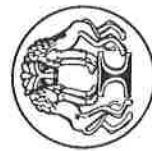


# READING ANCIENT SLAVERY

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5. 2.37, translated by White (1975) 118.
6. Griffith (2005) 164.
7. See above, pp. 122-3 and n. 6. On the satyrs as slaves see esp. Konstan (1981).
8. On the emergence of this notion in oligarchic literature see Raaflaub (1988). On the emergence of the metaphorical political sense of *eleutheros* and *doulos* see now Raaflaub (2004).
9. Cf. the disenfranchisements under the 'Thirty Tyrants' which stripped previously inalienable citizen rights such as trial by jury from many Athenians, thus diminishing their position.
10. Cf. O'Sullivan (2005) 119-59.
11. Segal (1961) 207-42.
12. If we accept *Cyclops*'s assumed connection with the Sicilian expedition (which is quite possible, considering numerous references to Sicily as the scene of action of the play and particularly because tyranny was Euripides' typical way of representing Athens' enemies in the Peloponnesian War), then we may regard the concrete social function of the play as that of harmonising opposite opinions on Athenian democracy by contrasting both of them with the image of the enemy.
13. I am indebted to Gregory Dashevsky, Edith Hall, David Konstan, Patrick O'Sullivan and Deborah Boedeker for the careful reading of a previous version of this paper. Their valuable suggestions have helped me greatly in improving my style and argumentation.

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## Navigating Race, Class, Polis and Empire: The Place of Empirical Analysis in Aristotle's Account of Natural Slavery

S. Sara Monoson

Scholars have long favoured language like 'incoherent', 'very weak', 'feeble' and 'battered shipwreck' to describe Aristotle's theory of natural slavery in *Politics* book 1.<sup>1</sup> These words stress its perceived logical incompatibility with the rest of his moral philosophy as well as scholars' dismay at Aristotle's failure to recognise it as such, or possibly even fury at what they detect as a measure of philosophical dishonesty or blatant personal bias. Studies of Aristotle on slavery thus often focus attention on exposing the contortions he has to perform in order to fit a case for slavery into his otherwise admirable philosophical system. He is often assumed to have been motivated to defend slavery by an un-philosophic attachment to widespread, exclusionary practices common in his day.<sup>2</sup> Given that Aristotle acknowledges current arguments against slavery and explicitly positions his discussion as an intervention in a contemporary controversy over its justice (*Pol.* 1.1253b15-23), the modern reader's disappointment is intense. Accordingly, Aristotle's discussion of slavery has for some time stood as a prime example of how even the finest mind can be corrupted by class interests, ethnic or race prejudice, or just the common orthodoxies of his time.

Recent work on Aristotle by two eminent political philosophers suggests another way of reading his handling of the question of slavery in *Politics*. Both of course find the Aristotelian justification of slavery every bit as repulsive as all other cases for the just ownership of human beings. But they also find the argument to be, from an Aristotelian vantage point, philosophically sound. Malcolm Schofield takes on the charge that Aristotle's theory of slavery is a prime example of false consciousness at work. He argues that the account of natural slavery in the *Politics* is 'not to any interesting extent ideological', 'at least potentially a critical theory', and that 'the doctrine of living tools is a defensible piece of Aristotelian philosophy'.<sup>3</sup> Though for different reasons, Richard Kraut similarly proposes that Aristotle's justification of slavery is 'internally consistent' and even 'contains a limited amount of explanatory power'. Kraut continues, 'It was a coherent way of looking at the social world'.<sup>4</sup> Both explain

Aristotle's theory of slavery in a way that requires us to distinguish between a philosophical muddle and a failure of critical imagination.

In this chapter I examine the theory of slavery developed in *Politics* book 1 for what it suggests about the contours of Aristotle's political imagination. How far does it reveal Aristotle's view of the possibilities that inhere in the material world? Building on the work of Schofield and Kraut, I start by reviewing why it is possible to conclude that Aristotle presents an internally consistent theory of a 'natural slave'. My main focus, however, is on the next step in Aristotle's thinking – his attention to 'whether or not anyone exists who is by nature of this character' (*Pol.* 1.1254a18).<sup>5</sup> What part does an appeal to evidence play in the construction of his argument? We must tackle that issue in order to expose some of the defining peculiarities of a distinctively Aristotelian way of thinking about slavery, and indeed about politics generally. I then draw out the measure of critical potential that his theory of natural slavery contains from the perspective of his own culturally specific experiences and the standpoint of lasting theoretical power. I conclude with some reflections on why this argument about slavery as practised in the fourth century BCE has informed and encouraged modern racism.

### Why isn't the theory of natural slavery a philosophical muddle?

The central claims of Aristotle's theory of natural slavery are simply stated. Nature produces a plurality of sorts of people. This variation has moral and political import. As theorists, we can decipher these differences and conduct a normative inquiry into the best way to order them hierarchically and into partnerships so as to form a just state and thus produce the conditions necessary for human happiness and virtue ('goods') to come into being in the world. As theorists, we can identify 'slave' (along with male, female, and ruler) as a natural character (a kind of 'being'<sup>6</sup>) and an elemental part of a state. We can further understand that a partnership between a natural slave and natural ruler can form a simple compound that, when joined with other simple compounds (male and female, father and children), will produce an *oikos* (household) which will, in turn, combine to form more complex social organisms – villages and cities (*polesis*) – that are necessary for the practice of virtue and happiness. To best understand the distinct purposes and excellence of the most complex form, a *polis*, in Aristotle's view a theorist must investigate in detail the character of its component parts, starting with the master/slave relationship.

