Neo-Aristotelian Politics

Recent Debates on Virtue, Natural Law and Technology

Conference on 25 April 2024

Nature, Natural Law, Technology

H.G.T. Decker (Maastricht University): **Between Dawkins and Aristotle: Finding Symmetries between Evolutionary Biology and Aristotelian Natural Law**

While Aristotle did not assemble a fully-fledged version of the Natural Law, he created the philosophical system which gave rise to it — *"the spiritual stream"*, in the words of Rommen, *"that carried the idea of natural law down through history to our time"*. However, this 'stream' became increasingly challenged. Essentialism is contradicted by Darwinian science, while rationality – as the distinctive feature of human existence – was questioned by behavioural economics and associated fields.

This paper, however, undertakes the opposite exercise. Instead of finding conflicts, it starts from the basic assumption that certain building blocks of the natural law are *partly biological;* a reflection of our evolutionary past (e.g., our cooperative abilities, social instinct and certain moral norms). Thereafter, the present paper searches for symmetries between evolutionary biology and the Aristotelian building blocks of natural law. It concludes that – while agonism on certain key domains remains – Darwinism and Aristotelian natural law may, on specific topics, reinforce each other against opposing forces.

Szabolcs Nyiri, Márton Oláh, Péter Szolcsányi (ELTE University): **The (political) Problem if We Interpret Internet as Agora – An Insight from the Political Philosophical and Philosophy of Technology Viewpoints**

Our presentation examines the current internet as the transformation of the Greek Agora. If we try to compare the two as spaces of publicity – from our contemporary viewpoint –, we could conclude that the agora was direct, personal, and interpersonal, but exclusive. Meanwhile – if we do not identify people who do not have the internet as people outside the Polis – the internet is indirect, impersonal, and partially anonymous while being interpersonal and inclusive.

The long nineteenth and turbulent twentieth centuries brought enormous economic and technological progress, and a specific networked world society emerged by the turn of the millennium. Beyond all this, we would also show that while the ancient agora can be homogeneous, the nature of the internet is much more fragmented in multiple – social and political – ways.

Overall, we aim to show two different natures of agoras. This raises the question that why is it important from a political philosophical point of view? We also try to present how could we think about the internet as a new, „techno-agora", which demands more reflection from the Platonic-Aristotelian philosophical traditions.

Virtue and Politics

Kálmán Tóth (Ludovika University of Public Service): **Is Self-Proclaimed Excellence a Political Virtue? Modern and Contemporary British Political Culture in the Light of Aristotelian Virtue-Ethics**

Self-proclaimed excellence has been an often neglected but controversial feature of political culture in the Anglosphere from at least the 18th-century onwards. Actors of politics often find it a useful tool of enhancing their careers in public discourse regarding the democratic processes of elections to overstress their own achievements and potential. In this context, virtue does not seem to originate in the perception of one's deeds, but in whether he or she can convince the

public opinion of being virtuous, often without any real grounding. As long as self-proclaimed excellence can be backed by objective facts, and there is no obvious contradiction between a political actor's actions and rhetoric, this phenomenon can be viewed as a minor moral flaw of the British and American political community as noted by a 19th-century Hungarian traveller. It can be assumed that this issue has significant contemporary relevance as well, as self-proclaimed excellence has undoubtedly gained widespread acceptance in the entire Western public discourse, not just in a strictly political sense, but in culture and sciences as well, often without clearly defying the criteria of excellence, that raises questions about whether there is any objective basis of public excellence, or if simply acceptance by the community decides on what is viewed as virtuous without any solid ethical foundation.

In my talk, I will examine the relations of this phenomenon to Aristotelian virtue ethics, how self-proclaimed excellence relates to the Aristotelian concept of virtue, pointing out the difficulty of impartially measuring human excellence, especially on the field of the political. As everything can be politicised, these questions have significant relevance related to the functioning of contemporary Western societies.

