

Aristotle and Hobbes on the Importance of Individuals Versus Institutions

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Abstract

Jeremy Waldron begins his Political Political Theory with the following question: “Institutions, or the character of those who inhabit them? Should students of politics make a study of the one or of the other?” (Waldron 2016: 1). His answer is indicated by his subtitle – “Essays on Institutions” – though the question itself is far from settled. This paper will shed light on what is at stake in this question by examining the historical bases for each pole: Thomas Hobbes as defender of institutions, and Aristotle as champion of virtuous individuals.

Supplementing the empirical literature on this question with arguments from the history of political theory clarifies the assumptions and political implications of each answer. Aristotle’s argument that healthy politics requires virtuous individuals conceives of politics as the practice of judgment (*phronesis*), places moral and civic education at the heart of politics, and entails that there is no universally applicable best regime. Hobbes, on the contrary, defines politics as essentially rule-following, minimizes the importance of moral education, and argues in favour of a universally-valid regime type. This paper will demonstrate how of these issues is conceptually bound up with the relative weight given to individuals or institutions. To this end the arguments of Aristotle and Hobbes will be presented and contextualized within current debates regarding this question.

There is a longstanding debate in political thought concerning the importance of political institutions relative to the individual actors that fill them. Indeed it goes back to the beginnings of western political philosophy, from Plato's insistence that if we had philosopher kings we would not have to trouble with matters of specific legislation (*Rep* 501a, 502b-c), to Hume's almost mathematical deduction of effects from particular regime-types (Hume 1985), to name but two examples. This issue has been re-ignited in the popular imagination with the election of President Trump; academics as well as journalists and political commentators have written much on the confrontation between US political institutions and Donald Trump.¹ The following headlines illustrate the range of views on the matter:

- Containing Trump
- American institutions will stop Trump from destroying the country (even if he wants to)
- Institutions can't save America from Trump²

Jeremy Waldron's *Political Political Theory* predates this specific debate, but he asks the same question with a theoretical purpose in mind: "Institutions, or the character of those who inhabit them? Should students of politics make a study of the one or of the other?" (Waldron 2016: 1) He ultimately sides with Hume, Mill, and others who give institutions a preeminent role in determining political outcomes. His work is useful insofar as it brings to the fore the precise question to be asked. It is essentially the same question as what is referred to in political science parlance as the agent-structure problem. Do agents determine the structure, do structures construct individual preferences and behaviors, or are they mutually constitutive?

Theoretical debates aside, the character of individual politicians is always at the heart of stories of political success or decline. The names of Pericles, Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, and others are often thought to be indispensable for an accurate understanding of political history.³

The purpose of this paper is not to address this debate head-on, but to broaden the scope of the issues thought to be in play, so to speak. I approach this question by exploring a prominent representative of each position in order to reveal what is at stake and what the issues are on each side. That is, if Institutionalism is true, what are the implications for political life and what can be done to ensure healthy politics going forward? Similarly, if the character of individuals is more important, might that bring moral education back into the realm of the political, for instance?

In order to turn the discussion to these broader implications of the individuals-versus-institutions debate I will examine and compare some relevant features of Aristotle – the champion of virtuous political actors – and Hobbes – who emphasized the need for correct laws and institutions. This paper frames their disagreement in the context of the following question: "What is the best way to ensure and maintain political order?" Although Aristotle and Hobbes

¹ Jedediah Purdy reviews some recent literature on the apparent fragility of American political institutions (Purdy 2018).

² Rauch (2017), Alini (2018), and Jurecic (2018), respectively.

³ Waller Newell's *Tyrants: A History of Power, Injustice & Terror* (2016) does this by tracing three distinct varieties of tyranny to the psychology and worldview of tyrants themselves.

mean different things by “political” and “order,”⁴ this framing of the issue nevertheless allows us to pinpoint their relevant disagreements concerning institutions.

This paper will present two sets of contrary implications related to this debate. I do not present them simply as two issues on which Aristotle and Hobbes happen to disagree. Instead, I think they are logically related to their positions on the question concerning individuals versus institutions. They are as follows:

1. Whether political life is best conceived of as exercising judgment or as rule-following
2. The importance and content of moral education

Aristotle: Virtuous Rulers

I begin with a brief outline of each thinker’s argument for the importance of individuals or institutions. Aristotle poses the following question: “whether it is more advantageous to be ruled by the best man or by the best laws[?]” (*Pol* 1286a7-9).⁵ His answer is given, among other places, in his classification of regime-types. The three healthy regimes are distinguished by the number of rulers – one, few, or many⁶ – along with their corruptions (*Pol* 1279a22-1280a5, 1289b27-1295a24). What is notable here is that there are no institutional differences between each healthy regime and its corrupt form. The difference between kingship and tyranny, for example, is simply whether the individual in authority rules with an eye to his own private good or to the good common to all (*Pol* 1279a33-38). The parallel treatment of regime types in *Nicomachean Ethics* is more explicit in tracing this difference to the character of the rulers. There Aristotle attributes tyranny to a “vicious king,” the change from aristocracy to oligarchy to “vice in the rulers,” and he frames the overall problem as consisting of “bad” versus “decent” rulers (*NE* 1160b10-20).

