



Aristotle on Natural Slavery: An Analysis Using the Marxist Concept of Ideology

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ABSTRACT: Aristotle’s account of natural slavery as presented in his *Politics* is often treated by historians of philosophy as an account that can be analyzed purely internally in terms of its argumentative structure without referring to social factors. Against this view, Aristotle’s account of natural slavery is seen to be ideological according to at least one variant of the Marxist concept of ideology, and cannot be understood without reference to Aristotle’s socioeconomic context. The ideological nature of Aristotle’s account of natural slavery is especially evident in his “proto-racialization” of the category of the “natural slave.” The Marxist concept of ideology is demonstrably useful in the historical study of philosophy, as compared with internalist historians of philosophy who claim that referring to non-philosophical factors such as class interests inevitably obscures the philosophical content of the texts that are the objects of analysis.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle, ideology, sociology of philosophy, slavery, Greek philosophy

1. Introduction

THE CENTRAL INTERPRETATIVE THESIS of this essay is that Aristotle’s account of natural slavery as presented in the *Politics* is ideological in character, in the Marxist sense. The main aim of this paper is to show that at least one variant of the Marxist concept

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of ideology can be successfully utilized in the study and interpretation of some cases in the history of philosophy. In other words, the interpretation of Aristotle's account of natural slavery is treated as a case study. Since there are several variants of the Marxist concept of ideology, it is important to explicitly specify the variant that I will be employing. In this discussion I will be employing Richard W. Miller's interpretation of Marx's conception of ideology. I do so because Miller's account seems to provide a concept of ideology that is promising in relation to the development of a materialist approach to the history of philosophy.¹ According to Miller, the concept of ideology was introduced by Marx and Engels in order to answer the following question: "Why have so many socially important ideas distorted reality when available data, reasonable inference and the state of science dictated no corresponding mistake?" (Miller, 1984, 46). On this reading, an ideology would be a claim or set of claims that "distort reality and that result from social forces, characteristic of class societies, having no tendency to bring ideas in line with reality" (Miller, 1984, 45).² In other words, a claim (or account) is to be regarded as ideological if and only if it is so evidently false that the only way in which we can explain why it is held is to appeal to its function in upholding the interests of the dominant group or class in the society in question. I have chosen to employ this variant of the Marxist concept of ideology because I am primarily concerned with the explicit (and evidently false) claims that Aristotle makes about who counts as a natural slave. The concept of ideology that I am employing is charitable insofar as the evident falsehood of the belief in question is to be evaluated relative to the evidence that was available to the thinker who held the belief that is under examination. Hence, if Aristotle's account of natural slavery is to be accurately described as being ideological in character we have to show that, for instance, his belief that non-Greeks were natural slaves (*i.e.*, lacked the ability to deliberate) was evidently false when

- 1 I do not deny that there is a vast and interesting literature on Marxist conceptions of ideology, nor do I wish to suggest that Marxist accounts of ideology that are different from the one that is being employed here are not valuable. My primary concern here is to show that at least one variant of the Marxist concept of ideology can be fruitfully employed in interpretive analysis of cases in the history of philosophy.
- 2 Miller, despite working within the so-called "analytical Marxism" tradition, essentially converges with Althusser's account of ideology. For both agree that "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 1971, 162). The point is that this account of the concept of ideology should not be seen as exclusive to so-called "analytical Marxism."

evaluated against the empirical evidence that was available to him. The concept of ideology that I am employing sets the bar relatively high for what can count as an ideological claim. According to my use of the concept of ideology, even if a certain claim is both false and supports the interests of the ruling class or group in a given society, it cannot be counted as ideological if its falsehood is not evident when evaluated against the evidence that was available to the individual who advanced it. The point of working with a concept of ideology that sets a high bar for what counts as ideology is to counter the criticisms of classicists and scholars of ancient Greek philosophy such as Malcolm Heath, who argues that describing Aristotle's account of natural slavery as ideological is too easy for it to have much point (Heath, 2008, 244). The function of the concept of ideology is precisely to provide an explanation of otherwise unexplainable errors by referring to the relevant social structures and interests.

The justification for using the concept of ideology when engaging in historical studies in philosophy is its explanatory power; it allows us to answer questions such as: How can someone as intelligent as Aristotle hold beliefs which seem to be so evidently false, even when we account for the evidence that he had access to? The importance of the criterion of blatant falsehood is apparent here, since we are discussing cases where the falsehood of the belief in question is so blatant that resorting to the claim that it is the product of innocent mistakes in philosophical reasoning is unlikely to be an adequate explanation. In other words, the concept of ideology with its reference to social interests and social struggles as explanatory factors can offer explanations precisely where the explanatory power of purely internalist accounts of the history of philosophy breaks down. A purely internalist account that attempts to explain developments in the history of philosophy by only referring to "philosophical reasons and considerations" (Normore, 1990, 38) would not be able to explain cases like Aristotle's account of natural slavery.

This commitment to internalism, which is simply declared by decree to be the only valid approach to studying the history of philosophy, is reflected in the manner in which scholars of Aristotle have dealt with Aristotle's theory of natural slavery. Malcolm Schofield, to give one representative example, thinks that Aristotle's theoretical claims about natural slavery essentially have nothing to do with slavery as it existed in the Athenian society in which he lived. He essentially

attempts to insulate the theory against the charge of ideology by claiming that “the false consciousness gets to work when Aristotle stops theorizing” (Schofield, 1999, 116). However, the difficulty with this view is that it requires us to believe that a philosopher who lived in a slave society (and not just a society with slaves), and who owned slaves himself, developed his views on slavery without being at all influenced by actually existing practices of slavery, and without being interested in describing them and providing them with legitimation. Schofield’s attempt at separating the theoretical elements from the empirical claims that Aristotle makes in his account of natural slavery provides a clear example of what I take to be an unreasonable methodological assumption, namely, the assumption that theoretical claims can arise without having any points of contact with the socio-historical context of the thinker who advanced them.

