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THE FIGURE OF THE SLAVE IN ARISTOTLE'S POLITICS: Philosophical foundations and their role in the formation of communities

João Pedro Leal Lisboa¹

Introduction:

Aristotle's approach to slavery, in the work *Politics*, involves a theme of extreme complexity and philosophical, historical and social sensitivity. Although slavery is widely condemned in contemporary times, its dimension

¹ Master's student in philosophy at the São Paulo State University "Júlio de Mesquita Filho" - Faculty of Philosophy and Sciences - Marília Campus. Email: jpl.lisboa@unesp.br

and influence in the history of humanity is undeniable, from Antiquity to current debates on freedom, work and social organization. In this sense, it is observed that slavery does not only orbit economic issues (in the modern conception of this science), but is also linked to ethics, religion, legislation, politics and other forms of cultural expression, functioning as one of the structuring elements of various forms of community organization.

In this context, Aristotle's thought on the slave stands out not only for its political and ethical systematization, but also for the peculiarity of what was established as Natural Slavery. This position must be analyzed carefully, avoiding simplistic and anachronistic interpretations, without considering the influence and extent of his ideas in Politics, as well as the originality of his position on this subject, given the controversies that were already erected in his time between those who were against slavery and those who defended its practice.

In view of this, the present study aims to analyze the Aristotelian thought on slavery and its community implications, both in the political and ethical views, as well as in what way slavery, in the molds established by the philosopher, differs from the positions then disseminated in the Hellenic world. It is based on the hypothesis that Aristotle elaborates a singular theory that detaches itself from the arguments used to legitimize slavery practices, at the same time that it

annuls the arguments erected by groups opposed to its practice, which were based on violence to question it, approaching the relationship between master and slave as a result of the human natural order, which will form the Family (*oîkos*), helping in its maintenance, which will be closely linked to the formation and functioning of the city (*polis*) and, consequently, will be fundamental for the realization of political life and happiness (*eudaimonía*) of each member.

The present study finds its relevance in the need to understand Aristotelian thought, which has a great influence on Western thought, seeking to extract the concepts applied in his political treatise, which in addition to guiding various forms of thought today, allows us to analyze with greater care themes such as freedom, justice, human nature, government and community. Such analysis allows not only a more accurate understanding of the philosopher's work, but also an in-depth reflection on his philosophical heritage regarding the understanding and analysis of the complex range of factors that make up human communities.

Theoretical Basis:

The present analysis focuses on the figure of the slave in Aristotle's *Politics*, considering that it is one of the points of great relevance in the philosopher's thought about the formation and functioning of

human communities, especially the domestic community (*oîkos*). This theme constitutes the foundation of several ideas developed throughout the treaty, being essential for understanding the structure of the city (*polis*).

In this sense, it is observed that the slave is intimately linked to the formation and administration of the family (*oikonomía*), which, in turn, is part of the structure of the *polis*. The family, as the initial cell of the process of synthesis explained by Aristotle at the beginning of the *Politics* (1252a-1253a), in addition to meeting the daily needs of its members, has its natural purpose in the city, since this community allows for the achievement of self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) and the common good (*eu zen*), providing its members, especially citizens, with the conditions to seek a happy life (*eudaimonía*). As Lisboa (2018, p. 47-48) observes, the ideas of community (*koinonia*) and good living (*eu zen*) are central categories to understand society in the Aristotelian way, since it is through community that the good life is made possible, which could not be effectively manifested otherwise. Thus, since the city is the largest and most complete of communities, man will be able to have a virtuous life, turning to the activity of the soul, thanks to the autarchy and good living of this environment, which is why no other form of human association would be able to allow the human being to have excellence in his activities.

For this complex dynamic to work properly, it is necessary that the smaller parts that make up the *polis*, especially the *oikos*, fulfill their purposes. Thus, the proper functioning of the family is essential to the realization of the city and, consequently, to the achievement of the good life.