José Maria Duarte (Lisbon University): **Friendship as the Missing Ingredient in Modern Politics: Examining the Role of Friendship in Fostering Virtue in the Works of Aristotle and Cicero**

This paper delves into the theoretical relationship between virtue, friendship, and politics, exploring the pivotal role of friendship as a bridge between individual ethics and the public sphere. Drawing upon the Aristotelian link established in his Nichomachean Ethics and Politics, where friendship serves as the crucial connection, the paper examines how cultivating virtuous friendships can foster positive change in the political realm. Further enriched by the contributions of Cicero, the paper compares and contrasts his perspective on friendship with that of Aristotle. It argues that reinvigorating the concept of the republic in contemporary politics necessitates a renewed emphasis on virtue, which can only be achieved through strong, virtuous friendships between political actors. Only through such bonds can the republican ideal of a just and flourishing society be truly realized. The paper contends that this transformation of political character must originate within civil society, ultimately aiming to transform political parties from their current state. This perspective necessitates a reframing of the contemporary role of political parties in democracies, emphasizing the importance of genuine friendship and shared values over partisan divides. By exploring the historical and philosophical underpinnings of this concept, the paper ultimately aims to offer a compelling vision for a more virtuous and effective political landscape, where friendship serves as a cornerstone for building a better future.

Ferenc Hörcher (Ludovika University of Public Service): **Virtue and Conflicts: Two Aspects of Aristotle's Concept of Politics**

There is a renewed interest in political realism today. One of the directions looks at politics, as a necessarily agonistic field of human activity, as exemplified in the work of Carl Schmitt or Tilo Schabert. On the other hand, an earlier communitarian direction took Aristotle as one of the theorists of *harmonia*, later Latin *concordia*, a peaceful cooperation for the common good. According to realists, this is a non-realistic view of politics, as human nature does not make it possible to avoid conflicts among groups within a community, too. Christian realism tries to negotiate these two views. The present paper wants to defend this last position, arguing for two

points. One is, that there is, in fact, conflict in the Aristotelian polis, but it does not exclude the demand for cooperation. The other one is the argument, that in fact the early modern discourse of reason of state, as exemplified mostly by Jesuits (e.g. Botero, Gracián), also negotiated a Machiavellian concept of power politics with the Christian ethical norms, relying on the Aristotelian-Ciceronian virtue of *phronesis* or *prudentia*.

Keynote I.

Erik Bootsma (Catholic Distance University): **Architecture and the Culture of a Nation**

Aristotle states that a necessary condition for any true polis is that it be composed of citizens living in one place. Secondly, a polis, or a nation must also be "in one place" in terms of political unity, or more properly cultural unity, to form "a people", which remains in times of a lack of political unity.
Cities and nations express this cultural unity through cultural artifacts, the most permanent being civic art and architecture. While often done for purely political ends, nevertheless monuments and landmarks become part of a cultural identity and helps create a cultural unity that often outlasts the particular circumstances of the time of their creation.
After all, what Frenchman, regardless of his thoughts about Napoleon, would not identify with the Arc de Triomphe?

How then is a nation in the 21st Century to approach the creation of civic architecture? Nations and their architects are saddled with two problems. The first is the growth of a critical view of history that is a profoundly anti-cultural movement. This movement, political in nature, seeks to undermine the historic culture of a nation, leading to the undermining of institutions and manifests itself architecturally in the physical destruction of monuments.

The second problem is the anti-traditional, anti-cultural philosophy of Modernist architecture has established hegemony over the practice of architecture. The "International Style" of Bauhaus Modernism and its successors Brutalism, Post-Modernism, et cetera, of these styles share a common disdain for and rejection of historic styles of architecture, and pervasive need for novelty. Where Modernist architects have been hired to create civic buildings, ones that ought to engender cultural meaning to a people, the results are almost universally failures. This is because Modernist architecture, by rejecting ornament and beauty, is quite simply incapable of symbolizing in such a way that a courthouse would be recognizably different from an office block.

