

# WHY ARISTOTLE TODAY?

Philosophical scholarship focussed on the work of historical figures is not always seen as “properly philosophical”. Sometimes researchers in the history of philosophy are dismissed as mere “scribes” and only those who claim to generate their own theories are considered truly philosophical. This view of what it means to do philosophy supposes one can cast off or supersede a conceptual inheritance without engaging it. I have never found that possible.

What is our conceptual inheritance? Do we inherit ancient Greek philosophy? It depends, of course, on what we mean by “we” and “our”. The line from ancient Greek thinkers to “the West” in all its resonances as an intellectual tradition and a geographical location is far from direct. For one thing, the Greeks were not obviously the forebears of “the West” – on a map, Greece seems to be more a part of the Near East and North Africa than of Western Europe and the United States. The Greeks only became the ancestors of “the West” in the production of “Europe” as a culturally discrete entity, through those who wished to claim an inheritance that would form “Europe” by wresting the Greeks from the Islamic “others” who had preserved Greek works through the centuries. This disputed heritage and disjointed lineage complicates the sense in which our thinking today is informed by ancient Greeks.

While medieval thinkers – Jewish, Christian, and Islamic – thought through Aristotle, whom they called “the Philosopher”, early modernists broke with medievalists by breaking with Aristotle, who would seem to have been roundly refuted in an age that ushered in science and technology. Yet even when Galileo challenges medieval astronomy rooted in Aristotle’s theory of the celestial heavens, he draws on Aristotle’s method of attending to the way things appear to defend his break from that superlunar theory. Galileo appeals to the authority his adversaries recognized to challenge the commitments of those adversaries. Modernists made much hay of debunking the Aristotle of the medievalists, and various aspects of his biology and zoology do not bear scrutiny by contemporary biologists. But Aristotle’s texts can still be fruitfully mined for analysing the world in which we find ourselves today.

But should we? A growing body of historical scholarship examines and critiques Aristotle’s now well-known

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justifications of slavery, the subordination of women, and his xenophobic and racist views. Some scholars insist that such dubious views are socio-culturally inert and can no longer hurt us. Others argue that Aristotle was merely a product “of his time”. Another suggests that Aristotle should be judged on the basis of whether he had a bad character or evil intent. I have defended Aristotle – against the view that he justifies slavery and the claim that his politics necessitates the subordination of women – but I make those defences, understanding that Aristotle was quite capable of being critical of the world in which he lived; he structures his entire philosophical practice around criticizing the practices and views of his predecessors and contemporaries.

## DID ARISTOTLE’S IDEAS UNDERWRITE A VIEW OF THE WORLD THAT PERPETUATES INEQUALITY?

What interests me is the effect these ideas have in the world. Did Aristotle’s ideas underwrite a view of the world that perpetuates inequality? What possibilities might emerge from considering these texts anew? In this essay, I consider the work of three different scholars of Aristotle, myself included, who draw on Aristotle for insight into contemporary predicaments.

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My work aims to upset the recourse to Aristotle to justify inequality. Perhaps my evangelical upbringing set me on this path by fostering my sense that one could contest the tradition only from within it. Battles over what a sacred text means could have real liberatory consequences. Trained in these hermeneutical trenches, I came to see in contemporary metaphysical assumptions, gender conceptions, and political dogma a sedimented view of Aristotle that is at some distance from Aristotle’s own texts. My latest book, *Aristotle on the Matter of Form: A Feminist Metaphysics of Generation*, proposes that a specific reading of Aristotle is responsible for a view that divides the world between matter and form. Such a division sees some things and persons as *stuff* to which meaning and value need to be

given, and other things and persons as *bestowing* value and meaning. I argue that another reading of Aristotle’s texts presents a very different view of matter and form.

The standard reading presents Aristotle as the source of a normative metaphysics, by which I mean a metaphysics that determines some ways of being or some aspects of being to be *better than* others. Aristotle’s metaphysics is understood to divide between the formal and material cause, where the form is understood to shape material stuff. Form thus becomes what has shape, and matter what has no character of its own and what exists solely for form to manifest in the world. The form in natural beings is also what it aims to fulfil as the final cause or end of the natural being. This metaphysics structures gender according to a binary, which associates the feminine with matter and the masculine with form: the feminine, especially the maternal, only works through the activating work of masculine, paternal form.