The chief difference, then, is whether the ruler or rulers care for the common good or not, which is evidently tied to whether they are virtuous or vicious. The implication is that any institutional arrangement can turn bad if the rulers turn bad, or if bad rulers replace decent ones. To put it another way, even the best political institutions will not prevent tyranny. The priority of virtue is confirmed in book 4 of *Politics* with the claim that the best regime “wishes to be established on the basis of virtue that is furnished with equipment” (*Pol* 1289a32-34).

Hobbes: Laws of Nature

In Hobbes’ politics, institutions are the political corollary of method in Descartes’ and Bacon’s epistemologies, that is, a set of constraints intended to render private judgment unnecessary.⁷ The epistemological benefit of a rigorous method is that one does not need to be particularly wise or knowledgeable to reach truth, as long as the methodological rules are followed. Similarly, Hobbes deduced a set of rules to govern political society that, if followed, will preserve peace. The character of the rulers is inconsequential as long as they enforce these correct rules. Subjects also do not need to be particularly virtuous as long as their private passions are held in check by the correct laws.

⁴ Cf. Habermas on the difference between Aristotle and Hobbes: “To be sure, ‘order’ thereby changes its meaning, just as does the ‘domain’ which is being order – the subject matter of political science itself is changed. The order of virtuous conduct is changed into the regulation of social intercourse” (Habermas 1974: 43).

⁵ References to Aristotle’s *Politics* are to Carnes Lord’s translation (1984).

⁶ Ultimately, he will later clarify, it is not the number of rulers that is essential to the differences between oligarchy and democracy, but instead whether it is the rich or the poor that rule (*Pol* 1279b34-37).

⁷ See Descartes’ *Discourse On Method*, especially parts two and four, and Bacon’s “Plan of ‘The Great Renewal’” and the second book of *New Organon*.

The fourteenth and fifteenth chapters of *Leviathan* give a “deduction of the lawes of nature” (Hobbes 1987: 79)⁸ from the one universal and undeniable fact: man’s fear of death. We have a certain passion that inclines us to peace – the fear of death – and reason calculates the necessary and sufficient conditions for such peace (*Ibid.*: 63). Like Cartesian method, Hobbes’ system allows us to “plug in,” so to speak, any individual ruler or group of rulers, and as long as the appropriate laws are followed the state of nature can be avoided.

These laws of nature, understood here as political institutions, have a connotation of “constraint” that isn’t present in Aristotle; they designate restrictions on our violent tendencies in order to preserve peace. Hobbes defines a law of nature as “a precept...by which a man is forbidden to do, that, which is destructive of his life” (*Ibid.*: 64). Their importance, therefore, lies in the fact that in the absence of their effective enforcement nothing will prevent men from acting violently (*Ibid.*: 85).

The implication for our current discussion is that political breakdown is caused by men as *makers* of commonwealths rather than as the *matter* out of which commonwealths are built (*Ibid.*: 167). That is, the institutional structures made by man are to blame, not the character of citizens or rulers themselves.

Implication #1: Politics as rule-following vs. exercising judgment

The first relevant implication of the individuals-institutions debate pertains to the overall conception of political life. For Aristotle, political life consists in exercising practical judgment concerning the good life. Politics is understood as an extension of ethics, which is the study of the good life, and more specifically, of the virtues and habits conducive to the good life. Aristotle claims in the seventh chapter of *Nicomachean Ethics* book 2 that discourse about particular instances is “more truthful” than discourse about universal principles, due to the fact that action – i.e. the sphere of ethics – takes place in the world of particulars. This elevates the virtue of *phronēsis*, or prudence, to a prominent place. Jürgen Habermas’ description of Aristotelian *phronēsis* as “a prudent understanding of the situation” highlights its importance for the situational spheres of ethics and politics (Habermas 1973: 42). Action necessarily takes place in the world of changing circumstances, so the ethical man and political ruler must be able to understand what is at stake in each situation and act accordingly.