Unlike Schofield, I will be arguing that an examination of Aristotle’s account of natural slavery in its socio-historical context, *i.e.*, one that acknowledges its points of contact with contemporary slavery in Athens and contemporary Greek attitudes towards non-Greeks, is more fruitful (for understanding Aristotle’s own account) than an account that presupposes that Aristotle thought that his account of natural slavery had no points of contact with contemporary slavery in Athens.³ My main argument for the thesis that Aristotle’s account of natural slavery is ideological in character is that Aristotle does not seem to be treating the question of whether there are in fact any humans in existence who can be correctly described as “natural slaves” as an open question. I argue that this is connected to what I will describe as Aristotle’s “proto-racialization” of natural slavery. I think it should be clear that one cannot hope to establish the ideological character of Aristotle’s account of natural slavery with certainty; hence, my aim is only to establish my claim with a high degree of plausibility. In doing so, I will attempt to defend the utility of employing the concept of ideology, in the Marxist sense, in the study of the history of philosophy (*i.e.*, to defend the claim that in at least some cases utilizing a variant of the Marxist concept of ideology is helpful to the historian of philosophy). In order to do so successfully, I will attempt to bring to the fore the conceptual contradictions that Aristotle faces in his

3 Paul Millett (correctly) notes that Aristotle’s views on non-Greeks “represented a reality of Athenian slavery” (Millett, 2007, 194). However, he does not attempt to relate this fact to the logical structure of Aristotle’s argument.

attempt to defend his theory of natural slavery. While I will try to bring in the relevant social factors whenever possible, I intend to focus on the conceptual issues that Aristotle faces because I wish to respond to a common criticism that is raised by philosophers against the use of variants of the Marxist concept of ideology, namely that those who employ concepts of ideology tend to ignore the logical structure of the philosophical position that is being studied. For example, Eugene Kamenka has argued that when Marxist historians of philosophy try to analyze Aristotle's theory of natural slavery through the prism of ideology they tend to ignore his "logical concerns" (Kamenka, 1965, 103). I will try to show that, far from ignoring the "logical concerns" of Aristotle's account of natural slavery, employing a variant of the Marxist concept of ideology helps us explain its logical structure.

I will emphasize that, since it is not reasonable to expect that philosophy (when carried out in good faith) will completely emancipate us from *all* the prejudices of our culture and society (and of our class, gender, and ethnic group), we should have realistic measures for what would have counted as a philosophically informed and successful engagement with slavery (*i.e.*, one that recognizes its injustice) in Aristotle's own historical context. To this end, I will point out the various alternative views on slavery and non-Greeks that were advanced by some of Aristotle's contemporaries, in order to provide a realistic measure of the range of views that were in principle available to Aristotle. I will argue that Aristotle had access to evidence (some of which can be found in the text of the *Politics* itself) that would have led him to question, at a minimum, his apparent endorsement of the claim that all non-Greeks are natural slaves, had he not been in the grip of an ideology which served to protect the material interests of slave-owning Greeks.⁴ I should explicitly note that throughout this discussion I will be taking it for granted that a successful philosophical engagement with slavery would have recognized its injustice.⁵ Nonetheless, it is important to note that while we do know that some thinkers

4 I say "apparent endorsement" because, initially, in Chapter 2 of Book I of the *Politics*, Aristotle does not directly say that all non-Greeks are natural slaves, but he does seem to approve of the line that he quotes from Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*: "it is proper for Greeks to rule non-Greeks" (1252b7–9). As we shall see, he does seem to actively endorse this claim throughout the *Politics*.

5 Note, however, that I am not assuming that a philosophical engagement with slavery that is unsuccessful is by virtue of that fact ideological in character (for that would be to beg the question).

in antiquity recognized that slavery as such was unjust, none of them took the additional step of calling for its abolition (Garnsey, 1996, 64; Vidal-Naquet, 1986, 173). Hence, if we are to judge Aristotle's account within its historical context, it might be reasonable to suppose that he might have recognized the injustice of slavery as such, but it is unreasonable to expect him to have called for its abolition. Hence, I will be focusing on the former issue.

Here, I want to make a final, brief methodological point. It seems to me that some interpreters of Aristotle have underestimated the importance of paying attention to the human capacity to compartmentalize, *i.e.*, our ability to be rational when dealing with one set of issues while being completely irrational when dealing with another set. For instance, Richard Kraut's interpretation of Aristotle's account of natural slavery depends on this assumption: "One cannot talk oneself into believing anything whatsoever, however absurd, and however much it conflicts with appearances — even if one might, by doing so, realize one's fondest dreams" (Kraut, 2002, 279). In my opinion, this assumption is patently false, and it begs the question against the possibility of the successful employment of the concept of ideology as an explanatory tool, since it essentially amounts to a rejection, without argument, of the possibility of employing strong cognitive bias, conditioned by one's socioeconomic position and other factors, as an explanatory factor when studying the history of philosophy (with the specific aim of understanding why the thinker in question held the view that we are examining). The basic (and to my mind, entirely defensible) presupposition of my approach is that, under some circumstances, cognitive bias (conditioned by one's socioeconomic position and one's consciousness of belonging to a "superior" ethnic group) can become so strong that it prevents the thinker in question from recognizing facts that an unbiased observer would have recognized. As Frantz Fanon pointed out:

Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted. It would create a feeling that is extremely uncomfortable, called cognitive dissonance. And because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalize, ignore and even deny anything that does not fit in with the core belief. (Fanon, 1967, 194.)⁶

