

“The problem in nature: after Aristotle”

1.

But what might be called a society’s ‘threshold of modernity’ has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question.

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 143

2. Some things exist, or come into existence, by nature; and some otherwise. Animals and their organs, plants, and the elementary substances—earth, fire, air, water—these and their likes we say exist by nature. For all these seem distinguishable from those that are not constituted by nature; and the common feature that characterizes them all seems to be that they have within themselves a principle of movement (or change) and rest—in some cases local only, in others quantitative, as in growth and shrinkage, and in others again qualitative, in the way of modification. But a bedstead or a garment or the like, in the capacity which is signified by its name and in so far as it is craft-work, has within itself no such inherent trend towards change, though, owing to the fact of its being composed of earth or stone or some mixture of substances, it incidentally has within itself the principles of change which inhere primarily in these materials. For nature is the principle and cause of motion and rest to those things, and those things only, in which it inheres primarily, as distinct from incidentally.

Aristotle *Physics* II.1, 192b8ff. (trans. P. H. Wicksteed and F. M. Cornford)

3. The partnership finally composed of several villages is the city-state; it has at last attained the limit of virtually complete self-sufficiency, and thus, while it comes into existence for the sake of life, it exists for the good life. Hence every city-state exists by nature, inasmuch as the first partnerships so exist; for the city-state is the end of the other partnerships, and nature is an end, since that which each thing is when its growth is completed we speak of as being the nature of each thing, for instance of a man, a horse, a household. Again, the object for which a thing exists, its end, is its chief good; and self-sufficiency is an end, and a chief good. From these things therefore it is clear that the city-state is a natural growth, and that man is by nature a political animal...

Aristotle, *Politics* 1.1, 1252a29ff. (trans. H. Rackam)

4. Thus also the city-state is prior in nature to the household and to each of us individually. For the whole must necessarily be prior to the part; since when the whole body is destroyed, foot or hand will not exist except in an equivocal sense, like the sense in which one speaks of a hand sculptured in stone as a hand; because a hand in those circumstances will be a hand spoiled, and all things are defined by their function and capacity, so that

when they are no longer such as to perform their function they must not be said to be the same things, but to bear their names in an equivocal sense. It is clear therefore that the state is also prior by nature to the individual; for if each individual when separate is not self-sufficient, he must be related to the whole state as other parts are to their whole, while a man who is incapable of entering into partnership, or who is so self-sufficing that he has no need to do so, is no part of a state, so that he must be either a lower animal or a god.

Aristotle, *Politics* 1.1, 1253a20ff. (trans. H. Rackam)

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