Eric Voegelin’s discussion of *phronēsis* in his essay entitled “Right by Nature” (1978: 61-70) depicts it as the “existential faculty” whereby its possessor can apply the unchanging standards of natural right in the constantly changing world. Moreover, he distinguishes *phronēsis* from *episteme*; practical judgment cannot be reduced to following rules. Instead of being a set of rules to be memorized or mathematical deductions to be carried out, it is a practical skill that can only be acquired via experience (Voegelin 1978: 153-154; *NE* 1141b14-24, 1142a13-31).⁹

This is articulated in book 1 of *Metaphysics*, which makes a distinction between art and experience. Art is the so-called pure theoretical apprehension of universal truths and first causes of things, and experience is the knowledge that is useful for action. From the theoretical perspective of the *Metaphysics*, art is preferable to experience insofar as it contains knowledge of what is for its own sake, and is ontologically prior and “most ruling” (*Meta.* 981b26-982a19).

However, even in this work devoted to transcending the useful knowledge of experience,

⁸ All references to *Leviathan* are to the page numbers in the original 1651 edition, not the pagination of Macpherson’s 1987 edition.

⁹ All references to *Nicomachean Ethics* are to Joe Sachs’ translation (2002).

Aristotle admits that experience – that is, knowledge of particular things rather than abstract principles and causes – is often more successful “for the purpose of acting” (981a13-24). This is consistent with common sense, as the auto mechanic is better able to repair a car than the engineers in suits at company headquarters. Though they may know why the cars were built in such and such a way, it is the mechanic who has the experience of repairing them every day. We can apply this principle to ethics and politics – which, we remember, are intimately related in Aristotle;¹⁰ experience is the knowledge useful for action in the world of particulars, rather than hifalutin principles of justice that may or may not be practically useful in the world of action.

Aristotle confirms the importance of *phronēsis* in the fourth chapter of *Politics* book 3. Despite bringing ruler and ruled together in order to avoid positing a master-slave relationship between citizens and rulers, Aristotle nevertheless suggests that there are different virtues specific to each. The virtue of the one ruled is true opinion, but the virtue of the good ruler is *phronēsis* (*Pol.* 1277b25-32).

In Hobbes, we see no parallel emphasis on the virtue required to rule properly. There is no wiggle-room to allow for particularities of experience, geography, the possibilities and limitations given by the character of the population, and so on.¹¹ Whereas Aristotle allows for *phronēsis* to “translate” the content of natural right to specific and changing local circumstances, from the universal desire to avoid death Hobbes directly deduces the laws of nature which “concern the doctrine of Civill Society” (Hobbes 1987: 78). The point here is that there is a single unchanging first principle – human nature – and a mathematical deduction of universal rules that apply everywhere human nature is as he describes, and it goes without saying that he takes his description of human nature and social problem it causes as universally valid.

Thus it is not prudent rulers that ensure good politics, but the application and enforcement of his nineteen laws of nature. These laws are described as “Immutable and Eternal” (*Ibid.*: 79), following from the fact that reason mathematically presents them as the means to peace, which all men agree is good. Hobbesian politics replaces the Aristotelian prudent understanding of changing concrete situations with a mathematical “science of what is good” (*Ibid.*). Indeed, he goes on to hesitate to even call them laws at all, at one point preferring to think of them primarily as conclusions or theorems (*Ibid.*: 80).¹²

Implication #2: The Importance, and content, of civic education

One would expect a comprehensive political vision that held virtuous individuals in high regard to similarly hold moral education in high regard, and of course that is what we see in

¹⁰ Cf. *NE* 1141b24-25: “In fact, the political art is the same active condition as practical judgment, though the what it is to be each of them is not the same.”

¹¹ The first chapter of Habermas’ *Theory and Practice* encapsulates the central difference between Aristotle and Hobbes clearly: “First, the claim of scientifically grounded social philosophy aims at establishing once and for all the conditions for the correct order of the state and society as such. Its assertions are to be valid independently of place, time, and circumstances, and are to permit an enduring foundation for communal life, regardless of the historical situation. Second, the translation of knowledge into practice...is a technical problem. With a knowledge of the general conditions for a correct order of the state and of society, practical prudent action of human beings toward each other is no longer required, but what is required instead is the correctly calculated generation of rules, relationships, and institutions....This separation of politics from morality replaces instruction in leading a good and just life with making possible a life of well-being within a correctly constituted order” (Habermas 1974: 43).

¹² The mathematical-deduction character of Hobbes’ system is also indicated in the Epistle Dedicatory to *The Elements of Law* (Hobbes 1999: 19-20).