Aristotle explicitly positions his account of mastership (*despotia*) in opposition to contemporary critics of slavery who maintain that for one man to be another man's master is contrary to nature, because it is only by convention that makes the one a slave and the other a freeman and there is no difference between them in nature, and that therefore it is

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unjust, for it is based on force' (1.1253b23-6). He quickly offers definitions that capture the sociological condition of a slave: 'A slave is an ensouled article of property (*ktêma ti empsuchon*, 1.1253b32<sup>8</sup>), an instrument for action (life) separable from its owner, and a person who is not merely the slave of the master but who 'wholly belongs to the master' (1.1254a12-13). He concludes, 'one who is a human being belonging by nature not to himself but to another is by nature a slave'. But the force of 'by nature' and thus his answer to contemporary opponents is not yet clear. To make it so he adds that a slave by nature is one who is 'capable of belonging to another' (*ho dunamenos allou einai*, 1.1254b2). How can he account for this capacity? Aristotle stresses that natural slaves indeed have the traits that distinguish humans from animals – speech and reason. But in the case of a natural slave the person's reasoning faculty is in a significant way deficient. He can conduct productive reasoning leading to the mastery of a craft but not deliberation leading to practical wisdom. Accordingly, the master/slave relation can be, for the natural slave, just and advantageous. It is advantageous because the relationship supplies rational direction and a pathway to participation in excellence. The relation addresses the deficiency of reason this type of person suffers in a way that is mutually beneficial to both parties. The master gains release from labour and access to leisure and thus to the practice of politics or philosophy. A natural slave gains certain kinds of skills and forms of knowledge appropriate to his service activities (1.1255b30), an opportunity to practise a variant of the moral virtues like courage and temperance (1.1259b20ff.), and even a type of friendship with the master (1.1255b13). This relation is just, then, because being rooted in nature, it advances the high purposes of the polis (not just life but good life) and, when properly practised, amounts to an exercise of authority that tends to the well-being of the ruled as well as the ruler (though not in equal measure, 1.1259b18-20).

Many see a great big muddle here. This sophisticated philosopher has conjured up a stilted and weak account of a soul deficient in reason and of how best to tend to this soul's well-being so that he can cast familiar patterns of human behaviour that his own moral theory would otherwise easily recognise as oppressive and exploitative from the point of view of the slave and disgraceful from that of the master as activity that sustains relationships of *mutual* benefit to masters and slaves. Some question whether his readers should even assume that Aristotle sincerely believes what he presents as his own view. Perhaps he is in the grip of ideological thinking? Isn't he really just manufacturing philosophical cover for an institution that denigrates labourers and barbarians so that there can be a leisured sector (of which he is a member) to practise political action or undertake the contemplative life? Surely he is a self-conscious partisan of the upper classes abusing philosophy for political ends? Or perhaps a reflexive embrace of a form of racism can explain the mess? He proposes, after all, that 'natural slaves' populate barbarian lands in Europe and

Asia, not Greece. Perhaps the theory of slavery is a deliberate or even unwitting mystification of Greek arrogance?

Schofield and Kraut both plunge right into these difficult questions. Both show that, however repulsive, basing an account of natural slavery on a conception of a soul deficient in reason does not produce a stilted and weak argument inconsistent with Aristotle's theory of well-being. Kraut systematically examines such things as Aristotle's understanding of the cognitive capacities and dysfunction peculiar to the natural slave, why slavery and not another condition (wage earner) best suits such a character, the idea of slave virtue and friendship between master and slave, and how it is possible to imagine that slaves are not harmed by their enslavement – and he shows how all of this is even consistent with the possibility that a master can legitimately offer a slave his freedom as a reward for good behaviour over time.<sup>9</sup> Schofield too examines Aristotle's elaboration of the diversity in nature, including the likelihood that there are some persons who are better off being ruled than ruling, the distinguishing features of such souls, how they participate in virtues like temperance, why it is not necessary to attribute feeble-mindedness to them, why master/slave and not a form of paternalism benefits them, and, most importantly, how the master/slave relation models a distinctive form of authority that stands in stark contrast to both domination by force and political rule. Like Kraut, he concludes that this conception of a natural slave sits comfortably in the Aristotelian philosophical system.

But why is Aristotle interested in slavery at all? Are there philosophical reasons to take up the topic in general and the assessment of contemporary practices of slavery in particular? Schofield maintains that Aristotle has no philosophical interest at all in justifying contemporary institutions of slavery, only in dismantling wrongheaded ways of understanding the practice of political rule. In particular, Schofield sees Aristotle's introduction of a theory of slavery not as an effort to defend an institution but as the 'launch' of a philosophical case for a plural view of the nature of rule in opposition to Plato's 'Unitarian conception'.<sup>10</sup> In his view, Aristotle 'gratuitously' peppers forceful theoretical arguments about rule with unfortunate expressions of an 'unargued' personal attitude towards the institutions of contemporary slavery. These unreflective comments indicate that Aristotle indeed assumed that most slaves in his own society were natural slaves. Schofield accepts that his comfort with this assumption was 'no doubt' due ultimately to 'the bias we might expect in a slave-owning culture which looked outside its own borders and ethnic identity for its supply of slaves' and he straightforwardly calls these passages evidence that Aristotle exhibits 'a nasty case of false consciousness'. But, he insists, it does not 'infect' Aristotle's theory of slavery itself.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the presence of unargued expressions of bias regarding contemporary institutions only obscures the real driving concern in the passage – undermining 'the equation of domination with political rule'.<sup>12</sup> Schofield

has a strong case. The opening of the *Politics* makes it very clear that Aristotle's paramount concern in this work is to demonstrate that his signature mode of inquiry can make it manifest that a pervasive view of the nature of political rule is wrong (*ouk aléthē*, Pol. 1.1252a18). The erroneous view that so exercises him is one that holds that the statesman, king, head of household and master of slaves have identical natures and that the difference between them is only one of degree (the size of the group over whom they rule), not one of kind (1.1252a7-12). For Schofield, the discussion of slavery kicks off Aristotle's account of why it is instead the case that the differences among these forms of rule are indeed matters of kind and not degree.