My book is an attempt to show how Aristotle’s own texts resist such easy divisions, and ultimately deconstruct them. Specifically, I show that the work of the semen to form depends on the power of the material that constitutes the semen. This power does not come from material having been formed to serve semen, but occurs at the level of the elemental forces that compose the elements: the power of heat coupled with moisture to form the pneuma that does the animating work of semen. In this way, Aristotle’s analysis of the male contribution in generation makes form interdependent on material capacities to do its work. I describe the reliance of form on matter and the material power that appears to have formal capacities in terms of a Möbius strip where one side seems distinct from and yet convergent with the other in the work of forming natural substance.

I offer similar resources for challenging traditional readings of Aristotle’s *Politics* in my first book, *Aristotle on the Nature of Community*. My entanglement with Aristotle’s *Politics* requires a certain amount of unpacking. I came to the work in graduate school after a first career in politics, first on Capitol Hill, then for the Republican National Convention (RNC), then for a major U.S. Senatorial Campaign. When I applied for the job at the RNC, my future employer asked me what I wanted to do after the Convention. I told him I wanted to study philosophy. He asked who I was interested

in studying, and I told him Foucault and Derrida. He asked me if I was sure I was a Republican. I guess he knew better than I did!

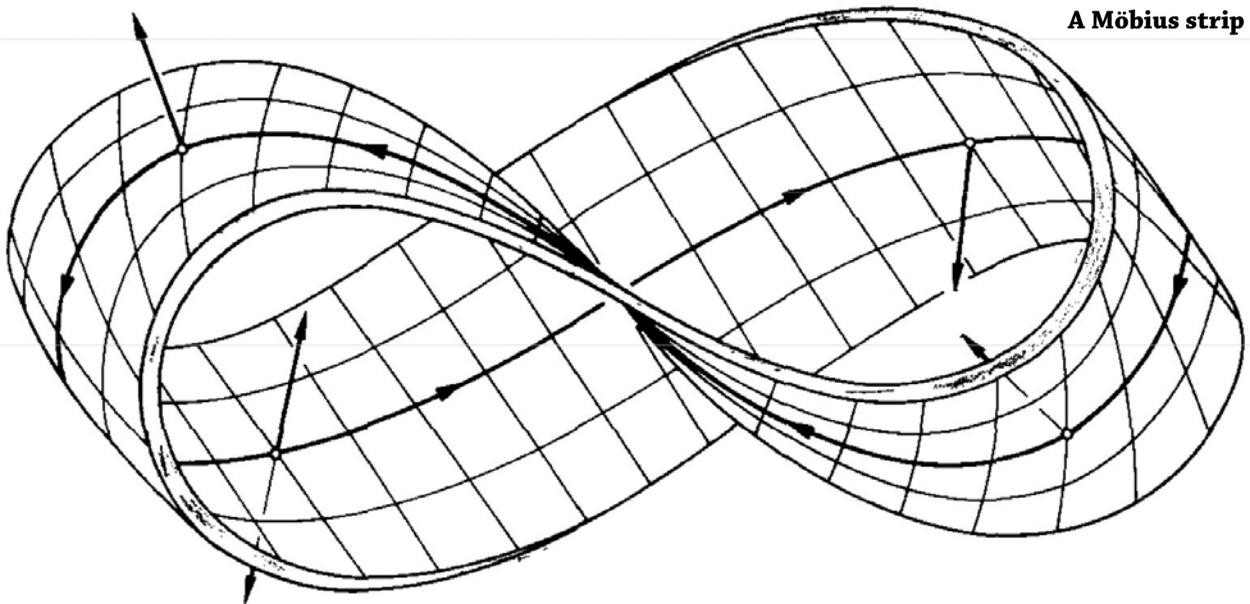
I was studying Plato and Hegel when I realized that my conservative commitments assumed a social ontology that prioritizes – both in value and in existence – the individual over the community. My conservative framework viewed political life as in the service of the individual. But I came to see from these thinkers that this view simply didn't bear out. In the U.S., the Covid-19 pandemic has seen many of those invested in individualism hurt by their resistance to collective practices of protecting one another, highlighting the limits of this individualist view. I grew similarly dissatisfied with the view that politics was accidental rather than essential to a life. Aristotle, the first to say both that human beings were naturally political and that the political community was natural, gave me an avenue to challenge the classical liberal conception of the individual. I found in Aristotle a dialectical relationship between human flourishing and the community, and a view of political life that made political activity central to the work of being human. I was particularly interested in how Aristotle uses the concept of nature to ground human and political flourishing. Defining nature as an internal source of movement, Aristotle uses it to ground political life in a way that simultaneously encourages a fostering of the conditions required for the human and the community to flourish. By contrast to social