Aristotle. Hobbes' emphasis on man as maker of commonwealths instead of their material, alluded to above, is really a reversal of Aristotle's emphasis on the material out of which things are constituted, in his natural as well as his political philosophy. Material, in Aristotelian physics, is not the passive stuff on which external laws of nature work, as it is in the contemporary mind. Rather, it is best understood as potency that either actively or inactively reaches toward certain forms. The material of the acorn reaches toward and seeks to take on the form of the oak tree, and the material of earth reaches toward its natural place below water, since to be in that position "is part of its very form" (Ross 1964: 75). Forms do not mystically come into being unless there is a material substrate in which they can be instantiated. Matter-as-potency plays a causal role in determining the forms to be brought about.

In the *Politics* the citizens are the material and the regime type is the form. It follows from this that the right kind of citizenry is required for healthy regimes of the right type. The citizen body, for that reason, is treated as part of the equipment of regimes. Recall Aristotle's statement that the best regime "wishes to be established on the basis of virtue that is furnished with equipment" (*Pol* 1289a32-34). Indeed, and in keeping with the causal account given in his natural philosophy, regime type is contingent upon the character of the population (*Pol* 1295b25-28, 1296b13-14, 1337a11-17).

It stands to reason that producing a "good" population is a prerequisite to a good regime, and of course Aristotle places heavy emphasis on the moral education of the citizenry, writing that "the best character is always the cause of a better regime" (*Pol* 1337a16-17).

The content of Aristotle's political education is moral, and invokes the distinction between ends and means.¹³ It is not a capitalist skills or job training program to serve economic prosperity, but a liberal education in the literal sense of the term. In the fourteenth chapter of *Politics* book 7 he writes that "it is with a view to these aims that they must be educated," referring in general to noble things that are done for their own sake, rather than for the sake of other things (*Pol* 1333b3-4). Later in the same chapter he describes these noble things as "best [for men] both privately and in common" (*Pol* 1333b36). This education is Liberal in that it prioritizes the activities that are done freely rather than in the service of another end, as peace is the goal of war and leisure is the goal of work. Of course, this parallels the sociological distinction between free men and slaves. The centrality of this view of education to Aristotle's understanding of politics can be seen by considering the very first sentence of the book, in which the political partnership is distinguished from other partnerships on the basis of its looking to living well rather than simply living (*Pol* 1252a5-6). Citizens who have undergone this education will be more worthy of the life of free citizens, and more importantly will be better equipped to constitute a regime that encourages living well.

There is another aspect of civic education, briefly mentioned in book 3 chapter sixteen, that sheds important light on *phronēsis*. In the context of the difference between rule by men or by law, Aristotle raises the prospect of particular situations that might not be covered by law. An interesting balance is struck between blindly following written law, even when it may act as an overly blunt instrument, and giving ultimate authority to rulers to abrogate law whenever they see fit. In cases like these, the wise decision of the rulers comes into force, but such a decision must be "educated by law" (*Pol* 1287a25). Indeed, not only is the education by law a criterion for just judgments, it is later described as a *sufficient condition* for such (*Pol* 1287b25). The relation to *phronēsis* is clear, as some cases cannot be decided by existing law and thus require the practical judgment that comes from experience of particulars more so than knowledge of

¹³ Cf. Ross: "It [i.e. civic education] is so little utilitarian, so predominantly moral" (1964: 268).

universal principles (*Pol* 1287a28, *Meta* 981a16-18). But, and this is stressed by Aristotle, the kind of experience and judgment required in these cases is that educated by the laws themselves. No detailed account is given of how exactly the laws are thought to educate rulers, though it seems like what is meant is that the principles by which law decides on cases it does apply to can be used and applied in different contexts, given the presence of *phronēsis*. Voegelin's depiction of *phronēsis* as a translator of eternal natural right into changing particular circumstances is possibly appropriate here. Another, though not necessarily incompatible, option might be the use of relevant precedent to decide new cases based on principles settled in previous cases. The specifics are not important for the present argument, which is simply that the law plays an important role in the civic and political education of rulers.