Schofield sees that some practical concerns and an orientation toward contemporary institutions do follow from a crisp distinction between mastership and political rule (rule of free men). Specifically, it clarifies the aims of true politics for the already politically ambitious, urges the virtuous who ordinarily scoff at political engagement to give it a try, and challenges people's attachments to commonly held attitudes that identify domination with happiness. But, in Schofield's view, a defence of the particular form slavery took in his own society does not follow from Aristotle's philosophy of rule. When Aristotle takes up that concern (that is, praises contemporary Greek institutions and suggests reforms), in Schofield's view he is not arguing about the nature of rule but rather is unphilosophically reproducing common biases.

Kraut has a different account of Aristotle's interest in slavery in the *Politics*. On his view, Aristotle does indeed have reason to elaborate a philosophically rigorous defence of slavery as an institution. If he could not justify slavery, Kraut points out, he 'would have been forced to announce to the Greek world that its political institutions ... rested on resources that could not be justly acquired or used'.<sup>13</sup> Aristotle recognises, Kraut suggests, that any defence of the polis as a viable, natural and indeed ideal political formation had to include a case for slavery. I would add that Aristotle also recognises that any argument for the polis as a locus for the practice of moral excellence had to cast the ubiquity of slaves in its daily life in an approving light.

That an attachment to the polis motivates Aristotle's attention to slavery may seem to confirm that a form of unthinking bias (parochialism) is at work in the *Politics*. And this does indeed seem to be the way Kraut interprets his own observation. He suggests that Aristotle's defence of the polis and of its practices of slavery are dispiriting signs that even Aristotle sometimes succumbs to the 'all too human tendency to avoid upheavals of thought' and that he might very well be a 'victim of these complacent habits of mind'.<sup>14</sup> But I think it is a sign of something else. Though the *Politics* is often read as (notoriously) oblivious to the contemporary Macedonian conquests and current threats to the polis as a durable form of political organisation,<sup>15</sup> his sustained attention to slavery both as a concept

and institution suggests otherwise. For example, in the era of Macedonian military and political ambitions and their attendant embrace of Hellenising cultural goals, what precisely might have been the reach of the 'Greek world' to which Kraut worries Aristotle would have to announce the incoherence of the polis as a political form? And of what importance might such a revelation be to the 'barbarians'? Did he defend the polis philosophically to avoid an uncomfortable disturbance in his own thought or actively to do combat with contemporary advocates of rival formations?

Aristotle's *Politics* does on occasion betray a heightened sense of the imperilled state of the polis as a political formation. We find evidence of this in the anxieties that attend his treatment of the apparently innocuous issue of the significance of population size in the discussion of the ideal city in *Politics* book 7. He explicitly says that he wishes to reduce the importance of population size in the analysis of politics. Population size alone, he insists, cannot signal greatness. A great state (*megalé polis*) is not the same thing as a state with a large population (*poluanthrópos polis*, 7.1326a25). Why would this variable be of such special concern to him? It is I think an indication of Aristotle's awareness of the challenging new forms of political organisation emerging in his time and his interest in showing that his mode of political science can pinpoint their defects as well as the excellence of a well-ordered polis. This concern is evident, for instance, in his critical discussion of a new form of kingship in which a single person is sovereign on every issue and governs at his own discretion, and stunningly, is able to exercise authority over a whole city a whole race and possibly over several races (*poleós kai ethnós enos é pleonón*, 3.1285b33). This passage suggests the example of Alexander's ambitions.<sup>16</sup> Aristotle may also have contemporary experiences of Philip's ambitions and Alexander's conquests in mind when he worries about the intense pressures on contemporary Greek political communities to be huge in size in order to enjoy prosperity as well as a reputation for greatness and success. He explicitly wonders whether this new size requirement will mean that the only type of polis still able to come into being is one with a democratic constitution (3.1286b20-5).

Because Aristotle describes at length the peculiar pathologies likely to infect the kind of democracy that is 'last in point of time to come into being' (4.1293a1-2), we can infer why this limiting condition for the future of the polis disturbs him. He views large democratic cities as prosperous communities in which the rich are very busy managing personal estates and the poor are at leisure to participate in deliberative activities because they will receive pay for service (from the public treasury). As a consequence of the poor citizens being both numerous and politically active, in Aristotle's view, in this type of polis the multitude's preferences, not the laws, will become sovereign (*kurion*, 4.1293a11) to ill effects.<sup>17</sup> Later in the *Politics* he addresses another peculiar pathology that characterises an excessively large city with a democratic constitutional structure and political culture

(both are implied by the term *politeia*). Owing to the lack of personal knowledge of one another, visiting foreigners and metics (resident aliens) will be able to escape detection and 'share' in the *politeia* (assume the privileges of citizenship) (7.1326b15-25). In practice, that is, subversions of birth as the usual, formal criteria for citizenship will likely occur, rendering the *politeia* vulnerable to precipitous change.<sup>18</sup> It is striking that Aristotle so clearly identifies a practice that could favour him personally – he was himself a metic during his years of residence at Athens – as a sign of a diseased polity. In this case, the prospect of personal benefit does not generate a bias that interferes with his philosophical reasoning. Instead, without hesitation he applies his theory of 'the causes that destroy each form of constitution' (5.1301a22) articulated in *Politics* book 5 (and derived from analysis of the collection of constitutional histories of 158 Greek cities produced under his direction at the Lyceum) to this circumstance. In fact, he shows no inclination at all to obstruct observation of this subversive activity. It occupies pride of place in *Constitution of Athens* attributed to him, which is the only surviving example of the storied collection of constitutional histories. Specifically, it opens the account of the 'present constitution' (*Ath. Pol.* 92) with an explicit account of the manner in which the Athenians try to manage precisely this problem (secretive subversions of birth as a criteria). It recounts the process that accompanies the presentation of young men for enrolment in the (deme-based) registry of citizens when they come of age, highlighting the several opportunities it provides for the exposure of imposters.