This presentation will explore, through the lens of Aristotle's Poetics and Politics, the philosophical underpinnings of the modern critical anti-traditional movements. It will look at how they have come to be deeply rooted within the art and architecture of today, and how the destructive influence of these philosophies may be countered in art.
Finally, the presentation will focus on the necessity of traditional and classical architecture for civic architecture, such that a nation might properly symbolize its own culture and foster a sense of cultural unity. That through the use of ornament, symbolism and traditional forms that carry meaning, civic architecture would be able to transcend time and political upheavals so that it might create a people, a civitas, that lives in a place that is not only meaningful, but also beautiful, so that it may be loved as well.

Keynote II.

David McPherson (University of Florida): Does Neo-Aristotelian Virtues Ethics Need a Neo-Aristotelian Politics?

Over the last half-century there has been a major revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics, but this has been largely divorced from any accompanying Aristotelian political philosophy. Insofar as this is the case, it represents a significant departure from Aristotle's own thought, since in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2 he makes clear that ethics needs to be understood as part of politics. In this talk, I will discuss my approach to Aristotelian virtue ethics, as developed in my first book monograph *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelian Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), and then I will discuss how I have sought to build on this to develop an accompanying neo-Aristotelian political philosophy in my second book monograph *The Virtues of Limits* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

New Readings of Aristotle, Neo-Aristotelian thought

Clifford Bates (Norwich University): **Aristotle on Force, Fraud, and Consent: Re-evaluating the Importance of Politics 5, Chapter 4.**

This paper looks at the section of Politics 5, chapter 4, where Aristotle explicitly raises the use of Force and Fraud and its role in political action in his political teaching. It is at the end of his general account of political change before examining in more detail how (and in what ways and in what directions) change will impact specific regimes, that he drops this discussion of the role of deceit and coercion not only in public political deliberations but also within political action itself. Here we will have Aristotle talk in a way that has more in common with Machiavelli than with the common presentation of Aristotle who is a promoter of virtue and the common good. Here we will see that any discussion of the common good in Aristotle's needs must address the role that coercion and deception need must play in successful or unsuccessful political action.

Tamás Nyirkos (Ludovika University of Public Service): **The Tyranny of the Majority: an Aristotelian View**

Although Aristotle did not explicitly use the phrase „majority tyranny," he came very close to its later formula when he said in his *Politics* that among the different types of democracy, there was one in which the "people" (meaning the poor majority) became a "monarch, one person composed of many," thereby creating a form of rule that was "the analog of tyranny among the monarchies" (*Politics*, 1292a). This metaphor (the majority as a large person vs. a smaller one called the minority) was later repeated by many works from Thomas Aquinas' *De regno* to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

It may be asked, however, whether such a notion of a homogeneous majority and the dangers it poses for a likewise homogenous minority is valid anymore. Modern societies, after all, are composed of multiple minorities; the equation of the multitude with the "poor" is also no longer evident; democratic regimes rarely rely on a simple majoritarian principle; and the rule of law, which Aristotle treated as the exact opposite of the rule of the multitude, is now rather a part and parcel of any "genuine" form of democracy.

At the same time, a brief look at the postmodern political condition is enough to convince anyone that social and political movements in democracies still struggle to become majorities (or at least look like one) and use their force to suppress dissenting – allegedly minority – groups

and opinions. The paper analyzes the ongoing relevance of the concept of "majority tyranny," its putative transformations, and a possible Aristotelian response to democratic abuses in contemporary societies and politics.

Rafał Paweł Wierzchosławski (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań): **How to be Neo-Aristotelian in Politics today?**

In respect to many Neo-approaches, like in case of the Neo-Republican turn, as distinct view from the liberal one (or demo-liberal one), a seminal question can be asked: what is DISTINCT from the mainstream approach?!

One of the traditional markers of Aristotelianism (not infrequently linked to Thomism, e.g., Catholic social thought since the 19th century) in the philosophy of society has been the opposition of this position to both atomistic liberalism and collectivist socialism (communism and other totalitarian approaches). Aristotelianism was supposed to value the individual and the community, without letting the latter dominate the former, but at the same time setting a frame of reference and conditions of functioning for it. It seems that this traditional view today must confront much more sophisticated positions.

