

Great Books Discussion

(We are pleased to present a transcript of a recent Great Books meeting conducted by Dr. Clide Aldrich and Dr. Clarence Efroymsen. Betty Cramer, Sue Higginbotham and Nancy Dye, members of the Advanced Shorthand Class, took the transcript. The contents of the discussion on Aristotle's **Politics** have been condensed.)



- L2: Do you believe that some people are born to be slaves?
- A: No, I don't. I think that a human being is born with a soul. He is, therefore, his own master. He isn't a natural slave. I don't think there is such a thing.
- L1: Are there not some people who are able to do only manual labor, who have no ability to use their heads or exercise judgment?
- A: Yes, there are I think among men people with relatively less ability than others, and in that condition you will find people who are not very reasonable and who cannot do much more than manual labor.
- L2: Would they be better off if they were slaves?
- A: No, I don't think so. It could be, but the race as a whole would only suffer.
- L2: Why?
- A: I think that slavery is a moral issue, and it is wrong not only for the slaves but also for the master.
- L1: Maybe it is just a matter of words. Let's eliminate the word "slave" and put some other word in. Do you think that some people are born with a capacity to obey without any capacity to rule?
- A: I think there are people that can rule and rule wisely, but I don't think there is anyone, unless he is in the lowest levels of intelligence where it is a matter of being abnormal. I think it is only there that you would find people who are slaves and I don't think they should be slaves.
- L2: What should they be?
- A: I think they should be cared for.
- L2: How can they best be cared for, and should society help them take care of themselves?
- A: I am a northern abolitionist and do not believe in slavery in any case. I believe each person should be given an opportunity to gain an education.
- L2: How about people, not just the lowest classes, but are there any other people who aren't capable of gaining an education?
- A: There are some, they claim, who are not born with the mind to be educated and are mentally diseased. However, I believe people given some education can help themselves.
- L1: What is a slave?
- A: One who is bossed around. He has a master to tell him what to do.
- L1: Are there any people whom you must tell what to do?
- A: There are people in our society who are incapable of doing for themselves although when you tell them what to do, you must pay

- them for it.
- L2: Do you know any slaves?
- A: Yes, some truck drivers are really slaves.
- L2: You mean the truck driver is a natural born slave?
- A: No, he is only capable of taking orders.
- L1: Then it is really the name "slave" that you don't agree with?
- A: It is the fact that the slave has continually to live under that master and he cannot go from one to another while the laborer of the present day can go from one to another.
- L1: You mean that there is a slave class by nature, but who can choose its master?
- A: I was just thinking that we might say that there are people who are best fit to obey, but I don't know if there are people fit to rule.
- L1: What, according to Aristotle, makes some people suited to rule and others suited only to obey?
- A: The superiority of the soul seems to him to be the basis for the fitness to rule.
- L2: Did he think all those who can lift a 500-pound weight should be slaves?
- A: No. The one with the ability to bring foresight into something concrete is the one to become a master. A slave differs from a master in not possessing reason and not being able to understand it.
- L1: There is a passage where it talks of having foresight or the lack of foresight. Do you think it is true that there are some people who are born incapable of reason?
- A: Yes, I do.
- L1: Do you think those people should be limited in society to a status that requires them only to obey?
- A: Politically, I believe, everyone should be free to vote, but not to rule.
- L2: Not in the sense that Aristotle expressed.
- L1: I have always heard in this country that the ballot box was one of the ways of controlling the destinies of the American people.
- L2: Supposing these people of whom you speak were in the majority?
- A: If there were a chance that they would be in a majority and could get themselves elected, it would be a different matter.
- A: If they were in the majority I don't think it would matter because if they couldn't reason they would probably be making wrong decisions and everyone would be unhappy.
- L2: Wouldn't that matter at all?
- A: Yes—very highly. Some people can't reason to any great degree.
- L2: How are we going to distinguish between these two groups of peoples?
- A: It is quite a natural thing for the person who is, shall we say, the laborer, not just to belong to one master, and no matter where he tries to rise he will continually end up in his own category.
- L2: Is the laboring man a slave?
- A: The word "slave" is a little harsh with us, but in the days of Aristotle it was a natural thing.
- L2: What do you mean by natural?
- A: I mean that the person had no ability to reason but by his own mentality and abilities and he fell into

- this category.
- L1: If it was natural then, would it be natural now?
- A: Yes, we do naturally have slaves to a great degree. Several men may be benefiting by the reasoning of one man and the rest of the people carrying out his reason.
- L1: The plan is to leave this question of whether or not there are natural slaves and raise the question of politics. Why do you suppose that Aristotle attached so much importance to this question of politics?
- A: Because the slaves numbered such a large percent that they had to be dealt with.
- L1: Do you think it was just a practical problem to decide what they were going to do with the slaves which Plato sometimes called cattle or was he trying to disengage a theory about the nature of government? How should one go about studying governments?
- A: You should break the large thing that you are studying into its smaller elements and attack each individually and understand it better.
- L1: Did he mean to conclude that once we got down to the slave-master element, you have the fundamental principle for all governments?
- A: No, I don't believe so. He decided that the differences in government were not those of numbers but those of kinds.
- L1: What is the simplest kind of government?
- A: The man and wife.
- L1: Was that the same kind of relationship that you find between master and servant?
- A: Off hand I wouldn't want to say.
- L1: Didn't he say anything about wives?
- A: He mentioned that barbarians made no distinction between slaves and women, but apparently Aristotle did.
- L2: I wonder if the slaves have no aggression?
- A: I would like to take the other side. There is no difference between sex and aggression. There are some people born with a certain aggressiveness and others who are not. Aggressiveness usually follows the male.
- L1: Why do you suppose Aristotle picked out the family unit as the most elementary basis by which to study the nature of government? What makes a family a unit?
- A: It is a unit because there is the master and the slave. It is the husband who is the head of the household.
- A: There will be a time, if the race is going to go on, when a woman can't protect herself. She won't be capable of it because she is pregnant. She is going to have a child and it would be the man's place to take care of her. The woman couldn't rule all the time so in the beginning the man found he could.
- L1: What is the particular thing that nature has given to man that might determine his political organization as different from other animals?
- A: Reasoning, isn't it? I think that a person who has the ability to reason would be more apt to be a ruler than one who does it strictly by force.

L1: How does Aristotle get on the subject of economics?

A: I don't think you can separate economics and politics. Which would come first economics or politics? One is based on the other.

L2: Could you tell how Aristotle considers legitimate ways of getting wealth?

A: He doesn't want people to acquire too much wealth but wants everyone to have what he needs.

L1: In conclusion it might be profitable to keep in mind that throughout this course there is a progression in the list of readings that you are to study and there is an attitude that existed in the fourth century and down through many intervening steps; it is the development of changing attitudes that should be one of the important things to be gained from a reading course of this kind.

Poem

Jane Pettijohn

Walk on the land.
Kiss them,
They will crush you.

Walk on the land.
Favor them,
They will plague you.

Walk on the land.
Deceive them,
They will follow you.