Welcome back. We’re gonna talk today a little bit about the foundations of ancient Greek politics, just a brief overview to give you a sense of the way that the Greeks thought about political subjects. There are a number of elements of Aristotle’s philosophy which provide insight into the ancient Greek conception of politics. At the center of it is a line of thought that we’re already familiar with from the ethics and which should also harken back to our earlier discussion of the central difference between pre-modern and modern politics, this idea that society and government and political authority arise from nature as opposed to from agreement or contracts between individuals, right? So the modern conception of politics is predicated on a contractual conception of society whereas the pre-modern political philosophy is based on a naturalistic conception of society.

And there’s two essential elements from the ethics which would sit sort of at the heart of the ancient Greek conception of politics, the first being that moral and civic virtue comprise the good for human beings taken as a species. So if you remember from the ethics, Aristotle says that all human beings by virtue of their common nature have a common good and that good consists of the life of moral and civic virtue. And the second element following from that observes that moral and civic virtue can only be acquired and exercised in a social context. That is, that the moral and civic virtues speak directly to man as an embodied rational being, as someone who expresses his thought and character in physical activity in the company of others.

These two ideas which come out of Aristotle’s ethics are crucial to understand not only Aristotle’s political philosophy but the way that the ancient Greeks thought about politics. We’re gonna talk today — we’re gonna be drawing both from readings from the end of the nicomachean ethics, because at the end of the nicomachean ethics Aristotle transitions over to a discussion of politics. We’re also going to refer to selections from Aristotle’s politics, the book which you do not have but excerpts which
you have in the form of photocopies.

In the politics Aristotle says that man is by nature a political animal. He says this on page 37. He says, quote, “From these things it is evident that the city belongs among the things that exist by nature and that man is by nature a political animal. He who is without a city through nature rather than chance is either a mean sort or superior to man.” So it’s because the polis — and by polis we mean the Greek city/state, a state at whose heart is a city. It’s because the polis provides the central framework in which human nature is fulfilled, in which human flourishing occurs, that Aristotle thinks that both the city and political life are manifestations of human nature, of man’s natural being, natural character.

And it’s because of the essentially political nature of human beings that Aristotle says in the ethics at the beginning that politics is the science in which we study the human good. He says this on page 4 of the ethics. He says, “Knowledge of the good would seem to be the concern of the most authoritative science, the highest master science, and this is obviously the science of politics.”

So there’s this intimate connection between the idea of a common human nature, the idea of a common human good, a common human flourishing, and the idea that it’s in the political framework in the political forms of life, the social and political forms of life, that human nature is most completely fulfilled, that human flourishing occurs.

Let’s talk a little bit more about the second point, this idea that moral and civic virtue can only be acquired and exercised in a social context within the framework of a civil society and the polis. Let’s sort of talk — say a few things first of all about the acquisition of moral and civic virtue and the role that the polis plays in that, and then the exercise of moral and civic virtue and the role that the polis plays in that.

With respect to the acquisition of moral and civic virtue, Aristotle observes at the end of the ethics that while perhaps some people can be sort of convinced, either
through argument or through training, to seek the path of virtue, that the average person that most people — he actually refers to them as the masses — will not become morally and civically virtuous that way, the idea being that most people’s moral and civic education has to be -- if not by force, has to at least have the backing of the state and the backing of law.

He says — he talks about this on pages 199 to 200 of the Nicomachean ethics. Of course this is where the ethics transitions — begins its transition over into the discussion of political subjects. If you look on the bottom of page 199, Aristotle says, quote, “If arguments were sufficient by themselves to make people good, then they would’ve won many great awards and justly so.” In other words, it would’ve been right to award them. “But as things are, though they appear to have the power to influence and encourage those young people who possess generosity of spirit and perhaps to make susceptible to virtue, a character that is well-bred and truly loves what is noble, they seem unable to influence the masses in the direction of what is noble and good.”

Now look a little further down on the page. “If one has not been reared under the right laws, it is difficult to obtain from one’s earliest years the correct upbringing for virtue. Because the masses, especially the young, do not find it pleasant to live temperately and with endurance. For this reason, the upbringing and pursuit should be regulated by laws because they will not find them painful once they have become accustomed to them.”

