perennial question in political theory is how to improve political practice. This fundamental question is philosophically translated into a quest for what constitutes political excellence. Ever since Ancient Greece, this problem of public ethics and politics has bothered both thinkers and actors and has not abated to this day.

As all philosophical issues, the quest for political excellence is so intransigent because it concerns complex functional relations among multiple physiological, psychological and sociological variables. In order to make such large inquiry more manageable here, we have to concentrate on a highly abstract level involving the basic relation between possibility and desirability.

Since excellence is a mental ideal, whereas politics is a behavioral activity, these two human values are reflected in the famous mind-body duality. Furthermore, grasping the content of this duality in the context of its environment, requires consideration of the wider natural-cultural interface. In this way, we maintain the proper perspective between mental and physical, ideal and real.

Finally, in order to anchor this highly abstract discussion in an actual historical example, we consider the case of ancient Greece, where and when it all started. By such exemplification, we hope to show the everlasting significance of classical wisdom, and its utility in contemporary discussions.

The methodology follows a logical path starting with the definition of terms, i.e. politics and excellence; continuing with the general principles of the combined relationship, i.e. political excellence; and ending with the particular ideals of classical civilization, i.e. Ancient Greece.

This process will show how the modern concept in political science compares with the classical ideal of political philosophy. By juxtaposing these two historically separated views, we may be able to see their similarities and differences and thus combine their best elements in an eclectic synthesis.

1.   DEFINITIONS

Before we engage the substance of our subject, we must first define our terms, so that we know what we are talking about. We shall do that by defining separately the two terms on the title and then combining them in the single phrase used here.

1.1.   Politics

To begin with, we conceptualize *politics* by looking at this term as a **phenomenon**: something we perceive going on out there.   From this point of view, politics is seen as an activity, taking place in reality.   Politics appears to be an action or a complex of events in what we experience to be the real world.

If politics is a patterned interaction, it must take place within a network of interrelations, not in chaos or vacuum, but within a systemic context or **arena** that is etymologically called **polity** or **polis**.   Politics is the activity relevant to whatever is common to a social system: *res publica,* as the Romans said, "public affairs," as we translate it now.

With this postulate, politics is explicitly limited to **human** societies.   As Aristotle said, *anthropos* is a *zoon politikon*.   Not only is man a political animal, he is the only such animal.   Ants and bees are social, but apolitical; hence politics can only take place in human societies and not in anthills or beehives.

It is the political *agora* that requires and defines its essence by its constituent units who are the **citizens**.   In this sense, citizens are those who partake of public affairs.   Only in this capacity as a participant in political activities is a person a citizen or *polites*.   In so far as one does not play that game, he is merely a private person or *idiotes*, hence inconsiderable and contemptible as an idiot.

This derivation shows quite clearly the high esteem that the ancients had for politics and citizenship.   So much so that the only civilized person was the citizen and politics was synonymous with **civilization** or *politismos*.   Politics, therefore, is a civilized and civilizing activity as it takes place in a polis or *civis* by citizens.

Politics is a uniquely human activity because it demands certain peculiarly human attributes, such as **controversy** the *sine qua non* of politics. Although **conflict** exists among all animals, it is articulated as **issue** only among humans, where clash of opinion and contradiction of position surface as verbal rather than physical conflicts

Yet, all human disagreements are not political; many involve fights, games or debates.   Unlike them, politics is the particular way of dealing with public issues by the judicious manipulation of **power***,* rather than violence or intelligence.   Figuratively speaking, power becomes **influence**, when one tries to change minds rather than behavior, moving thoughts rather than things.

Political interactions may be looked upon as an exchange of power or influence: people trying to get each other to think or act in certain ways.   But the difference between **physics** and politics is that the former modifies inanimate

motion by the application of physical force, whereas the latter affects human action by **dialectical** talk: searching for a synthesis of a thesis and its antithesis. In politics one does not get physical but rhetorical. The pressure applied in politics is more subtle than in physics, even if it may not be as effective.