Aristotle's work betrays interest in the vulnerability of the polis as a living form in another way as well. In his discussion of how the legal structure and mores of a polis can be shaped to produce an ideal city (*Politics* book 7), he seeks to undermine the influence over ideas of greatness exercised by known examples of sovereign entities that control huge populations and vast territories. In particular, he argues that when most people imagine that a prosperous state must be large (*megalé*) they mistakenly identify *megalé* with the 'numerical magnitude of the population' (7.1326a12). He concedes, however, that in all probability it is today impossible to escape the identification of the size of a population with a community's greatness (7.1326a17). Since this is so, he offers, it is necessary to attend to the correct indicator (*sêmeion*, 7.1326a23) of great size. To judge size correctly, he proposes, requires more than counting the bodies residing within a sovereign territory. It requires the critical analytical skills of a theorist and empirical political scientist. Specifically, it requires distinguishing between the special component parts of which a state consists and understanding their relation to the practice of excellence. And so, the inevitably large numbers of slaves, metics and foreigners that will populate a polis cannot account for its greatness (7.1326a18-20). Instead, the sign (*sêmeion*) of greatness must be the size of that portion of the population that practices statesmanship or political

rule (7.1326a20-2). The remaining discussion of the ideal city in *Politics* book 7 addresses whether the various necessary sectors of a population, specifically, leisured property holders, citizens of modest wealth, artisans, tradesmen, farmers, labourers, etc., should be citizen, free or slave, that is, whether they should count among the active citizens, the portion of the population that determines the true size of the state. And, though he concludes that in an ideal polis only a fraction of the whole population domiciled in its territory will be citizens and thus count in the calculation of true size, the upshot of this story is that no matter how small this number, it will be sufficient to establish the superiority of a polis to all other known and newly emerging forms of political organisation. These rival forms would include the ones that appear to many to be especially distinctive and indeed impressive precisely for their exceptional size. Aristotle's theory of natural slavery and the distinction between master-ship and political rule enable him to deny any standing as an empirical indicator of greatness to an uncritical calculation of population size and territorial expanse. Instead, on his view, a vast empire in control of a large population of natural slaves or sovereign over of a mixed population in which the natural rulers among them enjoy little opportunity to practise true political activity or philosophy will, at best, rank as a very small, not particularly great state, if indeed it qualifies as a state at all.<sup>19</sup>

#### How does Aristotle determine precisely who qualifies as a natural slave?

So far I have tried to show that Aristotle's theory of natural slavery is not a tangle of assertions at odds with basic tenets of his moral and political theory but a set of reasonable (though repugnant), intertwined propositions that fit with and at times shore up his philosophical system. But is his idea of precisely who qualifies as a slave a great muddle and just a function of bias? In this section I examine how Aristotle conducts that part of his investigation, reaching the conclusion that natural slaves populate the European and Asian (barbarian) nations.

Aristotle takes it as manifest (*phanerón*, 1.1255a3) that among the persons that inhabit the earth, some are slaves by personal constitution and character of soul (that is, by nature) and some are by nature free. To craft a just state, for Aristotle, then, it is necessary to sort people into these categories. But, he also takes it to be manifest that the intentions of nature (*bouletai hé phusis*, at 1.1254b27) are not perfectly clear in individual empirical cases. A condition of soul is not easily visible. It must be inferred from empirical observation. To make correct inferences requires the kind of 'practised faculty' of judgment that Aristotle identifies as the product of wide personal experience coupled with the enlarged experience that study of collections of empirical data can provide (*Nicomachean Ethics* 10.1181a10-14, b1-20). To get it right requires, that is, a grasp of political

science. And so, he takes it to be a chief task of political science to make the intension of nature apparent to rational people. The practice of political science must enable the location of a sign in the empirical evidence that allows a reliable inference. And that is the way his discussion of how one can determine precisely who qualifies as a slave proceeds.

Aristotle begins by dismissing body type as a reliable indicator of free or slave by nature even though natural slaves will be especially suited to hard physical labour. As a matter of fact, he acknowledges, 'slaves often have the bodies of freemen' (1.1254b33). Moreover, it does not even occur to him to consider skin colour as a useful sign. He does not trust physical markers much at all. Instead, he assumes that an observable form of human activity must supply the basis for a reasonable inference about the slavish or free condition of a human soul. The activity to which he devotes the most extensive attention is victory and loss in war. Is victory in war – that is, the successful use of force – a reliable sign of the superior justice of a particular state (and thus superior condition of its members' souls) and is loss in war is a reliable sign of a state populated by naturally slavish souls (1.1255a12-15)? Answering yes, he suggests, lies at the heart of a common and problematic belief in the justice of the widespread conventional practice of obtaining slaves from a pool of prisoners of war or of selling such prisoners into slavery. Answering no, on the other hand, lies at the core of a belief that slavery is only a legal condition dependent upon misfortune or accident and that it therefore cannot be just. And so, when Aristotle rejects conquest as a sign of just rule and natural freedom, Aristotle is agreeing with contemporary opponents of slavery to a certain extent. He even seems to have some fun exposing the logical contortions that contemporary proponents of slavery by conquest must perform in order to assert what they really want to assert, that is, that barbarian prisoners of war positively deserve such status but that Greek prisoners of war must merely endure it (1.1255a25-b5). Credibly to propose that anyone – Greek or barbarian – *deserves* slavery, Aristotle argues, one must locate a more reliable indicator of condition of soul than prisoner of war status.<sup>20</sup> Conquest as an indicator produces an unacceptable measure of ambiguity (*dichós*, 1.1255a3) in the determination of individual cases.

