

# Aristotle's philosophy in my life

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# Contents

Appendix . . . . . 6

So let's just talk about mean Aristotle as a cultural icon is one of things to talk about this. What does Aristotle mean to you culturally? What does George Washington mean to you? Who gives a fuck about George Washington? Does George Washington symbolize anything positive to you? But I think Aristotle is someone who really does have symbolic and cultural resonance and weight.

Aristotle is extraordinary because he made the transition from being a Pagan philosopher to being a Catholic philosopher. Historically that is why he is so famous. There was a brief period when the Christian Church, what we now call the Catholic Church, you know, suppressed and persecuted Aristotle, and then they kind of figured out that he wasn't as anti-Christian as they thought he was. They got to some of the passages where he says about the nature of divinity and God. And Aristotle ended up being rehabilitated as kind of one of the few little bits and pieces of antiquity of pre-Christian philosophy that could be embraced, or at least remixed, reinterpreted and and revalorised in in Catholic Europe.

So Aristotle in in a period when Europe was burning books, was censoring their whole Christian past when you know philosophers like Lucretius or what have you were really, you know, persecuted and so on. What things were regarded as heresies and terrible, and what. That Aristotle made the transition from being a Pagan and heretic to being somewhat acceptable within Catholic Europe.

So that's why his fame grew as much as it did. There's no real reason. I mean, in a parallel universe, why not Carneades? Why not? Indeed, why not Plato? I mean I think there are a lot of reasons why not play right? But why not some other philosopher? Who's now slipped into relative? Why not to democratize himself? Why not puritanism? What we now call scepticism. Why not cynicism for that matter? you know, sorry, cynicism is now used that, you know, we use it in, which is very different. But there was a school of philosophers called the Cynics. Well, Aristotle was the guy who won the lottery and made the transition from Pagan to. Christian enough to being acceptable within Christian discourse, so his fame grew and grew. Now in my life, you know, Aristotle does have some special significance. You know I'm not someone who reads these books with the delusion that they contain a message for me, nor that they contain a message for my times. So I do look at error. So first and foremost, as as a remnant of as a fragment of a very alien culture that in some ways I can never relate to. So like if I read. Book written in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Africa. I regard that as really, by the way, 17<sup>th</sup> century Portugal. Like sources I've read from the Portuguese Empire and stuff like they have really alien traditions and I'm just saying like even relatively recently within Europe, I feel like I'm reading a, you know, an artifact from a different culture that in many ways I can't relate to at all. I remember even reading some Dutch empire sources from a couple of centuries ago, and the way they open and end

like a letter. You know, your worship, you know, like, wow, it's so alien. You know, I am your humblest slave, your worship. So you can just go back a couple of centuries within Western. And really feel you're dealing with a profoundly alien culture. So this is this is one thing I don't look at Aristotle as something that's for me or below me or has a message for my times, however, you know. If you come out of a political science background, if you care about politics, then you know, I mean, Aristotle is really he's defined even some of the words we now use in the English language for politics. That's is also true of metaphysics. The word metaphysics itself comes from the title of a work of Aristotle. He had this. Definitive significance on the development of philosophy, including social and political. So I guess there was a sense when I was a young man of kind of how can anyone take themselves seriously if they haven't read Aristotle now? A lot of people say that about Shakespeare. I mentioned Shakespeare as an example. And come on with Shakespeare. It's \*\*\*\*\*. Like, you know, I mean, like, you don't need to read Shakespeare. Believe me, I do. I'm going to encourage my own daughter to read Shakespeare. I don't have anything against Shakespeare. When you think about it, what is there really of such definitive significance in the works of William Shakespeare? I think, frankly, nothing. Have you read some of the sonnets of Shakespeare or, you know, the the \*\*\*\*\* sonnets? Resting he does. He has excited.

There's a there's. A huge stack of academic literature of that, by the way, I'm sorry. And do you know, do you know his sonnet about the dusky woman? Did Shakespeare sleep with black women? That's another one. Yeah. There's a lot about Shakespeare. Next life based on the based on the sides, by the way. Anyway another topic topic for another video, but my point is by delving into Shakespeare by pouring this kind of time and attention. Well, you can even tell from my joking around. I have spent some time reading Shakespeare, but I don't think you get anything out. Like that. So being serious about political science, being serious about politics, being serious about philosophy in some ways in in reading Aristotle, you're gonna puncture that illusion. You're gonna deflate that illusion. You're gonna move past that, that kind of aura that is work is taking on. See the reality what they are. But there's one important sense in which, you know, I found something that was kind of shocking and tremendously important. Aristotle. That really changed my perspective on both modern Western politics and the way politics is taught and learned in in universities. So in most editions of the complete works of Aristotle, there is one very important work that is omitted, and that is Aristotle's constitution of Athens. So on the Constitution of Athens is a work attributed Aristotle that was discovered quite late. It was so it was not influential in antiquity. It was an influential in the Catholic period. I've already alluded to. It's a like a modern archaeological discovery, if you like. It's a text that's reentered that was lost or largely unknown, was unknown outside of Egypt. Thing was known within Egypt and then re entered the corpus of of aerosols, writing the view of democracy, the philosophical view of how democracy works at the source and also the practical explanation of how the democracy of Athens really works. In there and one of the

things that came as a stunning there are many things in there that came to me is a stunning revelation in contrast to the way Aristotle is kind of packaged and modernized for students within academia. But one of them is the word lot, L O T. What Aristotle supports is election by lot. He reviles and criticizes election by vote as anti Democratic and as tending towards aristocracy.