So Aristotle’s point here is that, you know, there are some rare sorts of folk who are fortunate enough to come from the kinds of families where all on their own they will develop into morally and civically virtuous human beings. But for most people, for most households, even if the family is inclined to inculcate the virtues in their children, they need the help of the state. They at least need the backing, the support of the state and of law. Aristotle in this context speaks admiringly of the military society of Sparta which
was, of course, the great Greek city/state which defeated the Athenians in the Peloponnesian War. He refers admiringly to the Spartans as the only people — the only Greek society in which the state and the legal system are perfectly integrated with the family in the process of the raising of children.

He says on page 201, quote, “It is in the city of Sparta alone or almost alone that the legislature seems to have been careful about people’s upbringing and pursuits, and most of these such matters have been neglected and each person lives as he wishes. The best thing is for there to be correct public concern with such things,” unquote.

So we see that civil society and political life, the polis, are essential for the acquisition of moral and civic virtue. That is, they’re essential if we are to be able to develop the masses of people who live in a society into morally and civically virtuous beings and thus to fulfill human nature and fulfill the human good on a society-wide scale.

Let’s also now say something for a minute about the exercise of moral and civic virtue. If you recall the discussion that we just had about the Nicomachean ethics — about the amorality of the gods, you’ll recall that Aristotle deduces that the gods must be amoral — that is, neither good nor evil — by virtue of the fact that they’re disembodied and do not act within a social framework. So Aristotle says something like this. He says, look, it would be funny to attribute characteristics like honesty or temperance or justice to gods inasmuch as gods are disembodied and do not participate in social life, and thus don’t do the kinds of things that we typically call honest, just, or temperate. If someone is disembodied, then that person does not eat. So how can one be temperate with regard to food if one does not engage in the activity of eating?

Similarly, gods being disembodied do not participate in commerce. So what would it mean to say that a god was an honest man, for example, inasmuch as honesty
as a virtue is manifested through socially embedded behavior, right? So I can be honest with respect to a loan I’ve taken. I can be honest with respect to something I’m telling you. But it’s hard to see how one could be honest — how one could have the courage — the virtue of honesty without being embodied and without being a part of the social framework. So the very framework in which the virtues are exercised, the very context in which the virtues are exercised, implicates not only that one is embodied but that one is an active participant in social and political life.

So the idea is that for the ancient Greeks civil society and the polis exist in order to facilitate the development of moral and civic virtue. The reason why we exist, live together socially, the reason why we organize ourselves into political units and set ourselves up, governments in which certain people rule over certain other people, is because those forms of life and those institutions are necessary in order to flourish as human beings.

And to us today this has got to sort of sound a little bit tyrannical. I don’t think too many people would like the idea today of — for example, let’s say the United States government and the United States as a country existing in order to facilitate the moral development of the citizenry. I say most people probably wouldn’t like that because there’s a caveat here that I think is sort of telling. The reason why we tend — we as a whole would tend to find the conception of politics that Aristotle is laying out tyrannically is because we don’t today — us that is in the modern world — don’t today tend to believe that there is a single human good. We don’t have a singular monolithic universal conception of value. Rather today, we tend to be individuals. We tend to think that each individual has his or her own individual good, his or her own conception of his or her own flourishing. What would constitute success, a good life, in one’s own individual case.

And so the idea that the government would exist in order to promote virtue would
be offensive to us because we conceive of there being as many conceptions of the
good potentially as there are people. And so the government, in choosing to promote
any single conception of the good, would be inevitably violating the majority of people’s
conception of the good. So we tend to think of value in an individualistic way, and so
the idea of the state — of the society and of the state existing or to promote a singular
universal conception of virtue is going to be offensive to us. This is much of the reason
why we generally have some kind of divorce between politics and morality. Morality
has been largely sort of relegated to the private sphere and politics tries to sort of
remain neutral between these sort of competing conceptions of the good.