The political process combines communication, negotiation, exhortation, where two opposing sides try to resolve their differences by **dialogue**.   Form in politics then is more important than content: it is not so much what one does but how it is done, that defines an act as political.

Finally, even if it is often its own reward, politics is teleological because its function is **policy-making**.   Politics is supposed to begin in controversy and end in harmony.   As such, politics is a way of converting social problems into policy solutions by means of power dialectics.   Of the many ways by which differences may be eliminated, politics provides the one based on **compromise**.   It does so, not by eliminating one party in the confrontation, but by **accommodating** both to each other.   In politics, there are no complete winners or losers, rights or wrongs, but various degrees of in-betweens.   The give and take of politics does not allow for extreme or exclusive solutions; rather, its dialectics converge opposites into similarities.

In systemic terms, the inputs of politics are various clashing forces that are converted into common outputs through a power algorithm.   Politics is a process of **conflict-resolution** by collective decision-making.   Although it is neither the only way of resolving conflicts, nor making decisions, politics is a particular combination of factors, reconciling contradictions to arrive at a united position

One might say that politics is a social **problem-solving** process, using dialogical, rather than logical or corporal means. In that, it differs from either mathematics or physics, being situated somewhere between reason and coercion.   Because of that, in its extremes, politics interfaces both *logos* and *chaos.*   As long as human actions span these two opposing tendencies, politics provide the **golden mean** for solving their collective problems.   Through politics, people are able to orient their collective activities, set their social goals and direct their cultural values with a modicum of civility and common sense.

1.2.   Excellence

We begin the definition of excellence --*aristea*-- as a **quality** or condition. It is a descriptive state, or inscriptive characteristic. In that sense, excellence describes a subject or object and ascribes to it a certain trait that may be found at the summit in any system of hierarchical levels. This means that excellence is situated at an extraordinary position, high above average.

It should be noted that excellence and perfection are not synonymous. Yet, although, excellent does not mean **perfect**, it approaches perfection, by moving in the same ultimate direction. Nevertheless, it describes a maximal possible, rather than prescribing an ideal conceivable state.

As a quality, excellence is judged comparatively or relative to others. As a **subjective** judgment, excellence depends on the priority criteria applied to it.

Such criteria reflect the particular values held by a **judge**, who is assumed to be a human being, evaluating something or someone. People have a proclivity to rank order items in a vertical scale, so seeking to find excellence in things or beings is a popular activity.

Given a particular goal attainment, excellence depends on maximizing the three instrumental **values** of rationalism, pragmatism, functionalism:
Efficiency, as economical process.
Efficacy, as effective way.
Utility, as functional operation.

By attaining maximal efficiency and efficacy in purposeful behavior, excellence is based on **criteria** of logic, esthetic, ethic means to serve a given end. Because it is a highly regarded value --*arete*-- excellence is considered as a worthy end for creatures or creations alike.

This contextual definition evaluates excellence on the basis of its application. In that sense, excellence in something considered unworthy or bad is regrettable. It is only excellence in something of value or good that desirable and commendable.

1.3.   Political Excellence

In our search for political excellence, the phrase denotes excellence as the noun and political as its adjective. However, in this context, it is preferable to connote politics as the subject and excellence as its qualifier. Unlike politics as an activity, excellence as a quality is more apt to describe that action, rather than vise versa.

Accordingly, combining our separate definitions of politics and excellence, we can now define political excellence **(PE)** as the most efficient, effective and functional way to resolve public issues dialectically.

PE means that the best method of public problem solving is efficiency and effectiveness, rationalism and realism. As an **art** of the possible, politics must be grounded on reality, even when attempting to extend above and beyond it. As such, PE combines both criteria of Occam's razor and Hume's guillotine, by avoiding inefficient methods and ineffective applications.

It is to be noted that this phrasal definition does not contain any ideological values or judgmental opinions. In that sense, PE is good if we consider politics as a good thing, something that we do here. The search for PE is thus an attractive and challenging activity, because its political goal is a **valuable** one to human development. Improving politics is a commendable exercise, and as such aiming at its excellence is something desirable to be aspired.