In my talk, I want to highlight some challenges to the Aristotelian project in politics (both in terms of the philosophy of society, meta-politics and political action itself in modern societies, often post-national and global structures). I will refer to competing positions that, while turning to communal references, at the same time dissociate themselves from Aristotelianism, for one reason or another. I will pay special attention to the neo-republican conception of the state (Pettit, *The State,* 2023), as an ontologically and institutionally considered vision of the social democratic state, which the author has been developing since the late 1980's.

I believe that the points he raises may be, for various reasons, relevant to contemporary attempts to formulation (revival) of the Aristotelian tradition, which will not be treated a priori as a noble antique to be placed in a museum, but only as an object of times past.

I will highlight four points that, in light of Pettit's formulation, are worth taking into account in thinking about contemporary takes on the Aristotelian tradition.

Right-Left, Conservatism-Progressivism - what is Aristotelianism's potential standpoint in the contemporary Realpolitik landscape. Pettit claims that republican theory is left-of-the-center-liberalism (1997). Where to place Neo-Aristotelian?! How to relate Neo-Aristotelian to communitarian (Alisdair McIntyre, Charles Tylor) – it used to be labelled as a left oriented politics? However, some may argue, that some of the communitarian approaches might support conservative view? Community as *small platoons* (Burke and Scruton)

Aristotelianism's social ontology in political arrangement. Communitarianism as important factor from ontological point of view – relation. A received view is as follows: liberalism – atomism, communism/socialism – collectivism, Aristotelianism (Thomist + catholic social thought) claim to be a third way (standpoint) – individual substance + community (on various ontological levels – *subsidiarity principle* of the modern national state and international entities like the European Union – Chantal Delsol). How to place Aristotle in network, assemblage, makro-mezo-mikro levels, which are discussed in modern social ontology (Little 2016). Question: How ontology of holistic individualism (Taylor 1985, 1995, Pettit 1993) might work in case of Neo-Aristotelian (vs. Neo-Republican) understanding of the 'common good' in modern societies which are governed by axiological pluralism principle?
The common good, and social (class) divisions. What reference to social values. Whether Aristotelian politics is to take into account (and if so, how) the axiological diversity of modern

societies (Weber's conundrum of axiological polytheism), the separate interests and fractures of societies (Josiah Ober - Athens, John P. McCormick - Machiavelli).

Civic virtue has always been a determinant of the Aristotelian political tradition (including in the republican tradition). How to understand the issue of civic virtue in the context of social and political institutions of modern societies, such as the selection and evaluation criteria of cadres of the state apparatus (administrative state) in various areas of state functioning. Civic (official) virtue in the context of the economy of esteem (Brennan, Pettit, 2004) but also in the context of a recent work on Political Meritocracy in Renaissance Italy by James Hankins (Hankins 2023)

Aristotle and Contemporary thinkers

António Capela (AESE Business School): **Bridging Polarized Divides. A Comparative Analysis of Guardini's Polar Philosophy and Aristotle's Golden Mean**

Polarization has become a defining feature of our times, with seemingly irreconcilable divides between individuals, groups, and nations. This paper explores two approaches to navigating these polarized landscapes: Guardini's Polar Philosophy and Aristotle's Golden Mean. Guardini's Polar Philosophy, developed by the German philosopher Romano Guardini, emphasizes the underlying unity and tension between polar opposites. It suggests that these tensions, rather than being resolved through compromise or suppression, can be harnessed to create new and unexpected possibilities. Aristotle's Golden Mean, on the other hand, advocates for moderation and balance between extremes. It suggests that virtue lies in finding the middle ground between excessive and deficient states. While both approaches offer valuable insights into navigating polarized environments, they differ in their underlying assumptions and methods. Guardini's Polar Philosophy is more dynamic and open-ended, emphasizing the creative potential of tensions. Aristotle's Golden Mean is more systematic and structured, providing a framework for achieving moderation. By understanding the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches, we can develop a more comprehensive and effective framework for navigating polarized environments. We can learn to appreciate the creative potential of tensions while also seeking moderation and balance.