6 Karl Mannheim also makes a similar point (Mannheim, 1960, 36).

2. *The Need for an Enslaved Population in Aristotle's Ideal Polity*

In Chapter 5 of Book I of the *Politics* Aristotle makes it seem that he is treating the question of natural slavery (*i.e.*, whether there actually exist people for whom enslavement would be just) as an open question: “But whether anyone is really like that by nature or not, and whether it is better or just for anyone to be a slave or not (all slavery being against nature) — these are the things we must investigate next” (1254b18–19). First, I should clarify what I mean by an “open question.” I simply mean that if Aristotle is treating the existence of people who satisfy the conditions for natural slavery (*i.e.*, enslavement that is just and beneficial for them) as an open question, he is, in principle, open to the possibility of it not being the case that there are any such people in existence. Now, if we can show that Aristotle could not have treated the question of natural slavery as an open question, and that what he presents as an unbiased philosophical inquiry that leads to the conclusion that “there are some people, some of whom are naturally free, others naturally slaves, for whom slavery is both just and beneficial” (1255a1–2), is in fact a rationalization of a conclusion that he was already committed to, then we have strong evidence to support the thesis that his account of natural slavery is ideological in character.

The argument is fairly straightforward. If Aristotle believed that the ideal constitution, or even a non-ideal but desirable one (relative to the existing situation),⁷ requires slavery in order to function as the mode of political and social organization within which the adult male citizens can cultivate their virtue and flourish (and for Aristotle, this seems to follow from the fact that the cultivation of virtue requires leisure, which in turn means that the polis requires slaves in order to provide the necessities of life for the adult male citizens of the polis so that the latter do not have to engage in physical labor), and if the ideal constitution (or the non-ideal, but desirable one) is just, then it follows that there has to be a form of slavery that is just, if the ideal constitution (or the non-ideal, but desirable one) is to be actualizable.⁸ No one, I think, would dispute that Aristotle thought that his ideal polis in Book VII requires people whose manual labor would provide the citizens with the necessities of life. Aristotle himself

7 *I.e.*, the practical ideal which he refers to as a “polity.”

8 Note that I will be focusing on the ideal *polis* that is described in Books VII and VIII.

is quite explicit about this: “Nor should those who are going to be citizens engage in farming, since leisure is needed both to develop virtue and to engage in political actions” (1329a1–3). Aristotle goes on to claim that, in the ideal polis, “the farmers must be either slaves or non-Greek subject peoples” (1329a25–26). When Aristotle says this he seems to have in mind a population of communally owned slaves (*i.e.*, a Helot-like population). We can see clearly that Aristotle is committed to there being a large population of individuals whose enslavement is just.⁹ Aristotle himself seems to have been aware of this issue when he says: “If each tool could perform its tasks on command or by anticipating instructions, and if . . . shuttles wove cloth by themselves, and picks played the lyre, a master craftsman would not need assistants, and masters would not need slaves” (1253b33–39). Aristotle’s account replicates, at the level of philosophical discourse, the need for slavery which sustained the social formation of classical Athens. In fact, Aristotle’s reference to domestic labor in the passage quoted above is rather revealing because while slaves were utilized in agriculture, and in silver mines, domestic slaves comprised the most numerous category of slaves in classical Athens (Fischer, 2003, 53). Domestic slaves were responsible for carrying out household labor and for wool-making and cloth-making.

3. *Aristotle’s Account of the Psychological Constitution of the “Natural Slave”*

On Aristotle’s account someone who is a natural slave lacks “the deliberative part of the soul” (1260a11–13) and hence is incapable of rational foresight. There is debate in the secondary literature over what kind of deliberation the natural slave is supposed to be incapable of. Pierre Pellegrin argues that when Aristotle denies that the natural slave has the ability to deliberate, he is not denying that the natural slave can be intelligent (in the instrumental sense); instead, he is claiming that the natural slave is unable to engage in ethical deliberation. I think that Pellegrin’s motivations for his view are understandable, as he clearly recognizes that “Aristotle was not unaware of the scientific and technical accomplishments of certain barbarian [*i.e.*, non-Greek]

9 It is true that this form of enslavement is different from chattel slavery. On the other hand, chattel slavery is only one form of enslavement. The Helots, for instance, were not enslaved as individuals to individual masters, but were rather enslaved collectively to the state (Cartledge, 2003).

peoples” (Pellegrin, 2013, 107). However, it seems to me that Pellegrin’s view cannot be correct: when Aristotle discusses what makes a person a natural master (as opposed to a natural slave) he makes reference to “rational foresight” without qualifying it as rational foresight associated with deliberation about ethical ends: “For if something is capable of rational foresight, it is a natural ruler and master, whereas whatever can use its body to labor is ruled and is a natural slave” (1252a31–34). I take it that when Aristotle is claiming that “whatever can use its body to labor is ruled” he is really claiming that whatever (or whoever) can *only* use his/her body to labor is only fit to be ruled. For Aristotle does not seriously claim that those who are not natural slaves are somehow constitutively unable to use their bodies to labor.¹⁰ However, we should also understand that Aristotle when trying to emphasize the identity of slaves with physical activity is essentially trying to rationalize the modes of discourse that were employed by Athenian slave owners (like himself) who would frequently refer to a slave simply as a *soma*, literally a body.¹¹

It is indeed true that Aristotle initially attempts to claim that natural slaves have bodies that are suited for labor while naturally free individuals have bodies that make them unable to engage in labor (1254b25–27). However, he quickly abandons this approach as he recognizes that “the opposite often happens as well: some have the bodies of free men, others, the souls” (1254b31), and he ends up emphasizing that the distinction has to do with deficiencies in the natural slave’s soul. The point is that, in the sentence that has been quoted above (1252a31–34), Aristotle does not claim that the natural slave lacks the capacity to engage in ethical deliberation; instead, he seems to be quite clearly claiming that the natural slave lacks rational foresight in the general sense (*i.e.*, that someone who is a natural slave is unable to engage in high level intellectual activity in general).¹²

10 Aristotle clearly suggests that those who are naturally free are capable of performing the tasks that are only appropriate for slaves, so it is not as if they (*i.e.*, those who are naturally free) are constitutively incapable of performing them (1333a6–10).