2. PRINCIPLES

Having conceptualized PE, we now ready to explain its parameters. This discussion assumes PE as an actual condition or ideal attainment. As such, it involves both means and ends that describe or desire it and their preferred relationship. These goals may be expressed as principles underlying the quest of PE.

2.1. Ultimate Ends

The ultimate purpose of PE aims to approach or attain three basic social values: liberty, security, harmony. Recalling the famous cry of the French Revolution and still motto of the French Republic: *"liberte, egalite, fraternite,"* we have amended it somewhat to fit better the fundamental goals of politics. These derive from the collective maximization of social values, because it is they that give politics its central purpose and sought excellence.

Unfortunately, these interrelated values seldom coincide by themselves. That is to say, they are naturally negatively correlated: the more there is of one, the less is left for the others. As if there is a certain gross amount for their combined worth which they must share, so that the expansion of one must be done at the expense and contraction of its cohorts, just like a **zero-sum** game.

If absolute **freedom** means doing as one pleases, the only constraints are natural capability limitations. Such freedom for anyone must obviously be curtailed within society in order to accommodate some freedom for everyone. The resulting limited freedom of each is supposed to result in the optimal freedom of all. This optimal condition should result in individual and collective **liberty** brought about by PE.

Security, on the other hand, is the protection from harm to physical and psychological integrity. Social security protects one from the vagaries of nature and the behavior of others. This can only be attained by curtailing or remedying people's freedom of action. The freedom of one thus impinges upon the security of another. So as one increases, the other decreases.

This contradiction can best be resolved by harmonizing social relations, so that particular interests combine to enhance the common good. The resulting social **concord** is thus attained by a stable dynamic equilibrium of liberty and security. Politics is the most civil or civilized way to find and keep this balance among competing interests or opinions and PE is the ideal way of attaining it.

2.2. Instrumental Means

In trying to attain its ends of optimizing liberty and security in harmony, PE utilizes primarily legal, moral and rational means. PE tries to maximize rule implementation, mutual consideration and logical application, as the best means to attain its ends.

As a civil activity, politics invokes, imposes and implements **law** as the legitimate rules of the social game. Law entails social **order** to such an extent

that law and order become synonymous. Politics gives law its **legitimacy**, without which law is merely a formal imposition, forcefully and fearfully obeyed.

Politics also is related to **ethics** in that it extends to public convenience the principles of private conscience. Although legality and **morality** do not necessarily coincide, politics and ethics must do so to a large extent. If ethical action is considerate behavior, the political process is eminently moral, in that it accepts partisan opposition and tries to resolve it into a common position.

Finally, politics utilizes **rationality** to carry out its dialectical process. Politics can only be played by highly rational animals of which only humans qualify. Although politics does not only use **logical** calculations to resolve its issues, it assumes some **reasonable** manipulation of its participants.

PE is the enviable condition and process of discovering and maintaining this elusive social manipulation in the most cost-effective way. In attempting to do so, PE marshals human forces and converts their natural discord into social accord. This dialectical process of politics is at its best when excellence in **leadership** and **statesmanship** to unite popular disposition into social cohesion.

2.3. Standard Measures

Since many values are negatively correlated or even mutually exclusive, they cannot be maximized together in the same place and time. It is these conflicts and confusions that make the task of politics so difficult and attaining excellence in this domain almost impossible.

Nevertheless, we can mention some **standards** by which one could measure the success or failure of PE. In attempting to combine its various coexisting and contradicting values, PE aims at qualitative **optimization**, rather than quantitative maximization. The necessary compromise to find the right combination in any particular case, most of the time lies in the **Golden Mean**.

This combination is a measured response to specific situations, but in general it is characterized by health, justice and proportion. A society showing these qualities explicitly is implicitly practicing PE. Whether physical or social, **health** is characterized as an optimal condition of balanced functioning of all the components of a system. A healthy organism or mechanism operates as an integrated whole, whose parts work together for a common good.