António Pedro Barreiro (Catholic University of Portugal): **Make Aristotle Great Again: Measuring Fukuyama's 'End of History' and Nietzsche's 'Last Man' against a Neo-Aristotelian Framework**

Francis Fukuyama's proclamation of the 'end of history' stands as a defining narrative of our contemporary era, characterized by technological advancement, the triumph of liberal democracy, and the globalization of markets. This paper critically examines the successes and shortcomings of this posthistorical paradigm, employing Patrick Deneen's neo-Aristotelian framework to argue that the current age's challenges are not failures of liberalism, but rather inherent consequences of its very triumph. This perspective is further elaborated by juxtaposing Fukuyama's thesis with the insights of thinkers like Chesterton, Arendt, Nisbet, Foucault, and Aristotle. The paper delves into the anthropological dimension of the post-historical age, critiquing Fukuyama's appropriation of Nietzsche's 'last man' concept. Instead, we advocate for a return to Aristotle's conception of the 'political animal' (ζῷον πολῑτῐκόν) and a teleological framework of analysis. This reframing allows us to better understand the underlying tensions inherent in the post-historical condition and to identify potential pathways towards a more fulfilling and meaningful existence. In conclusion, this paper challenges the simplistic notion

of a 'post-historical' era and proposes a more nuanced understanding of our contemporary circumstances. By adopting a neo-Aristotelian perspective, we can better appreciate the complexities and challenges of the present age and seek avenues for a more humane and flourishing future.

Ádám Smrcz (Ludovika University of Public Service): **The Tragedy of the Commons as the Tragedy of the Private Sphere – Arendt's Remarks on an Aristotelian Idea**

The term, *tragedy of the commons* refers to situations when self-interested agents tend to sacrifice the long-term goals of their communities for the sake of their own benefits whereby, on the long run, they end up harming themselves as well. While the utterance itself was coined by ecologist Garrett Hardin in 1968 in order to call attention to the dangers of unlimited population growth within limited natural resources, the idea goes back to Aristotle's Book II of the *Politics*, where the Philosopher claimed that the more people share a certain property in common (κοινόν), the less they tend to care (ἥκιστα γὰρ ἐπιμελείας) of it (Aristotle 2008, 57). This empirical remark was presumably intended as a criticism of Book 5 of Plato's Republic, where the abolition of private property (and the supposed benefits thereof) were first outlined. In order to reconcile the two tenets, some medieval commentators held that while the Platonic view could be applied to the prelapsarian state of human nature („*in statu innocentiae omnia communia erant"* – as San Bernardino da Siena phrased it in the 15th century), after the fall, when people had become vile and greedy, the Aristotelian framework was much more appropriate in terms of interpreting ordinary human actions (Senensis, 1745, 182).
We cannot be sure whether by Aristotelian influence of not, but almost three centuries later David Hume also came to the conclusion that human nature had such a harmful quality, due to which „each seeks a pretext to free himself of the trouble and expense, and [lays] the whole burden on others", as a result of which they all end up worse off (Hume 2009, 808-809).
But it was only the 20th century, which saw the widespread application of the concept in both philosophy and social sciences (with Elinor Ostrom's Nobel-prize winning account being only one of them). Hannah Arendt, for instance, drew a crucial distinction between family and society on the basis of ownership, since the former, as she said, „had been identified with a privately owned piece of the world, its property", and the latter a „collectively owned, piece of property", but later added that „collective ownership, strictly speaking, is a contradiction in terms" (Arendt 1958, 256). Although the term, *tragedy of the commons* never turns up in Arendts texts, one can easily observe considerable similarities between the underlying ideas behind such remarks and the implications of the concept itself. However, apart from scarce scholarship on the field (e.g. Grandia 2007; Martin 2013), Arendt's relationship to this Aristotelian idea remains understudied to this day. The aim of my proposed talk is, hence, to highlight its stakes in the author's thinking including how her concepts like „world alienation" were fashioned by it.