11 For the terms that were used by the Greeks to refer to slaves, see Fischer, 2003, 6–7.

12 My view is fairly close to Kraut’s view on this issue, *i.e.*, that Aristotle thought that the natural slave “lacks both the capacity to engage in that context-sensitive and creative adjustment of means to ends that Aristotle calls deliberation” (Kraut, 2002, 301). Joseph M. Bryant also reads Aristotle as claiming that natural slaves lack the ability to deliberate in general (Bryant, 1996). So does Ward (2002). Bryant provides additional support for my claim that Aristotle’s account of natural slavery is ideological when he notes that Aristotle’s claim that natural slaves are incapable of deliberation “is a form of intraspecies differentiation that finds no parallel in his biological studies of other species” (Bryant, 1996, 363).

We should also note that Aristotle's own account of the justification for the different relations of rule does not justify the conclusion that natural slaves ought to be ruled in a despotic manner (1260a5–15). As Nicholas D. Smith has noted, "the potentiality of the thing ruled does not seem to be an important ingredient in Aristotle's distinctions of the proper sorts of rule" (Smith, 1983, 117). For on Aristotle's account, reason ought to rule emotion (or desire) in a kingly manner (analogous to the rule exercised by the father over his children), but emotion, even though it perceives reason and responds to it, does not have the potential to be rational (to possess reason). Yet Aristotle thinks that emotion (or desire) should be ruled by reason in a kingly (or paternalistic) manner: "the soul rules the body with the rule of a master, whereas understanding rules desire with the rule of a statesman or with the rule of a king" (1254b4–6). Aristotle characterizes the natural slave as "he who shares in reason to the extent of understanding it, but does not have it himself" (1254b21–22). Hence it would seem that the proper rule for the natural slave is the sort of rule that is exercised by reason over emotion (*i.e.*, kingly rule), rather than the sort of rule that is exercised by the soul over the body (*i.e.*, despotic rule).¹³ It is therefore not clear that Aristotle has any adequate philosophical argument, even on his own terms, for thinking that natural slaves ought to be ruled in a despotic manner. Thus, at least on this point, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Aristotle's claim that natural slaves ought to be ruled despotically is anything other than an attempt to provide justification for the manner in which slaves were actually ruled in Athens. Hence, it is difficult to hold the view that Aristotle was not at all concerned with the actual institution of slavery when he was providing an account of natural slavery. We should also note that Aristotle cannot avoid this dilemma by claiming that natural slaves have no share in reason whatsoever (*i.e.*, that they are not even responsive to reason) because if he did that, he would in effect be claiming that they are not even human; however, he clearly recognized that "slaves are human and have a share in reason" (1259b27–28).

We can see, from the argument that I have presented above, that Aristotle's political philosophy as a whole (as he seems to have understood it) requires not only that a theoretical account of natural slaves should be specifiable, but also that there should be people in

¹³ Robert Schlaifer also makes this point (Schlaifer, 1936, 195).

existence whose enslavement would be just, if the ideal constitution (or even a polity) is to be actualizable. Here, I think it is important to note that Schofield's account of the role that natural slavery in Book I plays in Aristotle's overall project in the *Politics* is rather one-sided (Schofield, 1999, 112–115). I agree with Schofield that one of Aristotle's main aims in his discussion of slavery in Book I is to distinguish among different kinds of rule. However, Aristotle is also concerned with establishing that there are in fact natural slaves, since the ideal *polis* of Books VII and VIII requires that there be natural slaves. In fact, given that Aristotle's *polis* is a slave society (and not just a society with slaves),¹⁴ Aristotle (insofar as he believed that his prescriptions were actualizable, and presumably he believed this, if he criticized what we can call Plato's "utopianism" for being too impractical and advanced his own prescriptions as being far more practical than Plato's) requires that there be a substantial number of people whose enslavement is just. If this is the case, then we have some evidence to support the view that Aristotle's account of natural slavery is ideological, at least insofar as it is a rationalization of an utterly false conclusion (*i.e.*, that there is a large number of people for whom slavery is both just and beneficial) that he needs in order for his project to be viable. However, this evidence is not yet sufficient, for it is clear that showing that Aristotle needed a large number of people to be natural slaves for his normative political account to work is not sufficient evidence for claiming that Aristotle did not treat the question of whether there are any natural slaves as an open question. This argument provides some evidence, but we still require more evidence. After all, any political theorist who wishes to advance a coherent normative account requires that certain facts should go their way (or that certain states of affairs should obtain), but that does not imply that she is not treating questions about whether the relevant states of affairs obtain as closed questions (*i.e.*, questions that the theorist has already decided the answers to without a sincere examination of the relevant evidence). We require additional evidence if we are to establish that Aristotle's account of natural slavery is ideological. In particular, we need to

14 It should be noted that ancient Athens is classified as being one of only five genuine slave societies that have existed in world history. According to T. E. Rihll there are two factors that qualify a society to be a slave society rather than just a society with slaves: "the sheer number of slaves, relative to the population as a whole and the significance of the role slaves played in the society at issue, especially economically" (Rihll, 2011, 48).

investigate whether Aristotle had access to evidence that would have obviously counted against his claims.

