

## **Bronsemedalje NM filosofi for vgs, 2. runde 5.5.2020: Aslak Hellevik, Elvebakken vgs**

*“For man, when perfected, is the best of animals; but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all.” Aristotle: Politics I : 1253a31*

In this quote, Aristotle makes a claim about humans, and their dependency on law and justice. He claims that men are the best animals if they are perfected. However, upon being separated from law and justice, they are the worst of all animals. In the quote Aristotle speaks specifically about men. However, discussing the quote in this text I am going to talk about all humans, as I think the quote applies equally to everyone. In this text I am first going to look closer at the citation, trying to figure out what Aristotle meant by it, and what presumptions he makes in it. Then I am going to argue that the statement is flawed, and why these flaws makes the statement ambiguous.

First let's look at what Aristotle asserts in his statement. The statement can be divided into two parts, depicting both how humans can be the best, and the worst, animal. In the first part of the statement, Aristotle has two suppositions:

1. There can be a best animal.
2. There can be a perfect man.

If there can be a perfect man, and there is an animal which is the best, Aristotle claims that the perfect man is the best animal. Similarly, the second part of the statement also has two suppositions:

1. Men can be separated from law and justice.
2. There is a worst animal.

All these presuppositions are subject to critique and discussion. How can you rank the goodness of animals and humans? What are you measuring their goodness up against to see who is the best or worst (the grounding problem of ethics)? Does it even make sense to talk of animals such as deer and cockroaches in terms of goodness? The citation brings many questions with it, most of which I am going to ignore in this text. I am instead going to look closer at Aristotle's claim about law and justice, and how this influences the goodness of humans. I am going to look at the claim from two angles:

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1. Can one be fully separated from law and justice?
2. Would it be bad for humans to be fully separated from law and justice?

In the end, I am going to explore the potential consequences of the quote assuming it is true, and discuss why I think it is ambiguous.

Aristotle claims that humans are the worst animal when separated from law and justice. If humans cannot be separated from law and justice, it would follow from the statement that humans cannot be the worst animal. To discuss this, we need to distinguish between a personal law and justice coming from within oneself and law and justice enforced by a state. One could argue that everyone has a set of personal laws and justice they live by. It is also arguable whether it is possible to act unjust from a personal point of view, as a person's act in itself makes it clear the person thought the act was justified, else he or she wouldn't do it. Everyone always does what seems to be the best thing in their own mind. Whether it's the best thing for themselves, society or something else does not really matter, what matters is that there will always be a personal justification. From a personal point of view, it therefore seems impossible to be separated from law and justice, as the personal law and justice changes throughout one's life, being formed by one's actions.

So how about the law and justice in a society? In societies there are both written and unwritten laws. The written laws can easily be broken, and in that society the act of breaking the law would most of the time be considered unjust for those being harmed by it. But if you break the law, and end up in prison, are you then separated from the law and justice? Isn't prison the one place in our society with the closest connection to the law and justice, as it is literally the physical embodiment of the consequences of breaking them? It seems like lawbreakers are the ones tied most tightly to the law and justice of society, as it is them the laws and justice is there to correct. Some people, however, break the law without consequences. When you break the laws of society and get away with it, without anyone knowing, you might be truly separated from law and justice. On the other hand, most people have a conscience, and feel bad for doing the wrong things. As discussed, this personal justice could however skew far from the justice of society, and from the viewpoint of the

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society there can therefore be unjust acts. From this it follows that you could be completely separated from the law and justice of a society, making you worse than all animals according to Aristotle.

Another way of looking at whether one can be separated from law and justice is looking at it through relativism. In a relativistic view it is possible that you could be entirely separated from law and justice in a society. However, if you imagine all the possible societies that can possibly exist, and all the different laws and views of what is just and unjust in those societies, all your actions would break the laws and justice of an almost infinite amount of possible societies, all the time. This relativistic way of looking at the problem makes the concept of justice vacuous. Looking at situations of moral dispute from a specific society with a specific set of laws and with set thoughts of justice will always be partial, and one needs good arguments to claim that one's specific set of laws and justice is more right than others. The laws and views on justice we have in our societies today differs a little from culture to culture, but is mostly built on the same foundations. These are also found throughout most religions, for example in the Christian ten commandments. I would argue, and so would a relativist, that there is no way for us to know that these views on justice is more right than any other thinkable societies views on justice is. These views could however be the "random" product of natural selection. We don't kill each other, and think that's the morally right thing to do, solely because the humans who did think it was the morally right thing to do died before they could pass on their genes. In this way our laws and sense of justice is merely a manual for continuing and forwarding humanity. Without a belief in god, and without a knowledge of the meaning of life (and whether it is good to pursue it if we find it), the ethical grounding problem makes it seem ignorant to believe that the laws and justice we have today are morally good, and not just the things which happened to advance us as a species.