Though Aristotle does not argue for it explicitly and systematically in the context of the discussion of slavery in *Politics* book 1, a key later passage suggests that he believes that he has indeed located a reliable sign. In particular, he asserts that one can infer that barbarians are 'servile in nature' from the observable fact that they 'endure despotism without resentment' (*hupomenousi tén despotikên archên ouden duscherainontes*, 3.1285a22). The endurance of despotism without resentment signals a critical lack of deliberative capacity on the part of this population. Not surprisingly, this sign of slavish nature dependably excludes Greeks. Indeed, Aristotle uses this criterion to compare Greeks and barbarians, concluding that barbarians are 'more servile' (*doulíkóteroi*,

3.1285a20). But even though the assertion appears rooted in bias, it is still the case that this proposition intelligently fits with key principles of his moral and political theory and does not create a muddle. As Kraut has observed, 'The thesis that by their very nature Asians and Europeans lack the capacity for deliberation suits his purposes perfectly; it locates the superiority of the Greeks in their capacity to deliberate, a capacity made evident by the greater maturity of Greek politics, as compared with the primitive [despotic] politics of Asia and Europe.'<sup>21</sup>

The ability of endurance of despotism to signal natural slavishness is also the assumption lying behind Aristotle's invocation of tragic poetry. Very near the start of the *Politics* (1.1252b5-10), he cites line 1400 from Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, 'This meet that Greeks should rule barbarians.' What is the implication here? What does this relation satisfy? The line suggests, Aristotle explains, that the poets understand that barbarians and slaves are 'the same in nature'. They know this because they recognise that barbarians equate all forms of rule exercised in the household (over slaves, children and wives) with domination. They hold exactly the erroneous view of rule (*archê*) that the *Politics* sets as its main task to dispute and disrupt – that is, that various forms of rule differ in only degree, not kind. The poets understood, he proposes, that the way barbarians run their families suggests that they are a nation bereft of 'natural rulers'. That is, they are bereft of free men who, through political struggle, design structures that require ruling and being ruled in turn and enable the practice of moral excellence. How else, Aristotle might have reasoned, can one explain the absence in their histories (as far as he knew) of any resistance to tyranny and of stories of political battles that aimed to establish forms of rule other than domination?

The surprisingly extensive quotations from Solon's lyric poetry in the Aristotelian *Constitution of Athens* (*Ath. Pol.* 5-12) also suggest an interest in identifying evidence among the Greeks of endurance of, or resistance to despotism and in interpreting that evidence as signifiers of slave or free conditions of soul. According to the account in the *Constitution of Athens*, the very origin of the Athenian *politeia* resides in the Athenians' response to a civil crisis over the pervasive presence of relations of mastership (*despoteia*) among the various strata of the local freeborn Athenian population. But, the *Constitution of Athens* demonstrates, the Athenian populace did not suffer domestic despotism lightly or without resentment. Athens has a long and illustrious history of civil strife over the relative power of the rich and poor, as evidenced by Solon's poetry. Indeed Aristotle stresses that Athens was the site of intense civil unrest dating at least to the time of Solon (the earlier chapters of the text are lost) owing to the fact that the poor were the 'slaves of the rich'. And he does not mean this in a metaphorical sense. At that time debt bondage was commonplace. If the ordinary people could not pay their debts, Aristotle reports, they and their children could be seized and sold into slavery (2.2). He extensively cites

Solon's poems to provide evidence for what he treats as the organising principle of Athenian political development – the Athenians resolved strife and achieved a measure of domestic peace by struggling politically to introduce order and justice, not by suffering the establishment of an all-powerful, dominant authority. Aristotle recounts the episodes of tyranny at Athens (Peisistratids, the Thirty) but recalling them works to celebrate their overthrow and the city's adoption of ever-stronger measures against tyranny resurfacing. Tyrant slaying is part of the Athenian civic self-image (e.g. veneration of Harmodius and Aristogeiton<sup>22</sup>) marked by their overthrow. In Aristotle's view, Athenian history supplies evidence of the free nature of the Athenians. We can only suppose that he could have based a generalisation regarding the free nature of all the Greeks on some familiarity with similar indications of histories of resistance to despotism in the constitutional histories of various Greek poleis. Perhaps that was one point he took away from his examination not only of Athenian history but of the (now lost) constitutional histories of 157 other Greek cities that his Lyceum is said to have compiled under Aristotle's supervision expressly as aids to the conduct of political analysis (*Nicomachean Ethics* 10.1181b20).

Another notorious passage about Greek superiority also exhibits Aristotle's empirical mode of inquiry concerning the determination of the identity of natural slaves. Aristotle (in)famously attributes Greek superiority at least in part to the fact that 'the Greek race' (*tôn Hellenôn genos*, *Pol.* 7.1327b29) occupies 'a middle place geographically' (not too cold and not too hot when compared with too cold Europe and too hot Asia) and that its population is thus both spirited and intelligent in nice proportions. The European peoples (*ethnê*), on the other hand, are 'more spirited but somewhat deficient in intelligence and skill so that they continue comparatively free but lacking in political organisation and capacity to rule their neighbours' while the Asian peoples 'are intelligent and skilful but lack spirit so that they are in continuous subjection and slavery' (7.1327b20-30). But notice that having already determined that the barbarian races' endurance of despotism is a good sign of their slavish natures, what he is doing in this passage about climate is trying to account for the observable variety among slavish natures. Indeed, that his main concern here is to identify a variable that accounts for a good deal of the observable variety of states in the world is evident from the fact that he considers climate to be a differentiating force not only among the states populated by slavish natures but among the free Greek states as well. He does not leave this implicit, but says, 'the same diversity also exists among the Greek races (*ethnê*) compared with one another' (7.1327b34-45). This troubling passage about the influence of climate on human nature is thus not part of Aristotle's argument about the empirical basis for inferring, on a case-by-case basis, whether a soul is free or slave. He does not claim that climate is anything like a reliable sign of that. But he does accept that it

can account for some of the clearly visible variety inside that class. And this variety is important to examine, in Aristotle's view, because it can suggest which specific populations from among the naturally occurring diversity of slavish natures will likely be more or less 'manageable' when placed in a relation with a class of natural rulers, that is, when brought to Greece.