4. Aristotle's Proto-Racialization of Natural Slavery

I think that the additional evidence that is required for establishing that Aristotle's account of natural slavery is ideological comes in the shape of what I will describe as Aristotle's "proto-racialization" of natural slavery (*i.e.*, his endorsement of the claim that all non-Greeks are natural slaves). It is one thing to claim that there are extremely infrequent cases when people are born who would be better off if they were enslaved (a claim which I think is false, but which does at least have some relative degree of plausibility, given the context within which Aristotle was working, when compared in any case to Aristotle's claim that all non-Greeks are natural slaves), but Aristotle does not just make this claim; he goes on to make the claim that all non-Greeks are natural slaves (1252b4–8, 1285a19–21).¹⁵

It is here that the ideological character of Aristotle's account is most apparent. For, as I have argued above, Aristotle could not countenance an answer to the question of whether there are any natural slaves that took the form: "yes, but this happens extremely rarely as a kind of aberration in nature." Aristotle could not countenance such an answer because he needed a large population of people whose enslavement would be just, in order to provide the citizens of his *polis* with sufficient leisure. For if Aristotle believed that his ideal *polis* needed roughly the same proportion of the population to be slaves as in his contemporary Athens, then he would have believed that he needed between 15% and 40% of the population to be slaves.¹⁶ I think

15 I should note that this seems to be how Aristotle was interpreted by Plutarch. According to Plutarch, Alexander "did not follow Aristotle's advice to treat Greeks as if he were their leader, and other peoples as if he were their master; to have regard for the Greeks as for friends and kindred, but to conduct himself towards other peoples as though they were plants or animals; for to do so would have been to cumber his leadership with numerous battles and banishments and festering seditions" (quoted from Isaac, 2004, 301). This interpretation of Aristotle's advice was also shared by Eratosthenes, who is reported by Strabo as having written that "Alexander was advised to treat Greeks as friends and barbarians as enemies. This is silly, because some Greeks are bad and some barbarians civilized. . . . For this reason Alexander, ignoring the advice, received and favored all men of good repute" (quoted from Badian, 1958, 435).

16 The lowest modern estimate for the percentage of the population who were slaves in ancient Athens is 15% (which, according to this estimate, would still have been a slave society) while the highest modern estimate is 40% (Rihll, 2011).

it is not at all unfair to say that had Aristotle examined the relevant evidence in an unbiased manner, an honest intellectual mistake would (at most) have led him to the answer that I have advanced above, but by no means can we say that an honest mistake in reasoning and the evaluation of evidence could have led him to conclude that all or most non-Greeks are natural slaves. I think that it is on this point that the ideological character of Aristotle's account of natural slavery becomes too obvious to ignore, especially when we consider that most of the slaves in Aristotle's Athens were of non-Greek origin.¹⁷ For in this case, Aristotle's claim that non-Greeks are natural slaves is so clearly in contradiction with the empirical evidence that he had available to him that we are forced to explain it by resorting to the concept of ideology. For Aristotle is in effect claiming that (more or less) all non-Greeks lack rational foresight (*i.e.*, the ability to engage in long-term planning). In fact, Aristotle contradicts himself on this issue throughout the *Politics*, for he does make frequent references (some of them rather positive) to the Carthaginians' constitution (1272b25–30, 1273a20–30, 1273b8–10, 1320b4–5), and he does make a reference to Cyrus' revolt against the Medes (1312a10–13). In fact, we should also note that Aristotle characterizes Cyrus as a king, *i.e.*, one who rules for the sake of the common good, rather than as a tyrant (1310b35–38). Hence, in this sense he did implicitly concede that some non-Greeks were capable of some kind of deliberation (even ethical deliberation), and this seems to contradict (or at least is in tension with) Aristotle's claim in Book I that for non-Greeks "their community consists of a male and a female slave" (1252b5–8). The point is that Aristotle sometimes slips into making claims to the effect that non-Greeks are capable of engaging in long-term planning and that they are able to organize themselves so as to create complex political, social and economic structures.

One objection that can be raised against describing Aristotle as engaging in a proto-racialization of slavery is that the concept of race is a modern concept, and that to bring it into this discussion represents a form of anachronism. For example, Oliver Cox has argued that "it may be demonstrated that racial antagonism, as we know it today, never existed in the world before about 1492; moreover, racial

17 Millett has noted that "it is impossible to identify even a handful of Greeks as slaves in classical Athens" (Millett, 2007, 194).

feeling developed concomitantly with the development of our modern [capitalist] social system” (Cox, 1959, xxx). However, I do not think that describing Aristotle as engaging in a proto-racialization of the category of the slave by nature contradicts the basic point that Oliver Cox was making. Immanuel Wallerstein, clearly influenced by Cox on this point, argues that “historical capitalism developed an ideological framework of oppressive humiliation which had never previously existed, and which today we call sexism and racism” (Wallerstein, 1995, 102). The reason he gives for this claim is that racism is quite different from xenophobia (fear of the stranger, which of course existed before capitalism). According to Wallerstein, “racism is that set of ideological statements combined with that set of continuing practices which have had the consequence of maintaining a high correlation of ethnicity and work-force allocation over time” (Wallerstein, 1995, 78). In fact, this definition of racism, far from being incompatible with the claim that Aristotle is engaged in a proto-racialization of natural slavery, justifies it. For in Aristotle’s account we have ideological claims (*e.g.*, the claim that all non-Greeks are incapable of rational deliberation) that served to stabilize a socioeconomic system within which slave labor was correlated with ethnicity in a diachronic manner. Aristotle’s theory of natural slavery served to justify and stabilize the practices whereby people belonging to ethnic groups from Thrace and the Near East, where most slaves in Athens came from, were assigned the lowest status in the hierarchy of labor, namely that of slaves.¹⁸

