Aristotle’s Politics

Key Words:

Oligarchy: A small elite group of people having control of a country, organization, or institution. Mostly wealthy and powerful

Constitution: The system of fundamental laws and principles that prescribes the nature, functions, and limits of a government or another institution

Despot: A ruler or other person who holds absolute power, typically exercising it cruelly.

**Aristotle’s Politics**

Like Plato, Aristotle, wrote extensively on the subjects of tyranny and the rule of law. He hoped that his book *Politics*, a collection of essays on government, would provide direction for rulers, statesmen, and politicians.

In *Politics*, Aristotlerejected Plato’s ideal state. He said that it fails to address conflicts that will arise among its citizens. Unlike *The Republic*, *Politics* does not depict an ideal system of government. Instead, Aristotle explored practical constitutions that city-states (a self governing state consisting of a city and surrounding territory) can realistically put into effect. His aim was to “consider, not only what form of government is best, but also what is possible and what is easily attainable.”

He identified six different kinds of constitutions, and he classified them as either “true” or “defective.” Governments which have a regard for the common interest uphold justice, are true forms; whereas those which regard only the interest of the rulers are all defective and because they are despotic (Despotic is a synonym for “tyrannical.”)

To Aristotle, tyranny was the power of an individual who is responsible to no one. They govern with a view to its own advantage, not to that of its subjects, and therefore rules against their will. Aristotle wrote, “No freeman, if he can escape from it, will endure such a government.” He believed that tyranny is the “very reverse of a constitution.” The law ought to be supreme over all.

Aristotle made the same argument about oligarchies. When the rulers have great wealth and numerous friends, this sort of family despotism approaches a monarchy; individuals rule and not the law. He believed that the wisest should rule (middle class, educated) opposed to the richest, which would use their wealth to influence.

Aristotle stated that “the rule of law . . . is preferable to that of any individual.” This is because individuals possess flaws and could tailor government to their own individual interests, whereas the rule of law is objective.

Rulers must be “the servants of the laws,” because “law is order, and good law is good order.”

In addition to law, Aristotle believed a large middle class would protect against the excesses of oligarchies and democracies.

\*\*\*\*Reading Questions: Answer the following questions about in complete sentences.

1. In what way did Aristotle disagree with Plato?
2. What did Aristotle say was a true constitution?

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1. How does Aristotle define tyranny?
2. According to Aristotle which class should rule and why?
3. Why would Aristotle want a large middle to protect against the excesses of oligarchies and democracies?