### Is there a measure of critical potential in the theory of natural slavery?

Perhaps surprisingly, Aristotle never appeals to the apparent omnipresence (through history and cross-culturally) of slavery in one form or another to support his view that it is a condition rooted in nature. This is likely because, as a sensitive observer and scientist, he suspects that many factors might account for such a condition in the world, chief among them being the prevalence of war and the pervasive practice of enslaving (or selling) prisoners, as well as the frequency of violent crime, banditry, abandonment and abductions and the development of a legal and illegal slave trade. His concern is to infer from the largest possible data set why slavery is a natural condition, not why it is a widespread one. Whether it is also widespread and whether it is so justly are, in principle, separate questions. Conveniently for him, of course, the proper examination of the question, 'Who deserves to be a slave?' issues in an answer, 'barbarians', that corresponds to a sufficiently large set of (close by) persons so as to provide the relatively easy delivery of an adequate supply of labour to the Greek city-states. And so it appears that, however philosophically interesting, his account of slavery does not generate much of a critique of contemporary practices.

That is not exactly right, however. He does deliver a strong critique of slavery by force, which practice was indeed common in his time (that is, a critique of slavery by an imposed legal standing deriving from some legally acceptable misfortune like debt or loss at war). As a result, we can imagine that Aristotle's view could motivate an upstanding slave owner to ask 'Is my slave deserving?' His view does not require the slave-owner to conduct such an inquiry, of course. Aristotle's theory is comfortable with the identification of empirical signs that support a reasonable inference about groups of persons. For example, it proposes that the barbarians' observable endurance of despotism makes that class of people a good bet for slaves by nature. Accordingly, in Aristotle's view, free men can legitimately treat certain group memberships as proxies for identification as slave by nature. Nevertheless, his theory does leave room for the possibility of interrogating the inference.

The logic behind this small measure of critical potential resident in his theory of slavery is most visible in Aristotle's discussion of whether hereditary citizenship is just (3.1275b23ff).<sup>25</sup> In that section of the *Politics*

he reiterates that citizenship involves participation in the policy-making and judicial functions of a state and should be limited to those who have a certain character of soul (capacity for deliberation) but observes that, in practice, citizenship is usually limited to the children of citizens. He asks, 'Are such children rightly or wrongly given citizenship?' Is descent a legitimate proxy for a free nature?<sup>26</sup> Aristotle even identifies descent as a politically efficacious but still *hasty* practical definition of citizenship (*politikós kai tacheós*, 3.1275b25). He draws attention primarily to the question of colonisation and the participation of metics, foreigners and freed slaves in the peopling of new cities (3.1274b27).<sup>28</sup> Later generations of citizens of these colonies can, he notes, be descendants of classes of non-citizens. The first citizens of these colonies had to have been made citizens on some basis other than birth. And so, in some cases it appears allowable to interrogate the usual criterion, descent. In this case it is likely that Aristotle is thinking about how foreigners, metics and freed slaves of Greek ethnicity could start a new hereditary line of citizens, surely an attractive possibility for these often accomplished and ambitious members of the polis (and recall that this group would have included Aristotle himself). It is unlikely that he is here challenging the capacity of barbarian heritage to be a convenient and reliable sign of slavish nature. But the point remains that since Aristotle's view of individual cases rests on inferences, his conclusions remain, at least potentially, empirically falsifiable. Indeed Kraut goes so far as to stress that since Aristotle thinks it is unjust to enslave anyone who has the capacity to deliberate, once we drop the assumption that there are whole peoples in whom this incapacity is widespread as untenable, we emerge with the result that slavery is an unjust institution. 'This is not Aristotle's conclusion,' Kraut reminds us, 'but it is the one to which his political philosophy is driven, when it abandons the empirical claim of the natural slavishness of Europeans and Asians.'<sup>29</sup>

Kraut also rightly stresses that Aristotle valorises self-sufficiency, citizenship and philosophical activity so highly that his theory cannot be accused of glossing over the impoverishments of a life of slavery. It highlights what a life in slavery lacks no matter how comfortable a slave's material existence may be, how knowledgeable and sophisticated a slave might become regarding the exercise of certain technical skills, nor how indispensable a part of the achievement of excellence of the polis his contributions might be. This is an especially important point in regards to Aristotle because a key element of his theory of natural slavery is that slaves by nature benefit greatly from slavery. The critical potential of his theory comes to the fore, Kraut points out, when we compare it to Stoic philosophy, which argued that a fully flourishing human life was indeed compatible with slavery.<sup>30</sup> In Aristotle's view, in contrast, whatever benefit slavery offers the natural slave it cannot compare to the enjoyment of freedom experienced by a natural ruler. As the distinguished sociologist of slavery Orlando Patterson has noted, Aristotle's view renders apparent



the fact that a slave enjoys 'no independent social existence'. Aristotle makes it plain that a slave exists 'only through, and for, the master; he is, in other words, naturally alienated ... and in a perpetual state of dishonor'.<sup>28</sup> Aristotle's theory highlights this assessment of a slave's life even as it defends the justice of the institution.