However, I think that the qualification “proto” is important because Aristotle was faced with a problem in terms of finding a suitable physiological marker by which to distinguish the members of ethnic groups that were marked for slavery from the members of ethnic groups purportedly marked for mastery. The problem was that Aristotle could not use the physiological marker that comes to mind when one thinks of slavery today, namely skin color. He could not do so because Greeks in the classical period were not significantly lighter in skin color than people belonging to ethnic groups from the Near East, and they were not significantly darker in skin color than people from Thrace. This means that Aristotle could not have a physiological marker that would be difficult to disguise. However,

18 According to David Lewis most slaves in Classical Athens came from Asia Minor, the eastern Balkans (also known in the literature as the Black Sea regions), and (Greater) Syria (Lewis 2011).

it seems that if he had the chance to employ a physiological marker that could not be hidden easily or mistaken for a different marker, he would have employed it. Recall Aristotle's claim that natural slaves have bodies that are suited for labor while individuals who should be masters have bodies that make them unable to engage in labor (1254b25–27). Of course, the idea of a body that marked itself out as the body of a master or a slave requires the existence of a very salient physiological marker, and the Europeans of the early modern period were able to find such a salient physiological marker in skin color. Hence, I do not take myself to be contradicting Oliver Cox's claim that racism as we know it today did not exist before the late 15th to the early 16th centuries. However, I think that if we recognize that, in principle, skin color is not the only possible physiological marker that can be used, we can recognize that Aristotle's account is much closer to modern racism than it is to xenophobia. Slaves from the Near East and Thrace were certainly not "strange" to Aristotle; they were part of his household.

Moreover, there is an additional explanatory benefit to describing Aristotle's account of natural slavery as involving a "proto-racialization" of this category. It enables us to explain why, as Sylvia Wynter has noted, Aristotle's theory of natural slavery, as taken up by the Scottish philosopher John Mair, was essentially adopted wholesale by the jurists who attempted to establish the Spanish crown's right to rule (and more specifically its right to despotic rule in Aristotle's sense) over the "New World." King Ferdinand's jurists used Aristotle's theory of natural slavery in order to argue that the indigenous peoples of the Americas were slaves by nature, and consequently that it was both just and beneficial for them that they be enslaved by the Spanish (Wynter, 2003, 296). Aristotle's theory of natural slavery played a crucial role in the development of the ideological apparatus that helped justify slavery in the "New World." In fact, it seems that the only thing that prevented Aristotle's theory of natural slavery from becoming a fully blown racialized account of slavery was the fact that Aristotle could not find a suitable, *i.e.*, sufficiently salient and difficult-to-conceal, physiological mark that could be used to distinguish between those for whom slavery was just and those who should be masters. The justifiers of slavery in the 15th and 16th centuries were able to find a "suitable" physiological marker in skin color, and with Aristotle's

theory of natural slavery in hand they were able to set the intellectual foundations of the ideology of early modern slavery.

We have seen above that Aristotle contradicts himself: on the one hand he wants to argue that non-Greeks lack the capacity to deliberate and that consequently their enslavement is both just and beneficial for them; on the other hand he sometimes slips into admitting that non-Greeks have done and can do things that imply that they can engage in rational deliberation. Aristotle's account seems to be self-contradictory in another respect. On the one hand, he claims that "because non-Greeks are by nature more slavish in their character than Greeks, those in Asia being more so than those in Europe, they tolerate rule by a master without any complaint" (1285a19–21). Here, he seems to suggest that non-Greeks who live in Asia would make the best slaves (because they lack spirit, *i.e.*, they have no desire to rule themselves). One therefore presumes that in the ideal *polis* the slaves would be from Asia because they will be unlikely to agitate for freedom. Yet, in Book VII, Aristotle also claims that "it is better to hold out freedom as a reward to all slaves" (1330a32). Now, if Aristotle was serious about his depiction of the slavish or servile character of non-Greeks living in Asia, and if we assume that the slaves in the ideal *polis* would be from Asia (which is a plausible assumption, given Aristotle's own assumptions), then it seems unlikely that there is any benefit (say, in terms of increased productivity) that can be derived from holding out freedom as a reward to such individuals, precisely because "they tolerate rule by a master without any complaint" (1285a19–21). This seems to show that Aristotle was not quite serious about his own characterization of the psychology of non-Greeks from Asia. So even if Aristotle suggests the promise of freedom as a kind of Machiavellian ploy, this suggestion presupposes that his own account of the psychology of those who are purportedly justly enslaved is not correct (*i.e.*, that non-Greeks from Asia do indeed have some kind of yearning for freedom).

I suggest that this kind of inconsistency is exactly what one would expect from a theory that is ideological in character. I think one could argue that the very manner in which Aristotle seems to contradict himself in the *Politics* (with regard to the claim that non-Greeks are natural slaves and what this implies) suggests that he was in the grip of an ideology. It is important to understand that one could be advancing ideological claims without realizing that this is what one

is doing. The idea that the factors that explain ideological constructions are not the ones that the thinkers who produce the ideological constructions in question would identify as the explanation for their thought is clearly presented by Engels in a letter to Franz Mehring (dated July 14, 1893):

Ideology is a process which is, it is true, carried out consciously by what we call a thinker, but with a consciousness that is spurious. The actual motives by which he is impelled remain hidden from him, for otherwise it would not be an ideological process. Hence the motives he supposes himself to have are either spurious or illusory. . . . He works solely with conceptual material which he automatically assumes to have been engendered by thought without inquiring whether it might not have some more remote origin unconnected therewith. (Engels, 2004, 164.)