contract theorists, who posit a natural stage or sphere from which human beings must exit in order to become political, Aristotle's use of nature to ground political life does not hierarchize people who have transcended their natural existence – those who have secured sufficient resources not to worry about how they will eat, those whose bodies do not bear and sustain their offspring – over those who have not, because human reason is located within a natural framework.

However, any treatment of Aristotle's *Politics* must grapple with the detrimental uses of his arguments. He was used throughout the American colonial and slave-holding period as a source of justifications for slavery and for excluding women from political life. I don't deny that these exclusionary interpretations of Aristotle's texts are possible – indeed, the historical record bears that out – but I do think that another interpretation is more consistent with Aristotle's account of what it means to be human.

Aristotle defines the human as one engaged in political activity, because the human capacity for *logos*, or reasoned speech, is “for making clear what is advantageous or harmful, and so too what is just or unjust”. What follows from this description of the work of *logos* is that any cry of exclusion or injustice would testify to the humanity – and political nature – of the one speaking. When Aristotle ties the citizen's work to this human capacity for *logos* – deliberating and

**A Möbius strip**



judging regarding what the best life for the community should be – he offers critical leverage to countermand the unjust exclusions of women and those counted as slaves, insofar as such people make claims to what is beneficial and just. The task of political life was to ensure the kind of rule that included all who engaged in such activity, since too often those engaging in this work were not heard or recognized. Aristotle aims to distinguish “political rule”, which involves those who are ruled, from “master rule”, which does not. To maintain a political rule is to resist the public mastery that constitutes tyranny. Aristotle’s recommendations for those engaged in politics – the warnings against the instability resulting from the exclusion of large portions of the community, the concern with electoral processes that aim to entrench oligarchic leadership – point to his continuing relevance in modern times.

## **THIS METAPHYSICS STRUCTURES GENDER ACCORDING TO A BINARY, WHICH ASSOCIATES THE FEMININE WITH MATTER AND THE MASCULINE WITH FORM**

When applied to Aristotle’s political theory, calling political life natural shows first that, like natural beings, political community is what it is in the deliberative activity that organizes it. The deliberations that define the community – questions about what constitutes living well – are institutionalized in its order or constitution. Like other natural beings, the political community continues to ask itself in its deliberations whether it is achieving the ends it has set for itself. Insofar as the question of what counts as the good life is also a question about who is being included, as it is for Aristotle, political life remains concerned with whether it includes all who appeal to justice.

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Another approach to thinking through and with Aristotle can be found in Marjolein Oele’s recent book.

In *E-Co-Affectivity: Exploring Pathos at Life’s Material Interfaces*, Oele examines Aristotle’s liminal concepts which occupy a status at the in-between – affect, nutrition, perception, place – and she puts these in dialogue with contemporary ecological and biological research. Doing so, she develops a view of the natural world that is interconnected, mutually implicating and affecting human life. She aims to “understand individual life” – from plants to birds to placenta to human skin to soil – “as being informed by a broader communal form of life”. She writes:

By reading Aristotle carefully and with nuance, through the method of “affirmative deconstruction,”... we may reclaim some of Aristotle’s insights that are relevant and helpful for our current day (for instance, his account of the constitutive nature of touch, and his account of direct and indirect co-suffering), while problematizing others (such as his account of the active-passive distinction and the various hierarchical stratifications of affective change).