Aristotle exhibits a brilliant, nearly unfettered sociological imagination in his political works and yet it never even occurs to him that a free society could be based on anything but slave labour. What accounts for this failure of imagination? I don't think that an arrogant sense of Greek superiority and concomitant need to assert the lowly condition of barbarian peoples can explain this failure. Neither can the claim that he did not escape the profile of his own times. His discussion of the sociological conditions that would most likely lead to citizens being able to navigate the sources of revolution and thus enable their constitution to persist through time includes a striking act of political imagination. He proposes that a 'community administered by the middle class' is best (4.1295a20-96a22). Nowhere in Greek history could Aristotle point to such an empirical reality. He could observe that perhaps the most exemplary individual citizen in the history of Athens possessed a middle quantity of wealth (e.g. Solon at *Ath. Pol.* 5.3<sup>29</sup>) and could point to the presence of some middle-class citizens in large cities (*Pol.* 4.1296a12), but he could not point to economic forces or structures that could drive the development of a sizeable population of 'middle class citizens', let alone identify a city in which such a class held sway over political life. The rule of the middle class was a wishful fiction.<sup>30</sup> Rather, what best explains Aristotle's inability to conceive of a free society based on anything but a slave economy is his contempt for physical labour and utter rejection of any possibility that a fully virtuous and good life could be consistent with any experience of manual labour or service to another. Citizen virtue, he says in no uncertain terms, does not belong to every citizen or every free man, 'but only to those who are released from menial occupations' (3.1278a10). Substantial leisure, he holds, is an essential condition of political freedom. Sadly, Aristotle does not seem to have used his acute powers of observation to uncover the pathologies that would likely attend a slave economy, including the violence and cruelty that accompany the trade in human bodies and souls. Sadly, it was enough for him that in an ideal city all mercantile activity, and presumably that means the slave trade, would be carried out by the lower orders of free men (foreigners, metics, former slaves).

#### Is Aristotle's theory of natural slavery pernicious?

Moses Finley reminds us that the presence of a defence of slavery in this most famous philosopher's body of work rarely added much more than 'learned embroidery' to the main argument for modern slavery, which 'rested on Scripture'.<sup>31</sup> This is largely true, save for some propaganda

produced during a brief period leading up to the US Civil War. In this case, American advocates of race-based slavery explicitly appeal to Aristotle to argue that that slavery is not simply a 'necessary evil' (as patriots had maintained for years) but is instead, as John C. Calhoun the Senator from South Carolina put it, a 'positive good'.<sup>32</sup> Some Southern intellectuals even argue that the modern case for slavery represented a significant advance over Aristotle, while remaining firmly Aristotelian in spirit. In particular, some argue that Aristotle's theory of natural slavery remains compelling except for one detail – his empirical data was faulty and thus he made a wrong inference regarding the identity of the group that best qualifies as natural slaves. In their view, Aristotle erred when he abandoned the possibility that an easily visible physical trait like race could indeed be a reliable indicator of the (inferior) character of soul. For example, in 1850 George Frederick Holmes published an article entitled, 'Observations on a Passage in the *Politics* of Aristotle relative to Slavery' in the prestigious *Southern Literary Messenger* in which he proposed not simply that Southern practice was in keeping with Aristotle's understanding of slavery (specifically, that 'the relation of master and slave is, in the full extent of Aristotle's proposition, both natural and expedient'), but that 'in our own day' we better understand how to read the empirical evidence precisely to determine who qualifies as natural slaves and masters. He lauds Aristotle and the Greeks generally for 'paying strict attention to the characteristics of different races' in their efforts to classify people into categories (by nature slave or free). He also immediately notes, however, that the Greeks were 'erroneous' in the application of that 'great principle'. Only in 'modern times', he stresses, have the different 'functions' of the different races become 'definite and clear'. He appeals to a notion of the march of history as well as to specific characteristics of contemporary society. He offers a narration of ancient and contemporary history as evidence for the Negro race's 'utter incapacity' to live in freedom. In contrast, he suggests, observation of history shows that 'the various Caucasian races ... have wholly or in part been subject at times to a servile condition, but with the progress of civilization they have uniformly advanced, and have extricated themselves from slavery by the exhibition of an aptitude for freedom'.<sup>33</sup> These Southern intellectuals found it possible to follow Aristotle's mode of inquiry to produce an update of the content of what they consider to be an Aristotelian conclusion. These intellectuals found reasoning with Aristotle attractive also because they share his unequivocal opposition to the very possibility that political freedom could be consistent with a working life (which they always associated with labouring generally and not just drudgery). They drew on Aristotle to attack Northern elites for allowing free white brethren to suffer 'wage slavery' instead of embracing Negro slavery as a path to white freedom.<sup>34</sup> These examples show that interest in Aristotle among Southern intellectual elites is not superficial. As Harvey Wish observed in 1949,

'Aristotle proved a major prop to antebellum Southern romanticism for the leisured class ideal'.<sup>35</sup>

While it was intended in its own time to be a (reformist) critique of unjust forms of slavery by force, a part of a theory of rule, and as an essential element in the articulation of foundation for the polis (in contrast to other emergent imperial political formations) as the best basis for a free society in which a leisured elite would engage in equal citizenship, Aristotle's theory of natural slavery and empirical case for the identity of slavish natures may have actually inaugurated a particularly pernicious way of thinking about slavery. As the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville observes in his writings about his travels in the United States in the 1830s, the fact that slavery in America is not based on legal standing alone (which could allow a freed slave's former status to go undetected), but instead on the observation of race and its interpretation as a signal of an inferior condition of soul that is said to render one fit for and capable of benefiting from enslavement, makes it likely that this nation's specific experience with slavery will have terribly persistent and horribly debilitating sociological and psychological effects long after it (eventually) achieves abolition, legal equality and even effective black enfranchisement.<sup>36</sup> He was, of course, dead right. But the point I want to stress in bringing to mind these modern references is that we must scrutinise Aristotle's mode of inquiry – and not simply his record of having accepted contemporary opinions regarding Greek superiority over the barbarians – in order to gain access to the peculiarities of Aristotle's reading of slavery and the shape of his political imaginary and its reception in modern times.