Closely related to health is the concept of **justice**, denoting the proper combination between contribution and distribution of values. A just society is one where people are satisfied that this distribution is equitable. Problems arise when people's needs or wants do not match their capacities or abilities. For that reason, equal and equitable do not coincide, something that PE is called upon to resolve to most people's satisfaction.

This just resolution is best brought about by a sense of **proportion**, which is the real meaning of **wisdom**. Considering a problem from all points of view and looking at reality from a holistic perspective is the true mark of worldly wisdom. It is the talent for overall proportion in balancing as many aspects and aspirations that make the difference between political mediocrity and PE. Thus a state of social sanity, equity and legitimacy are the apparent criteria of PE.

3. CLASSICS

On the basis of our discussion so far, the question now is whether the Classics anything to teach us. As the archetypical political civilization, Greece developed a highly sophisticated culture that created the first urban man or citizen. Thus it extended human nature --*physis*-- into culture --*politismos*-- by its particular nurture --*paidia,* so it should have something valuable to say.

To begin with, the Greeks realized the opposition between nature and culture, debating what combination was optimal. As their *nomos-physis* controversy reflected, the central issue was whether the human character was primarily the result of either culture or nature. Greek values --*arêtes*-- were thus predicated upon this issue. Here, we look at the most fundamental ones for PE.

3.1. Agonistic Spirit

The Greeks had a rather bleak view of both man and nature: the former was brutal and cruel, the latter harsh and hostile. In order to survive and prosper, man had to tame and master nature by his wits and wiles; traits in which the Greeks were supposed to **excel**.

This unmitigated struggle made virtue of necessity by infusing man with a fighting mentality. The social translation of this environmental need was the development of the Greek **agonistic** spirit of competitive individualism: *atomismos*. Always striving to excel --*aein aristeuen*-- therefore became the prime motto of the Greek.

This competition was at its best in the **Olympic** Games and its worst at the Hellenic Wars. As such, the vaulting ambition of the Greeks created Hellenism's brightest creations as well as its darkest sins; leading to both political excellence and individual **hubris**.

PE encapsulated the essence of social conflict in the public arena of the Greek polis and attenuated man's innate **egoism** by the citizen's intelligent socialism. This social development following natural evolution thus was supposed to put the Greek above all other men.

3.2. Democratic Agora

Although not the only social animal, man has the unique distinction of being the sole performer of politics. As Aristotle said, *anthropos* is a *zoon politikon.* Ideally, one could create a **utopia**, as Plato did, where politics is excluded by definition or intention, but precisely for that reason, a Platonic polis would resemble rather a beehive or anthill than any real life human community.

It is the political *agora* that requires and defines its essence by its constituent units who are the *citizens*. In this sense, citizens are those who partake of public affairs. Only in this public capacity as a participant in political activities is a person a citizen or *polites*. In so far as one does not play that game by participating in a direct **democracy**, he is merely a private person or *idiotes*, hence irrelevant and contemptible as a village idiot.

This derivation shows quite clearly the high esteem that the ancients had for politics and **citizenship**. So much so that the only civilized person was the citizen and politics was synonymous with civilization or *politismos*. Politics, therefore, was a civilized and civilizing activity because it took place in a polis or *civis* by citizens.

Of course, some societies are relatively more political than others. We will not go so far as the Greeks to claim that only theirs were political, but we can affirm that by its very nature mankind can only thrive within a polity and not just any society. In this endeavor, PE --*politike aristae*-- was the only way worthy of a highly developed **civilization**, whose archetype was Greece.

3.3.   Pragmatic Life

The conflict between agonistic and democratic values, or individual and collective, also reflected the contradiction between the duality of human nature, that combining both rational and irrational elements. The Greeks were quite cognizant of these conflicts both within man and state. Their laws and customs tried to take into account of these antithetic characteristics by regulating conflicts and promoting cooperation.