In this panorama, it is evident why the figure of the slave requires special attention. The relationship between master and slave constitutes one of the foundations of the domestic structure, and its proper functioning is a condition for this community to achieve its purpose, meeting the daily needs of its members and contributing to the formation of the *polis*.

In the domestic sphere, the relationship between master and slave is presented as one of the first forms of natural coexistence, similar to the union between man and woman. This relationship is linked to the condition of man as a political animal (*politikón zôon*), since all forms of human association have established purposes (POLÍTICA, 1252a, 24-33). In the case of *oikos*, these relations derive from natural facts specific to the human condition. Along these lines, Aristotle exposes that the master-slave relationship is functional and complementary, due to the fact that, naturally, there will always be someone who rules and someone who is governed. In the family, it is up to the master to govern, because he has a greater rational capacity, and the slave to obey, because he

is more apt with the use of his bodily abilities. It should be noted that the inversion of these functions would be contrary to the established natural order.

Therefore, the relationship is not only necessary, but also mutually beneficial: the slave, being good for menial activities, does not possess the qualities of a master to rule, while the master cannot perform his functions without the help of the former (one could not exist without the other, there being mutual cooperation). To support this thought, the Stagirite compares this relationship with that of the soul with the body, since the soul commands the body with the authority of a master, since the body, being matter, will not be a principle of movement, needing the activity of the soul to move, together, it even traces physical differences between the master and the slave (POLITICS, 1254a, 3-9).

Furthermore, Aristotle defines the slave as one who, by nature, does not belong to himself, but to another, and one man belongs to another when he is the object of property, even if he is human, destined for action and with autonomous existence (POLÍTICA, 1254a, 13-17). From this perspective, the slave is equated with an "animated instrument" and a "living property", with the relationship necessary to promote action, being essential to the practical life of the master. In the context of *oikonomía*, it is a kind of extension of its master's body, in a properly

operative sense, aimed at the production and activity of the genre (VAHL, 2016)

Although the slave is placed in the state of property, Aristotle does not reduce him to an object. His integration into the domestic community can be seen as a symbiosis, where both (master and slave) have mutual benefit from the relationship, which gives the philosopher's position a uniqueness in the debates on this subject.

It is important to highlight that this analysis should not be based on modern models of slavery and other commonly known types, such as Brazilian colonial slavery. Aristotle does not base his approach on racial or commercial criteria, nor does he seek a legitimation based on a domination based on ethnicity, as occurred in the so-called Old World. On the contrary, his proposal exposes the existence of a natural slavery, which does not come from a convention or violence, but from a complementary and functional bond, established by a natural order.

At this point, by contemplating the mutual necessity and convenience in the relationship between master and slave, since both need each other to fully realize their nature, Aristotle refutes the questions and allegations of those who had a position opposed to slavery, who defined it as unnatural because it was the result of violence (submission of the will of one man to another). With the idea of a natural slavery, there is no submission by force or violence, but rather a natural

connection between two individuals with different aptitudes.

Still, the philosopher not only refutes the position of those who were against slavery, but also of those who defended it, based on the right of conquest, since such legitimacy could be wrongly applied based on a purely legal interpretation or analyzing the motivations that led to the situation.

Wolff (1999, p. 101) argues that, because none of the opinions held about slavery is acceptable: neither the one that he maintains "that it conforms to the law", nor the one that affirms that it is contrary to nature, nor the one that conforms to nature (where the supporters of this thesis are based on the right of the strongest, and Aristotle's naturalism opposes this), Aristotle refutes the criticisms, while rejecting the usual defenses of slavery, defending a singular form, which breaks with the practices and justifications prevalent in his time.

Similarly, Elliot (2022, p. 11) observes that Aristotle presents a sophisticated form of slavery as just, recognizing the limitations of the arguments for and against present in the debates, welcoming the criticisms, and bringing a form that departs significantly from the thinking of the time.