Oele explores the ways that plants draw sustenance from the soil and sun through Aristotle’s accounts of nutrition and perception to reflect on how the lines between self and other become blurred in that process. Plants are generally considered to be autotrophic, i.e., self-nourishing, but plants magnify the question of how and whether nutrition is through the self or the other since, as Aristotle explains, food is what is other. Oele draws on Aristotle’s description of perception as a form of affectivity “that enables the preservation of the perceptive process and activates its nature”. For Aristotle, perception and nutrition require a mediating third: hearing, for example, involves the hearing organ, the ear, and the audible sound, as well as air through which the sound passes. Nutrition similarly requires a medium of heat between the plant and the food. Perception and nutrition thus both join and separate the animal from what is perceived and the plant from what nourishes, complicating the easy division between self and other. Food is not the same when it is not yet consumed, but made the same through the plant’s heat when consumed. Nutrition further complicates the self-other relation because nutrition as self-nutrition places food as a medium between the self as what is fed as body and the self as what feeds as soul, where another – the food – is required for the self to relate to itself in this way.

Oele also examines Aristotle's account of touch to raise questions about birds in relation to their environment. Drawing on Aristotle's claim that the medium of touch in the animal body – the skin – is itself constitutive of touch, Oele argues that the feathers of birds extend the border of the body to the space beyond the body, in between the world and the self. Feathers, as part of and beyond the birds' bodies, trouble the idea that touch occurs in a determinate location and problematize the notion of discrete physical boundaries. Birds' feathers' perceptive work challenges the easy distinctions between active and passive, and between interiority and exteriority. The feathers' ability to track the trauma of the bird in fault bars drives this point home. While seemingly beyond or outside the bird, feathers nonetheless keep record of the way the bird has been affected. Similarly, one bird preening another hints at the ways this creature emerges in the world dependent upon its environment and its fellows, "who through touch exposes it to, and protects it from, the world". As Oele argues, *aisthēsis*, perceiving, becomes *synaisthēsis*, perceiving *with*. Her Aristotelian analysis of birds invites us to wonder how human destruction of bird environments harm birds even without physically injuring them, and how birds might continue to bear this harm long after the destructive act.

## I FOUND IN ARISTOTLE A VIEW OF POLITICAL LIFE THAT MADE POLITICAL ACTIVITY CENTRAL TO THE WORK OF BEING HUMAN

Place is a third concept Oele draws from Aristotle, using it as a "productive edge for our analysis of the placenta". Aristotle defines place by its boundaries: "Further, the place coincides (*hama*) with the [natural] thing, for the boundaries (*ta peratai*) coincide with the bounded (*peperasmēnōi*)". If the limit is constitutive of place, the placenta emerges as a natural boundary and constitutive principle of the place of both mother and foetus, both of which are defined by the boundary that encloses them and lets them emerge and makes them possible. New research shows that the placenta

can affect the later health of the mother in the form of "microchimerisms". The placenta can foster exchange of cells not just from nutrients of mother to child, but from child to mother. Oele describes the immunological interaction that the placenta moderates, affecting the environment of the mother even long after birth.

Plant nutrition, bird feathers, and human placenta offer occasions for Oele to make the case for a material natural world to which human beings are intimately bound, drawing on Aristotelian concepts and frameworks while allowing scientific insight to refine the Aristotelian conceptual schema.

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Sara Brill draws our attention to a third way that Aristotle's work can offer insight for the contemporary moment. In *Aristotle on the Concept of Shared Life*, she uses a constellation of concepts to diagnose current policies of reproductive control and enforcement. On Brill's reading, "politics arises as a response to human natality (to the fact of birth from another) and takes as one of its primary tasks the control of birth". This focus on managing birth suggests that politics – our collective efforts to institutionalize agreement and disagreement in law and custom over how we should live – affirms this constitutive dependence that marks us as human. But Brill finds in Aristotle an anxiety about reproduction and its excesses, which she calls "anti-natalism" (not to be confused with the anti-natalism of someone like David Benatar). She locates this anxiety in his concern for the way that money can reproduce without end, which he criticizes as a limitless desire for living without concern for living well. Brill traces this anti-natalist attitude to the contemporary slogans of "culture of life" and "sanctity of life" which are used to force women to bear life and thereby make their lives unbearable. Anti-natalism does not mean opposition to birth, but rather a fundamental resentment or anxiety about the condition of having been born, of being dependent on those who birth for one's own life. Such resentment is what leads to the contemporary demand to control life and its reproduction. Brill writes:

[T]he gap that Aristotle observes here between living and living well does not so much assert a radical divide between reproductive life and political life, for instance, or between animal and human life, than it

identifies the human conditions that make failure to thrive possible.