The whole philosophy of politics and democracy that you get in other longer works of Aristotle, like you know, he has one book simply called *The Politics*. You have to go back and reexamine it, realizing what's made clear in the English translation of Constitution of Athens, which is that Aristotle is a critic of what we now call electoral democracy. What he supports is election by lot. Lottery. Electing people at random, his model of human equality and participation, and also his whole criticism of, it's still a huge problem today, of corruption and special interests and conflict of interest. His way to overcome that is you constitute a class of educated people. He's obviously not talking about electing every one of the society. Athens was a very unequal society. There were slaves and they were slave owners. But where you basically have a group of people who are a group of men, it's only men who are qualified to hold public. Office and then they are assigned their particular offices and government by lot by lottery, not by election in our sense at all.

And I remember reading that and it was a stunning moment because I realized the extent to which all my professors have been lying to me. Even my textbooks have been lying to me. The significance of. And a lot of things Aristotle said that were kind of confusing in the past because he does it. He's kind of confusing in terms of the I was only reading this in English, not in Greek. These kind of confusing criticisms of corruption and democracy, how how democracy doesn't doesn't work. He talks a lot about the way in which democracy tends to slide into old. Quirky and for me growing up in Canada at the time, I could really relate to that well, no, I mean for you too. It's like, OK, why did George W Bush become president? Well, because before him, George Bush senior was president. Why did George Bush senior become president? Well, because he was the head of the CIA. Why did he become head of the CIA? Because he was a millionaire, involved in oil rigs in the Caribbean. I mean it's it's pretty dark. The role of, you know, the extent to which democracy becomes a kind of mask over oligarchy. That was a huge issue for me growing up in Canada to some extent. We all feel and to realize so that aspect of Aristotle's philosophy which I had understood in the past, but the English didn't quite make sense. Oh, it's because he's dealing with a difficult to translate contrast. There's a contrast between two types of elections, election by vote and election by lot.

So when I knew that, that was a turning point in my life in a lot of ways. And I mean it deepened for me, the sense that if I was going to learn anything at all, I had to learn it. As an autodidact, I had to learn it by interrogating primary sources to the greatest extent possible. And you know the most easily accessible source of information. Whether those are kind of encyclopedia articles or introductory history textbooks. Those are almost always in our culture, the most dishonest. You know that

you're better off getting a fragmentary and incomplete view of history by working from authentic primary sources. You know what I mean, which of course, have their own type of bias. Rather than getting someone's overview of history and politics that has gone ahead and read a bunch of sources for you and smoothed them out and made. And realizations about. Because underneath those generalizations, I mean to say that the devil is in the details is in an understatement. Of course, this is what I would go on to encounter encounter in Buddhism in First Nations politics and so many things. It's so easy to give people a kind of reassuring summary, a summation of what a philosophy is about, what a political dispute is about, even what a civil war is about. You know what I mean? You can watch a YouTube video right now about the the Spanish Civil War, 20<sup>th</sup> century war, or about a, you know, the seven Years war or, you know, or the French Revolution, 00. And I should say that. Sorry for me, that's even linked to my break away from left wing politics from communism. My parents were communists and I was very much raised to be a communist. But, you know, I had a book. That was literally on my bookshelf from my earliest childhood about the history of the Russian Revolution. You know, the creation of Communism in Russia. And it contained so many statements that were in the same way, true, but misleading. You know what? I mean, you can say a lot about Aristotle and his philosophy and what he has said, his perspective on democracy. You can see things that are true but misleading. Where I had to realize that so much of what I knew, whether it was about Karl Marx or Western democracy or ancient Greek, was in this sense true, but misleading. And that I had to interrogate primary sources and I was better off having incoherent little fragments of information based on those real sources rather than any kind of synoptic analytical overview produced by another scholar by another author, because the level of deception was so high. And indeed the level of self deception on the part of those authors was so often so high.

## Appendix

Harvard Law school professors Adriaan Lanni and Adrian Vermeule discuss sortition among other Athenian political mechanisms. They write:

In the ancient Greek world, selection of magistrates by lot was nearly synonymous with democracy. One of the most important functions of the lot in the Athenian democratic structure was to prevent any individual magistrate from amassing too much power and thereby threatening the sovereignty of the popular Assembly. We argue that the lot, taken together with the principles of rotation and collegiality, operated as precautionary measures against individuals gaining too much influence. [...]

Although ancient sources do not provide a clear statement of the reasons for adopting the lot, selection by lot is uniformly associated with democratic

reforms, as opposed to election, which is considered aristocratic. Selection by lot and the related concept of rotation in office likely had many purposes, including promoting popular and equal participation in government, reducing the risk of bribery and corruption, and minimizing factionalism and conflict between elite groups. But an equally important rationale for the lot and rotation was precautionary: as several scholars have pointed out, it prevented any individual executive official from gaining too much power, thereby insuring the sovereignty and supremacy of the Assembly. Hansen has pointed out that it was the critics of democracy who traced the lot to democratic notions of equality; both the famous statement of democratic principles in Herodotus' Persian Debate and book 6 of Aristotle's *Politics* appear to link the lot and limitations of magistrates' power with preserving the sovereignty of the *demos*. Headlam similarly describes the distinctly second-best nature of the lot: "it was introduced ... to prevent the executive officials from being too influential... [m]ediocrity was its object, because this was the only means of insuring that not only the name but also the reality of power should be with the Assembly." It is important to emphasize that we are not arguing that the only, or even the chief, motivation for the introduction of the lot and rotation was the desire to limit magistrates' power; we are simply highlighting this precautionary function of the lot as one of the many rationales for this institution.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Precautionary Constitutionalism in Ancient Athens

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à-bas-le-ciel. <[youtube.com/watch?v=jA9nVVlv6Ng](https://youtube.com/watch?v=jA9nVVlv6Ng)>

This is a partially cleaned up transcript that has been abbreviated.

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