I am now going to move away from the first question and look at the claim Aristotle makes that it would be bad for humans to be separated from laws and justice. Assuming that some

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humans are or can be separated from law and justice, are these humans the worst of all animals?

To understand why Aristotle thought it was bad for humans to be separated from law and justice we should look to his theory of potentiality. Aristotle thought the meaning of things could be found in what he called their potentiality. The meaning of a seed is to grow into a tree. A full-grown tree would be the seeds potentiality fulfilled, and its purpose fulfilled. With this theory Aristotle also believed there to be a potentiality within humans. Humans are social creatures, and live together in societies governed by law and justice. Part of fulfilling human's potentiality would therefore be to thrive socially, which a separation from law and justice hinders. Therefore, humans separated from law and justice are worse than humans following them, since they fulfil their potentiality to a lesser degree.

Another philosopher that would agree with Aristotle that humans need law and justice is Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes described what he called the state of nature, which is a stateless world in which humans live without any laws or systems, entirely free. He thought the entirely free life in the state of nature would be bad for us even though it might sound good at first glance, and describes the life in the state of nature as short, cold, brutal and meaningless. To avoid the state of nature humans have to go together to form states, laws and systems of justice, constraining and at the same time protecting people. With this view it is clearly bad for humans to be separated from law and justice, and humans should do everything they can to avoid the state of nature. This argument supports Aristotle's claim that humans are the worst animal when they are separated from law and justice.

Both Aristotle's and Hobbes' arguments raises a difficult question; if the life of humans without law and justice in the state of nature is so very bad and brutal, and this is how the first humans lived, how did humans start developing away from the state of nature? It seems illogical that there would be any development when humanity starts at the worst possible place, where all humans are "the worst of all" animals. An answer to this problem would be to separate moral and ethics from development. Even though the people living in the state

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of nature were “the worst of all” animals, this was no hinderance to evolutionary development. The moral changes with development, and not vica versa. However, this brings us back to the grounding problem, and makes it questionable whether or not our ethics today are any “better” than those in the state of nature.

Focusing mostly on the last part of Aristotle’s statement, I have discussed its legitimacy, and reasons why it might be true or not. While there might be no definitive answer to whether its true or not I am now going to look at the consequences of it if we assume it is true, and why I think there is an ambiguity in the quote.

The way the statement is formulated plays a role in making the consequences of it more severe. Aristotle might have written that humans are worse of an animal when separated from law and justice, but instead he writes that humans *the worst* animal. This insinuates a direct correlation between separation from law and justice, and goodness of a person. Reading the quote the other way around you get that when humans are fully intertwined with the laws and justice, they are the best of all animals. While Aristotle might argue that justice is not relative, and that the laws should be made in a way that makes them enforce true justice, it is easy to see how the quote, taken to the extreme, could be used to defend brutal regimes with strict laws and (to us) a twisted justice. Using the quote one could argue that the people following the laws and justice most thoroughly are the best people, not taking into account that the ones making the laws and justice in a society might have personal motives. The quote could also be used to argue that higher degree of law-following makes a person better. Therefore, societies should make more and more strict laws, making the people following them better persons. This can however be refuted by another of Aristotle’s theories of ethics, namely the golden mean. When presented with two extremes such as here, either no laws or laws for all possible actions, the best thing would according to Aristotle be somewhere in the middle, a golden mean. Aristotle would probably argue that through applying this method, the amount of laws a society should make people follow to make them as good as possible would be somewhere in the middle of the two extremes,

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so that there is both freedom for the individual as well as clear laws and views of justice, which people can have as a reference points training their virtue.

Having to apply other Aristotelian methods to interpret the consequences of the quote granting that it is true shows its ambiguity. On its own, the quote could be interpreted in several ways, all seeming like plausible interpretations. Firstly, a “perfected” man is both very ambiguous and subjective. Within it lies the deep philosophical question of what a good life is, and the meaning of the quote changes dependent on what you think a perfected man is. The main point of the citation, saying something about how good or bad a human is, also stumbles into another fundamental philosophical question, namely the grounding problem. With no clear grounding of ethics, and with no answer to what the meaning of life is for both humans and animals, ranking humans in goodness compared to animals seems completely meaningless. The ambiguity in interpretation of the quote combined with it seeming to depend on some of the most fundamental philosophical problems seems to make it useless. However, I believe it still tells us something about how humans are dependent on law and justice. And, assuming Hobbes state of nature is bad, how the sense of justice built into us can help us become better.