#### Notes

1. Williams (1993) 117; Patterson (1991) 162; Garnsey (1996) 125, 107.
2. Dietz (2009) 3 summarises this perspective: 'Aristotelian political theory exemplifies a conventional acceptance of Greek cultural prejudices in the service of an exclusionary, racist, sexist, slave-owning political status quo.' She goes on to interrogate that view.
3. Schofield (2005) 91, 100, 105.
4. Kraut (2002) 278.
5. Translations from the *Politics* are from Rackham (1977).
6. See Frank (2005) and Mara (1995) for discussion of the central role of activity in Aristotle's understanding of nature.
7. That Aristotle offers a remarkably insightful account of the sociology of the master/slave relation and of slavery as a condition of 'social death' is not contested. See Patterson (1991), 162: 'what he has left us is a first rate sociology of it [master/slave relation]'.
8. Citations of the Greek text are from Ross (1957), available online at *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (2009). On this Aristotelian phrase see also Thalmann, above p. 72.
9. Kraut (2002) 295-6.

10. Schofield (2005) 106.
11. Schofield (2005) 110.
12. Schofield (2005) 109.
13. Kraut (2002) 279.
14. Kraut (2002) 279.
15. Aristotle is assumed to have failed to absorb the 'transience of the polis' (MacIntyre [1981] 149). I owe recollection of MacIntyre's phrasing to Dietz (2009) 4.

16. For discussion of how this exceptional and emergent form Aristotle terms *pambasileia* (e.g. *Pol.* 3.1287a9) recalls the ambitions of the Macedonian kings, see Dietz (2009).

17. Aristotle identifies the control of judicial and legislative functions by the poor as the defining characteristic of the final, most thoroughly democratic, incarnation of the Athenian *politeia* (*Ath. Pol.* 41.2). Aristotle surmises from observations like this that the best kind of population for a democracy is an agricultural one. He stresses that in this case the many are enfranchised and content but far too busy to tend to political affairs, which they leave to the leisured elite by default. See *Pol.* 1318b5.

18. A instability in the effective criteria for citizenship status can harm a *politeia* by making it vulnerable to revolutionary change (as when a city with a depleted population due to war or disease enfranchises resident foreigners and freed slaves and becomes more democratic, or when civil strife leads to partisans trying to shape the demographic balance of a city by (in some cases) enfranchising non-citizen populations who fought with them or (in other cases) disenfranchising lower status compatriots who dilute their influence). See *Pol.* 1.1275b37.

19. It may become an *ethnos*, but it is unlikely to become a *polis* because a multitude assembled by conquest cannot easily establish and come to possess a *politeia* (*Pol.* 7.1326b5-6).

20. The question of desert comes up again when he discusses rule and imperial expansion. 'It is not proper', he argues, 'to attempt to exercise despotic government over all people [i.e. mastership on a grand scale], but only over those suited for it, just as it is not right to hunt human beings for food or sacrifice, but only the game suitable for this purpose' (*Pol.* 7.1324b35-40). The theory of slavery suggests a critique of the imperial designs of the Macedonians over Greek *poleis*.

21. Kraut (2002) 303.

22. I address the part of Harmodius and Aristogeiton in the Athenian civic self-image in Monson (2000). Note that Aristotle's *Ath. Pol.* lingers on this episode and it remembrance by the Athenians, arguing that its interpretation is a paramount importance. See Frank and Monson (2009).

23. It also drives the discussion of the enfranchisement of metics, foreigners and former slaves as part of revolutionary change in a *politeia* (Cleisthenes' enrolment of many non-citizens in his tribes after the expulsion of the tyrants and Thrasylbulus' attempt to enfranchise many after the defeat of the Thirty) or as the result of a problematic depletion or expansion of the citizen population due to prosperity, disease or war (e.g. Pericles' reform of citizenship laws). See *Pol.* 3.1275b35ff.

24. He also challenges parentage and descent as good indicators of the measure of moral virtue a child can be expected to exhibit (*Pol.* 1.1255a1-5).

25. Subversion of the restrictions on membership and shifting practical opportunities for metics and former slaves to gain full membership in an existing polis are considered sources of the destruction of a *politeia*. See discussion of the pathologies that threaten large-scale poleis on pp. 138-9 above.

26. Kraut (2002) 303.

27. Kraut (2002) 304-5.  
 28. Patterson (1991) 10.  
 29. 'Solon was one of the leading men by birth and reputation but middle class in wealth and position', *te d'ousia kai tois pragmatist ton meson*, *Ath. Pol.* 5.3, tr. Moore (1975), reprinted in Everson (1996).  
 30. The constitution of the 5000 described in *Ath. Pol.* (30-3) might be thought to provide an example in history of such a possibility. But Aristotle clearly says the restriction of power to this class did not actually occur and that the constitutional reforms needed to empower them never made it out of draft form (31.1). The *Ath. Pol.* identifies the rule of the 5000 with an idea that failed precisely because of the absence of the material conditions (in this case a particular stock) necessary for its realisation.  
 31. Finley (1980) 18.  
 32. Calhoun's 'Speech on the Reception of Abolition Petitions' delivered in the US Senate on 6 February 1837, reprinted in McKirrick (1963) at 13. That Aristotle had a direct influence on Calhoun's thinking is evident from a letter he wrote in 1840 which included the following: 'I would advise a young man with your views ... to read the best elementary treatise on Government, including Aristotle's, which I regard as among the best.' Quoted in Harrington (1989) 65. On Calhoun and the impact of Aristotle on American pro-slavery arguments see further the Introduction by Hall and especially the chapter by Monoson in Alston, Hall and McConnell (2011).  
 33. Holmes (1850) 200.  
 34. Fitzhugh (1854); Hammond (1858).  
 35. Wish (1949) 254.  
 36. de Tocqueville (2003 [1835/1840] 326-50).

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