Consequently, to claim that Aristotle is advancing ideological claims does not necessarily amount to claiming that he was conscious that this is what he was doing, and perhaps this explains his carelessness. However, if Paul Cartledge (1993) is correct when he claims that by Aristotle's time the inferiority of non-Greeks was a well-established belief on the popular level (though, as we shall see Aristotle had access to sources that challenged this belief), then Aristotle might not have expected any substantial resistance or pushback from whoever was the intended audience of the *Politics*. It is also interesting to note that Aristotle's identification of non-Greeks with natural slaves seems to reflect the identification of slaves and non-Greeks in Athenian legal culture.¹⁹ To be sure, Aristotle does distinguish between slaves by law and natural slaves (1255a3–6), *i.e.*, on Aristotle's account one can occupy the legal position of a slave, but not be a natural slave, so that one's enslavement would be unjust. However, since most of the slaves in Athenian society were non-Greeks, the potential critical power of Aristotle's distinction is curtailed by his identification of non-Greeks with natural slaves. In short, as I have suggested above, the concept of ideology when it is applied with rigor and clarity, far from leading us to merely pass over Aristotle's account of slavery or to treat it in a careless and dismissive manner, allows us to explain its logical structure (*i.e.*, its inconsistency).

19 Robert Schlaifer notes that, in Athenian society, "the bases of the legal positions of the slave and the foreigner were the same" (Schlaifer, 1936, 181).

5. *The Absence of Aristotle's Concept of Habit in His Account of the Differences Between Greeks and Non-Greeks*

Perhaps we can gain additional insight into the ideological character of Aristotle's approach to natural slavery by briefly examining the account that he gives of the differences between Greeks and non-Greeks in Book VII, and his account of the causes of those differences. Aristotle discusses two groups of non-Greeks: the Northern Europeans, whom he characterizes as being "full of spirit but somewhat deficient in intelligence and craft knowledge" (1327b21–24), and the non-Greeks who live in Asia, whom he characterizes as having intelligence and craft knowledge while lacking spirit (1327b26–27).²⁰ Aristotle claims that the Northern Europeans are relatively free, but apolitical (presumably because they are spirited but lacking in intelligence), while the non-Greeks who live in Asia are "ruled and enslaved" (1327b26). Aristotle seems to want to attribute these differences to differences in climate. What is striking about this argument is that although Aristotle had the conceptual tools to attempt to account for the purported differences among different ethnic and cultural groups in terms of socialization and habits (*i.e.*, in terms of the effects of political, social, and economic structures), he does not even pretend to attempt to do this. Instead, he simply dehistoricizes and naturalizes these differences, a move which is common among those who advance ideological claims. I think that this point is especially important because Aristotle is a thinker who clearly recognized, in other contexts, the importance of habits and institutions in shaping human behavior; yet here he does not even attempt to apply this kind of nuanced social and behavioral analysis. I suggest that this kind of compartmentalization (the manner in which Aristotle accepts a mode of analysis that he might regard as being overly simplistic in other contexts) is further evidence of the ideological character of his account of natural slavery.

Jill Frank refers to this explanation of ethnic differences as a function of the effects of climate in order to argue that, for Aristotle, the distinction between those who are naturally free and those who are naturally unfree "rests on something other than a fixture of foreign psychology" (Frank, 2004, 102). Contrary to what Frank claims,

²⁰ Presumably he is referring to a limited intelligence that does not encompass high-level intellectual tasks.

Aristotle never attempts to explain the (perceived) “natural slavishness” of non-Greeks by referring to their habituation to tyrannical institutions (which is what he could have done). Instead, he seems to suggest consistently that non-Greeks are ruled by tyrants because they are naturally slavish and not the other way around.²¹ Frank claims that, for Aristotle, “there is nothing immutable that singles out any particular person as a slave. Instead, slave identity, like citizen identity, is determined by activity” (Frank, 2004, 95). However, Aristotle begins his discussion of the question of the existence of people who are natural slaves by noting that “some things are distinguished right from birth, some suited to rule and others to being ruled” (1254a20–22). Hence, I think it is highly implausible that Aristotle himself held that there is nothing immutable that renders individuals worthy of enslavement according to his account of natural slavery.

We should also note that Aristotle had access to a more nuanced approach, but did not attempt to employ it. We do know that Herodotus emphasized the importance of custom and habit in shaping the behavior of different peoples, and that he emphasized the way these behaviors and characteristics change as different peoples come into contact with one another and as their social institutions develop (Rood, 2006, 302; Flower, 2006).

6. *The Neglected Greek Critics of Natural Slavery*

It is important to note that an ideological critique must treat the object of the critique (in this case Aristotle’s account of natural slavery) in its historical context. I have already mentioned Herodotus’ view as an alternative to Aristotle’s account of non-Greeks. It is significant for our purposes to note that some of Aristotle’s near-contemporaries as well as some of his contemporaries rejected the existence of natural slaves (*i.e.*, they argued that slavery as such was unjustifiable). For instance, we know that the sophist Antiphon of Athens wrote the following in the late 5th century BCE: “By nature we are all constituted alike in all things, both barbarians and Greeks. This can be seen by

21 When Aristotle claims that “because non-Greeks are by nature more slavish in their character than Greeks, those in Asia being more so than those in Europe, they tolerate rule by a master without any complaint” (1285a1921), he is clearly attributing the (perceived) prevalence of tyranny in Asia to the “natural slavishness” of Asians, and not the other way around (contrary to Frank’s thesis).

consideration of those things which are essential by nature to all men. . . . In these things no barbarian is set from us, nor any Greek” (quoted from Baldry, 1965, 44). It is clear that Antiphon’s claim that all human beings are constituted alike in all things implies a strong rejection of the possibility that there are natural slaves, in so far as natural slaves (on Aristotle’s account) suffer from some kind of innate (and apparently hereditary) psychological deficiency (*i.e.*, the absence of the deliberative faculty). We also know that Philemon, a comic poet who was around one generation younger than Aristotle, is quoted as saying that “though a man be a slave he is made of the same flesh as you. For no one was ever made a slave by nature; but chance has enslaved a man’s body” (quoted from Westermann, 1955, 24).²² The question of whether Antiphon and Philemon believed what they said is irrelevant for my argument; I am only interested in showing that such views were in circulation and that Aristotle had alternatives before him.