Once the philosopher's position on the subject has been established, as well as the singularity of his thought, it is necessary to address the question of

the virtue of the slave (POLÍTICA, 1259b, 18 a 1260b, 26). Considering that the family is a community, in which each member performs specific functions, Aristotle inquires about the possibility of its members having virtue and how it manifests itself, paying special attention to the slave. Given their servile function, linked to action, and their nature, it is analyzed whether the slave would have no other merit that did not derive from their bodily services, since in the case of being capable of possessing virtue, in what would they be different from free men? But if they did not have virtue, there would be a problem, since they are human and rational, not simple domestic tools (POLÍTICA, 1259b, 23-31).

The philosopher investigates the possibility of the slave developing a certain type of virtue and the measure of it, since because he has different functions from the master (free man), he could not manifest it in the same way and measure. In this reasoning, the virtue of the slave must be observed according to the domestic order, taking into account his functions.

Considering all these points, it is observed that Aristotelian thought about slavery is unique, not limited to pragmatic or legal justifications, nor does it reproduce conventional slavery paradigms. By integrating the slave into the base community (the *oikos*), where he is seen with a certain degree of importance not only for it, but for the dynamics of the entire *polis*, he stands out

from the models of slavery, presenting his own dynamics, based on human nature, in accordance with reason and ethics, as well as with the need for community life.

Methodology:

The research is of a basic nature, classified as qualitative and uses the hypothetical-deductive method, with the objective of deepening Aristotle's approach to the figure of the slave and its connection with several factors of his political treatise, as well as the uniqueness of his position in comparison with other currents of thought on slavery.

As for the technical procedures, the research can be classified as bibliographic, being developed based on a plan for collecting information of a historical, political, ethical and philosophical nature, through bibliographic and documentary sources. The focus will be on Aristotle's treatises, especially *Politics*, but also *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Metaphysics*, as well as works by other philosophers, legislators, poets, and commentators, who addressed, influenced, or were influenced by his ideas. Works, scientific articles and other texts will also be used, which deal with the Greek *polis*, the family (*oikos*), slavery in ancient Greece, ethics and natural slavery, among other related topics.

Data analysis follows a systematic and comparative approach. The materials collected are

organized around thematic axes, related to the objects of study and the proposed problems. With this information, they will be analyzed and separated from the general data related to the domestic community, the figures of the master and the slave, the specific ones on the thought of natural slavery, the social structure (within the Aristotelian family and political sphere), the government of the house, the exercise of political life, the good life through the city and the currents of thought conflicting with the philosopher's position. Analyzing them in a comparative way to clarify Aristotle's thought on the division of family members (with emphasis on the slave), the uniqueness of the thought on natural slavery, the nature of the slave, how his function affects the political community and his relationship with virtue. Finally, it will be addressed how these issues shape the Aristotelian vision of community and man's need to live in communion.

The time frame of the research is concentrated in Classical Greece, approximately in the fourth century B.C., having as its main milestone the political reality of Athens, which served as the setting for Aristotle's studies.

Results of the Discussion:

The analysis of the figure of the slave from the Aristotelian perspective, especially with regard to natural slavery, reveals ideas deeply integrated

with the structure and maintenance of *the oikos* and *the polis*, consequently, it is also linked to the virtuous life. Thus, reducing the philosopher's position to that of a "man of his time" ends up harming the understanding of the formation of communities, the good life and human nature according to his proposal.

In this sense, the philosopher's position cannot be understood as a mere justification for social domination, but as part of the natural order that structures domestic life and, consequently, political life. The slave, although compared to an animated instrument, is not reduced to a mere object, being admitted as a man and a member of the *oikos*, he plays an essential role in this community and in the relationship with the master, the latter responsible for the administration of the house and for the active participation in the public life of the *polis*.

Observing that the *polis* will allow man to act virtuously and have a happy life, Pereira (2008, p. 224) states that man needs the necessary means to act virtuously, thus, in view of the connection between politics and ethics, it is clear that virtuous action engenders the necessary conditions for a *well-organized polis*.