Two instances of Hobbesian civic education are found in criminal punishment and civil religion. Both revolve around the goal of creating consensus around the authority and laws of the sovereign, such agreement being the guarantor of stability. While Descartes thought that a socially beneficial consensus could be created by giving everyone the tools to think properly, and hence all arrive at the truth, Hobbes' approach was to use the state's power to produce a citizenry less likely to have divided loyalties or give in to factional conflict. The thirtieth chapter of *Leviathan*, "Of the Office of the Sovereign [sic] Representative," gives the ruler the obligation of "publique instruction, both of Doctrine, and Example" (Hobbes 1987: 175). This obligation is subordinate to the overarching end of the commonwealth, described here as "the procuration of *the safety of the people*" (*Ibid.*). In the same chapter Hobbes distinguishes between revenge and correction as motives of punishment (*Ibid.*: 182). Finally, he seems to place the ultimate responsibility for crimes arising out of ignorance on the Sovereign itself, "whose fault it was, they were no better instructed" (*Ibid.*: 183).¹⁴ The implications for civic education are not fleshed out by Hobbes, though he appears to see in criminal punishment a means, and an obligation, of civic instruction. What should be stressed for the present argument is that the content of this education reverses Aristotle's prioritization of ends over means. If Aristotelian civic education is moral, not utilitarian, Hobbesian civic education is utilitarian, not moral. The educational purpose of criminal punishment is to encourage support for the laws not for their own sake, but for the sake of peace and social stability. Subjects are not to be taught which end to follow or the goods one ought to pursue, but only to respect and follow the laws that are conducive to the end of peace.

Hobbesian civil religion is a well-studied phenomenon, the insightfulness of which was attested to by no less an authority than Rousseau (Rousseau 1913: 109). It is well established that the theological aim was to reinterpret Christianity in such a way as to render it no longer a rival to the worldly authority of the sovereign.¹⁵ We need not say more here than to recognize that Hobbes' devoted almost half of *Leviathan* to theological themes, even though the main lines of a theory of absolute monarchy justified by consent had arguably been established by the end of part II. The theological themes in parts III-IV take on an educational aspect when, for example, Hobbes gives Christian kings the power to exercise pastoral functions, in which he

¹⁴ Maximillian Jaede derives from Hobbes' penal theory a fairly robust account of this aspect of Hobbesian civic education in (2016).

¹⁵ See, for example, Oakeshott (1991: 290-291), Voegelin (1952: 155), and more recently Beiner (2010). Beiner's attempts to go beyond clarifying Hobbes' negative, that is pacifying goal, by highlighting the positive purposes to which Hobbes directs Christianity: "Hobbes's solution is to 'Judaicize' Christianity by reinterpreting Christian Scripture according to a pre-Christian understanding of a political messiah" (Beiner 2010: 48).

includes baptizing, administering the sacraments, and importantly, preaching/teaching (*Ibid.*: 297).

The implication from the penal and religious education seems thus to be that civic education is subordinate to the laws of nature, and that its purpose is to remove any impediments to their effective promulgation and enforcement. Simply put, it must make men more likely to follow the rules set forth by the Leviathan. Such subjects do not need virtue or *phronēsis*; indeed that would do more harm than good, because leaving things to private judgment is asking for disagreement and faction.¹⁶

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has tried to unpack some of the implications of the individuals-institutions debate with the help of Aristotle and Hobbes. From Aristotle we see that if the character of individuals plays a pre-eminent role in producing political outcomes, politics itself requires practical judgement and cannot be reduced to mere rule-following, and that civic education requires a strong liberal component over and above any productive components. On the other hand, Hobbes shows us that if the proper institutions really are our saving grace, then political life is not much more than rule-following, and even civic education should devote itself to teaching said rules and removing impediments to their effective enforcement. The onus is then on men as builders of institutions to craft the best possible institutional and legal order in which men must be taught to play by the rules of the game.

These considerations are not meant to be final or definitive. All of the themes discussed here are worthy of more extended discussion, and more could be said to establish my suggestion that the lessons concerning practical judgment and civic education are in fact logically bound up with the empirical question concerning institutions or individuals. However, it seems at least plausible that they follow roughly in the manner in which Aristotle and Hobbes work them out.

The ink spilled debating whether or not institutions can contain individual holders of executive power could more fruitfully shed light on the nature of political life by paying attention to the related issues raised by this paper. Many voices in our current debates do not answer the “so what?” question. It may be the case that institutions can prevent would-be illiberal rulers from abusing human rights – but what course of action follows from that? Alternatively, if a healthy politics requires virtuous actors, that presumably makes the production of such actors central to the prevention of political disorder. What a political project like that might look like, and how it might be accomplished in an age of value-neutrality, would then become pressing questions for theorists and policy-makers alike. This paper has merely attempted to point out some of these *new* questions, which are really *ancient* questions, in order to deepen contemporary discourses concerning the ever-present reality of political breakdown.

¹⁶ This is a recurring modern critique of the ancients, namely that they permitted or even encouraged endless disagreement but did not seem able to find a way to resolve the problems it caused. Though in the context of the English civil war and the reformation, Hobbes can perhaps be forgiven for prioritizing agreement and stability.

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