Aristotle himself was aware of the existence of such attitudes towards slavery (1255a3, 1255a10), yet his approach towards these objections is rather muddled. It seems to me that if his intention was to refer to those who held views that were similar to the views expressed by Antiphon and Philemon, then his claim that their arguments “have neither force nor anything else to persuade us that one who is more virtuous should not rule or be master” (1255a20–21) is rather odd. First, it seems that the opponents of natural slavery held that no one was a slave by nature; however, to argue that no one is a slave by nature is quite different from arguing that even if there were people who could be accurately described as “natural slaves,” their enslavement would be unjust. Aristotle seems to think that he has side-stepped the main objection by arguing that the latter claim is false. He does not really respond to the direct challenge that was posed to his views by the likes of Antiphon (*i.e.*, the claim that, as a matter of fact, there are no slaves by nature). Second, Aristotle seems to make a partial concession to the opponents of slavery when he concedes (in effect) that a rigid ethnic division (*i.e.*, one that is hereditary in character) between non-Greek natural slaves and those who are naturally free (Greeks) cannot be maintained: “But often, though nature has a tendency to bring this about [*i.e.*, to have natural slaves be born to natural slaves

²² The sophist Alcidas is also quoted as saying that “God has left all men free; nature has made no man a slave” (quoted from Baldry, 1965, 60).

and to have naturally free individuals be born to naturally free individuals], it is nevertheless unable to do so" (1255b1–3).²³ Note that Aristotle still wants to maintain that "nature has a tendency to bring this about," for he clearly wants to claim that the division between natural slaves and those who are naturally free is really a proto-racial division. Yet we should note that to say that nature has a tendency to bring about something, but that this tendency is *often* thwarted, seems to be incoherent, given Aristotle's own conception of what it is for something to be natural. For in his *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle makes the following claim: "In all our speculations concerning nature, what we have to consider is the general rule; for that is natural which applies either universally or for the most part" (663b27–29). So, we can ask how is it that Aristotle is able to identify a tendency of nature that is not even actualized in the majority of cases (*i.e.*, how can Aristotle describe this as something natural)? Aristotle in attempting to defend his theory of natural slavery ends up contradicting a key tenet of his philosophy of nature. The general point is that Aristotle's engagement with the opponents of natural slavery is rather superficial. Certainly, we cannot plausibly believe that this is the best that someone of Aristotle's exceptional intelligence could have done in terms of presenting and responding to their arguments, had he been interested in seriously engaging with those arguments. This serves to corroborate my claim that Aristotle is not treating the question of whether there are any natural slaves as an open question and that his account is largely ideological in character.

7. Conclusion

When we consider all of the relevant evidence, it is difficult to avoid concluding that Aristotle's account of natural slavery is largely ideological, in the sense that it is comprised of claims that are so obviously false, relative to the evidence that he had available to him, that we can only explain how someone as intelligent as he could have held them by appealing to their function in upholding the perceived interests of slave-owning Greeks and the Greeks' image of themselves as being inherently superior to non-Greeks. The contemporaries of

²³ This point is also made by Cambiano (1987), but he emphasizes Aristotle's discussion of physical differences between natural slaves and those who are naturally free (1254b25–36), whereas, I think the issue is clearer in the passage that I have cited.

Aristotle who believed that there was no such thing as natural slavery and that all slavery was unjust were challenging an entire form of life, for to make such a claim in a slave society is to claim that one's society is fundamentally characterized by injustice (of course, calling for abolition is a different matter entirely). Hence, in rejecting this view, Aristotle was also rejecting a chance to offer a radical moral critique of contemporary Athenian society. In the final analysis, I think that Aristotle's account of natural slavery was motivated by an attempt to defend slavery as it was actually practiced in contemporary Athens (and in the Greek world in general). To be sure, Aristotle's account of the sort of slavery that can be justified (*i.e.*, "natural slavery") could, in principle, have been used to criticize the practice of slavery as it existed (*e.g.*, by denying that most of those who were enslaved are natural slaves). However, by equating non-Greeks with natural slaves, Aristotle made it extremely unlikely that it would be used in this manner, and he must have been aware of the fact that most of his contemporaries believed that non-Greeks were innately inferior to Greeks, just as he must have been aware of the fact that most slaves were non-Greeks. As I have emphasized throughout this discussion, when we consider Aristotle's account of natural slavery in light of his equation between non-Greeks and natural slaves, it becomes clear that it is largely ideological in character. It seems to me that Aristotle could not bring himself to admit that his society was structurally unjust, and so he ended up defending the indefensible. Nonetheless, it should be clear that my purpose in writing this paper is not to gloat over Aristotle's failings. If there is any lesson to be derived from analyzing his account of natural slavery, it is the importance of recognizing that the moral and political claims which appear to us as the products of reasoned philosophical reflection may in fact be ideological in nature.²⁴ To observe how a philosopher who was as intelligent as Aristotle was unable to emancipate himself from the prejudices of his culture, ethnic group, and socioeconomic class is an exercise in humility which should be translated into an effort to understand the social determinants of philosophical thought. This involves taking

²⁴ Marx makes a similar point in a passing reference to Aristotle's account of slave labor in the opening chapter on the commodity form in Volume I of *Capital*: "If a giant thinker like Aristotle could err in his evaluation of slave-labor, why should a dwarf economist like Bastiat be right in his evaluation of wage-labor?" (Marx, 1976, 175, n35).

potential applications of the Marxist concept of ideology seriously in the study of the history of philosophy.

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