



TOPIC 1: Debate on values

Teaching and learning aids

Aristotle (384-322 B. C.)

Aristotle does not start from constructions of abstract thought, but from the actual existing state in its historical form as developed from the Greek polis. It is in this community that a man's character and his actions are formed. The State is defined as a community of values, which gives the individual the opportunity for his own best development. For Aristotle life in the state community is a constitutional element in his human existence. (T 1/1)

To be sure, this state does not simply just exist, but has a purpose, which again and again requires new efforts. So it is that state takes on an educative function. (T 1/2)

For this reason Aristotle's ideas are called the teleological approach (from Greek. telos = end).

The state makes it possible for people to attain the "good" and "noble" life but also expects the corresponding contributions from its members.

This gives rise to two questions:

1. Who defines what constitutes a good or happy life?

It would be going too far here to repeat all that Aristotle wrote on conditions that have an effect on everyone who strives toward the highest good or happiness. In any case, a man's own reason and certain qualities of his soul - virtues - play a particular role in this. Virtues such as courage, prudence, generosity, justice are acquired through the right kind of upbringing and this is largely dependent on correct legislation; good laws make available to the greatest possible number of people training in good qualities of character, which in turn contribute directly to the good life. (T 1/3)

2. How is participation in law-making determined?

The government of one's own kind is called by Aristotle political rule and must be learnt expressly. Only those who have themselves been governed well are also able to govern well. Aristotle, to be sure, leaves ruling rather to individuals, who must nevertheless be guided by two things: on the one hand the goals of the state and on the other the legislation of a constitution in which participation of citizens in law-making is guaranteed.

Therefore the only person who may legitimately govern is the person who has given the citizens a share in law-making, whereby Aristotle estimates the power of judgement of the masses to be greater than that of a small number of the best. All laws should, moreover, respect the constitution in order to be really just.

(T 1/4)

Essential parts of the political ethics of Aristotle presuppose the existence of a certain community that can refer back to its traditional values. The form of government that best serves the common good and the implementation of common values is the one to be considered good. Individuals without obligations to the community are foreign to him.

The fundamental Aristotelian ideas were taken further with a Christian development by Thomas of Aquinas during the Middle Ages and provide too, the foundation for the so-called communitarians, who have had a considerable influence since the 1980's.

Summary

- Man is by nature a creature that creates states
- The state by nature precedes the individual
- The state's aim is to develop the virtues of its citizens
- In this sense the state has a duty to educate
- The common good takes precedence over the self-interest of the individual
- Laws require the consent of the citizens