Here Brill draws attention to the claim Aristotle makes that the political community comes into existence for the sake of living and continues to exist for the sake of living well. This gap opens the space for allowing some lives to just live and not live well. Brill argues that the focus on living and the alienation from living well is at work in reproductive labour *and* productive labour: “[W]hen Aristotle conceives of human flourishing as requiring the exploitation of labour, he condemns human life to the very dynamic that produces its commodification”. Brill pinpoints the origins of this commodification in what Aristotle takes to be the first possession in *Politics* – the mother’s milk – which relies on “an alienated approach to the material conditions of human birth and maturation, whereby maternal labour is divorced from maternal agency”. If property is the domain of the household and it makes possible action that extends beyond the household, and thus into the realm of living well, then the first possession of the mother’s milk underwrites any effort to move beyond living to living well without extending that capacity to the mother.

## **INSOFAR AS THE QUESTION OF WHAT COUNTS AS THE GOOD LIFE IS ALSO A QUESTION ABOUT WHO IS BEING INCLUDED, POLITICAL LIFE REMAINS CONCERNED WITH WHETHER IT INCLUDES ALL WHO APPEAL TO JUSTICE**

What is it that makes us see some lives as valuable and others as precarious? Brill finds in Aristotle a response to this question. She focuses on the way the Aristotelian concepts of *zōē*, life, and *su zēn*, shared life, signal the importance of practices of sharing life

in Aristotle’s views on birth and population in the “city in prayer” (the city Aristotle describes in *Politics* VII), which is traditionally viewed as his ideal city, and in his account of ownership (alongside the anxiety about excessive generativity (or reproduction without a proper limit) in the zoological works). Rejecting a strict division between the human and the animal, Brill investigates Aristotle’s zoological works to “better observe the theorizing about political life that develops out of Aristotle’s work on animals and its place within broader conceptions of power”. She turns to the social behaviour of fish for whom

the adequacy of sustenance would allow for the realization of a generally more preferable sociality, that is, as though a more political existence is something the animals would tend toward were they released from care for food.

This concern for sustenance – and the possibility that continued concern for necessities prevents political cooperation – points both to the need to produce adequate sustenance and the anxiety over how reproduction could lead to excessive mouths to feed.

Brill describes her work as locating “a dynamic at work in Aristotle’s thought that might sharpen our eyes for a similar dynamic at work at other times and places”. As she puts her project in the Coda of her book:

The value in reading Aristotle’s *zōē*-politics, if there is any, lies in its uncovering of the connection between an understanding of life and a conception of property, between an emphasis on generativity and a structural devaluing of women, and in the sobering reminder that one can develop a detailed theory of justice while still maintaining a constitutive inferiority of women and ‘barbarians.’ What these connections suggest is that effective resistance to these tendencies requires a solidarity formed by the awareness of the oppressive forces that emerge from a refusal to tolerate the anxiety of origin and a flight into a fetishized beginning.

By investigating Aristotle’s politics of life, Brill argues that we might better understand what animates the drive to monitor and control reproduction in contemporary politics when those who bear children can be prosecuted for miscarrying and invasive

procedures to obtain an abortion are required by non-medical bodies. Aristotle, Brill maintains, articulates the logic at the heart of these policies.

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We read Aristotle today to understand the roots of a particular philosophical tradition. But we also read him so that we can resist the misogynistic and xenophobic and racist uses to which his texts have been put, to articulate the co-feeling of the whole natural world, and to understand the malevolent demands of the culture of life in contemporary politics.

## **DURING THIS PANDEMIC, WE READ ARISTOTLE TO THINK THROUGH URGENT ISSUES OF HOW HUMAN LIFE IS SITUATED WITHIN NATURAL LIFE**

During this pandemic, we read Aristotle to think through urgent issues of how human life is situated within natural life, a truth we too readily ignore. Oele warns that the borders we think we maintain between the human and the natural are fictions. While Brill diagnoses in Aristotle the schema for justifying the division between life deemed worthy of protection and life in the service of that life, I find in Aristotle an alternative conception of political life that joins the human to the natural to deny such a distinction in a way that extends beyond the limits of biopolitics and juridico-politics. These different approaches show how Aristotle serves as fertile ground for analysing and addressing the crises of our contemporary moment: the pandemic, global warming, the division between lives that are made to matter and those that are not, and growing income disparity and political instability.

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