The **Olympian** religion also reflected this contrarian predilection by juxtaposing **Apollonian** rationality to **Dionysian** emotionality. The instinctive passion of natural man could thus be contained by the intensive reason of civilization, resulting in an optimal pragmatic synthesis.

Similarly, as a counterweight to natural excesses, was the highly respected social value of the **Golden Mean**. Its dictum *pan metron ariston*, was supposed to keep civilized men from going too far. As the accompanying dictum *meden agan* put it, the spirit of moderation was antipathetic to the wretched excesses of *pleonexia* that inevitably led to the sin of pride as *hubris.*

The Greeks believed that the higher one rises the lower one can fall because of the **nemesis** brought about by the envy of the gods. So the problem was how to attain excellence without provoking doom. The solution was *eunomia*: the lawful restraint of too much wealth or power.

As the best way to approach their opposing values, the Greeks proposed to **know oneself**: *gnothe s'auton.* This self-consciousness or *autognosis* was the root of wisdom or *sophia*, because it contained the knowledge of limitation and put everything in perspective. A similar synthesis was effected by harmonizing the material-spiritual opposition, by conjoining both as a healthy mind in a healthy body: *nous hygeies en somate hygeies.*

PE synthesized all these contradictions by balancing opposites and combining their best elements in the political agora. The ideal statesman was the pragmatic sage who applied reasoned restraint to keep the citizens in harmonious interaction. Similarly, the ideal citizen was the involved public man who struggled to convince others of his point of view, while accepting their opinion and tolerating their opposition, without going to extremes either way. Putting things in this perspective was considered the essence of civic wisdom and hence PE.

Conclusion

Juxtaposing modern concepts and classical values. It is evident that Greek principles compare favorably to our own. If only the Greeks could practice what they preached! Unfortunately, like all civilizations, they did not. But they did leave us with their legacy of what constitutes a good life and PE, which we would be amiss not to take seriously and try to emulate.

A political society is one whose members are willing to tolerate imperfection and behave **politely**, lest by pursuing purity they capture futility. Even as a counter example, the Greek tragedy shows that rational ideals must be compromised with emotional feelings and balanced by political pragmatism.

As the world's first philosophic civilization, Greek culture combined Thales' naturalism, Protagoras' humanism, and Aristotle's rationalism, thus giving us the essence of a well-rounded citizen. This combination values **character** more than intellect and pragmatism more than idealism. That is why the most prized political virtues of responsible citizenship and charismatic leadership alike, are sensitivity, civility, amity and empathy.

Greek culture made virtue of necessity by its classical **simplicity**, imposed upon it by the material scarcity of its natural environment. Because of their lack of quantity, the Greeks emphasized quality, by focusing on the moral, mental and aesthetic superiority of ecologic scarcity and economic poverty.

Accordingly, excessive wealth and power lead to overconfidence and overextension, imprudence and impudence, to be avoided, since eventually they spell doom. Thus they looked down upon physical labor and commercial trade, as well as the conspicuous consumption of a sybaritic life.

Yet they exulted the combination of somatic and psychic excellence, as reflected in the high value they placed to the **Olympic** Games, **Delphic** Oracles, and intellectual pursuits. Those outstandingly adept at these endeavors were prized and revered throughout the Hellenic world as models of human perfection.

Applied to social life, these values ranged between the opposite polarities of liberty and security, prosperity and stability, sovereignty and prosperity, competition and contemplation, war and peace, At different times in their history, the Greeks vacillated between these opposing ideals, trying to have it both ways, while most of the time engaging in extreme antagonistic competition and antipathetic argumentation.

As the master science, politics aims at PE to correct and contain these contradictions by the wise synthesis of their best elements, leading to the *summum bonum* of *eudaimonia*. Such reflective satisfaction does not simply come with material possessions but with meaningful comprehension, leisurely education and social interconnection. It is this balanced political combination that we can now reiterate, lest we forget the wisdom of the ages and perennial truths bequeathed to us by the classical Greek ideals, if not actions.

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