In this way, the domestic community, being the initial cell of the synthesis process that will form the *polis*, needs to function harmoniously, with each member fulfilling their functions according to their

nature, which has a direct impact on the formation and maintenance of the city. The virtuous actions of the citizen depend, therefore, on the proper functioning of the family, where the slave will not be a mere accessory, but a fundamental part of community life.

In addition, Aristotle contradicts the currents of thought that defended or condemned slavery, based on convention, violence or force of law, by basing his thought on the relationship of master and slave as something coming from a natural order. Therefore, there would not be a simple convention based on the right of the strongest or a cold interpretation of the law, but rather the natural flow, in which there would be those who naturally command and those who obey, and the latter can act with virtue to the extent of their functions. This innovative perspective, although problematic from a contemporary perspective, represents a philosophical effort to understand structural inequality within the domestic and political communities.

Therefore, it becomes evident that the Aristotelian approach to slavery requires a reading free of moral anachronisms, in order to understand the innovation that his approach brought to the theme and its influence on the foundations of Western philosophy and politics. The contribution of this study lies precisely in highlighting the complexity of his thought and in establishing connections with the philosophical tradition, including

debates on the formation of society, political thought and the nature of man.

Additionally, when analyzing studies and academic productions on ethics and politics, such as that of Pereira (2008), the importance of understanding the slave not only as a historical figure, but as a philosophical concept in Aristotelian thought, especially with regard to the formation of the community, is highlighted, paying attention to the reality and historical context of the author.

Conclusion:

Accumulating what has been analyzed, it is concluded that the figure of the slave, from Aristotle's point of view, cannot be studied in the ways commonly applied to the theme of slavery, since natural slavery does not stop at a justification or economic instrument based on racial prejudice or class superiority. This should not only be observed by the singularities of the philosopher's time, considering the historical-social reality of Classical Greece and the peculiarities of the figure of the slave in the Hellenic world, but also by the political and ethical proposal contained in Aristotelian thought, which studies and establishes the natural functions of the members of the *oikos* and the *polis*, as well as interconnecting them to the structure and functioning of these communities.

As seen, the slave is part of the domestic community, not by violence or mere convention, but by his human nature, and this will bind him to the master of the house, due to both converging by necessity, thanks to their own skills, resulting in the convenience of this relationship. Thus, it is observed that Aristotle creates a symbiosis between both agents, not being a relationship of domination, but a government with mutual cooperation according to a natural order.

This theme can present itself as a thorny terrain, given the difficulty of dissociating the philosopher's idea from historically reprehensible practices. Therefore, the research reinforces the need to approach Aristotle's thought with philosophical rigor, avoiding moral anachronisms and interpretations based on current conceptions, in order to understand the dimension of the figure of the slave in the philosopher's political vision, with regard to the functioning of communities (*oikos* and *polis*), and its connection with *eudaimonia*.

As a practical implication, this study allows us to reflect on the formation of natural categories in human communities and the justification of social hierarchies throughout history, also offering elements for the philosophical debate on justice, authority, community and the common good, containing issues of relevance to studies of the history of philosophy and ancient philosophy.

It should be noted that the study is limited to Aristotle's treatises, concentrating on Politics, with no focus in comparison with later philosophers (medieval or modern), due to the proposal discussed in the lines above.

In this way, the present research sought to move away from the position of criticism contrary to Aristotle's thought and focused on the complexity of his proposal, especially the innovation that it was in the face of what was ventilated in his time, especially by the ethical and political proposals of his predecessors (philosophers, statesmen or jurists).

Future studies could expand the analysis of the figure of the slave in Aristotle by articulating it with authors such as Thomas Aquinas, Rousseau or Hegel, as well as investigate the use or eventual overcoming of Aristotelian thought in later political, legal, economic or theological contexts. It would also be relevant to study the theme by comparing it with other forms of servitude in the earlier Greek philosophical tradition and in other cultures.

Keywords: politics, family, master, slave by nature, slavery.

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