Now, there is, of course, an exception. They are people today who much like
pre-modern people do believe in a singular universal conception of the good. Because,
of course, the reason why the ancient Greeks wouldn’t necessarily find this conception
of political life oppressive or tyrannical is because they did have a singular universal
conception of the good. But today, amongst people especially who tend to be very
religious — people who tend to be religious tend to think in more universalist terms.
And so of all the people in a country like the United States who would be amenable to a
conception of politics like Aristotle’s, it would likely be those people who have strong
religious belief and who believe in universal conceptions of human nature and in
universal conceptions of the human good.

For the Greeks, a conception like — like politics of Aristotle’s is unremarkable.
It’s uncontroversial. Because in the ancient Greek world — and this is also true in the
pre-modern world up to the Middle Ages — there is a singular conception of human
beings, there’s a singular conception of the human good, and so the idea that the
government exists to sort of promote a single set of values is neither remarkable nor
troubling.

I want to talk now more specifically about Aristotle’s politics. We’re not gonna
go into any great detail, but I want to look more closely at this idea that the various forms of life and institutions that make up our politics exists for the sake of facilitating a human need, exist for the sake of allowing us to flourish in the many and complex ways that we do. Remember that both moral and civic virtue are complex. That is, to be a morally and civically virtuous person is to manifest and to exercise a multiplicity of virtues and the idea is that each of these virtues requires a certain social framework within which to manifest itself and within which to be exercised. And so I want to just talk a little bit — because Aristotle is very nicely into politics, distinguishes or differentiates the varying levels of political — social and political affiliation and institutionalization and pairs those with the human functions, the human needs that they fulfill. He starts from the bottom up.

And one of the nice things about this is not only to show the sense in which politics is natural and which political institutions arise from nature, but also it shows the manner in which Aristotle conceives of political authority as arising from nature. Remember from our earlier discussions that authority, political authority, can also be conceived of as either coming from nature or coming from agreement. So in the modern world we tend to think of political authority as being bestowed by the agreement of all. An election is an example of bestowing political authority by agreement. In the pre-modern world the view tended to be that authority came from nature, that those who had authority were those who had the greatest natural fitness or ability in whatever relevant area of leadership one was talking about. So all of those ideas are gonna be revealed very nicely in the sort of breakdown of the levels of social and political life and their pairing with the corresponding human need or function that they serve. So I’m going to sort of talk about this as if we had a chart with two columns. The first is going to be the social political relationship or institution and then the second will be the function, the human need or function that it fulfills.
Aristotle says that the most fundamental social relationship/institution is that which is created by the union of men and women. So the most basic social institution is the marriage bond, a man and a woman coupled, and the obvious human function that this serves is that of procreation. Without men and women coming together, there would be no children. Without children, the human race would go extinct. Now, things are a lot more complicated today. Of course today with artificial insemination and such, gay and lesbian men and women or heterosexual people who are sterile can, through the use of various reproduction technologies, produce children in an artificial way. But if you think about this, Aristotle’s point still stands because the material required to reproduce still involves both a man and a woman. You still need the male and female material in order to make children. So I think Aristotle’s more fundamental point here remain untouched, even by the advent of modern reproductive technology. Incidentally, all of these things we’re discussing now occur between pages 35 and 38 of the Politics.

So the most basic social institution is man/woman and it served the function of procreation which speaks directly to the survival of the human species. So that is a relationship that arises from a natural need, and thus it is a natural institution. It exists in order to fulfill a fundamental human need.

The second most basic social relationship/institution, Aristotle says, is that between ruler and ruled, between the one who leads and the one who follows. Aristotle says that this relationship, this social institution, serves the purpose of preservation by which he means survival. Once you exist as a species, you have to persevere. This is only possible if some people lead and other people follow.

Aristotle interestingly says with respect to this second relationship, the second institution, that those who rule are those who are most intelligent while those who follow tend to be those with physical prowess or skill of some kind. He says on page 36, “For that which can foresee with the mind is the naturally ruling and naturally mastering
element while that which can do these things with the body is the naturally ruled and
slave."

So we have here a clear example of natural authority. At the most fundamental
level of authoritative relationships, a relationship between ruler and ruled, that line of
authority comes from natural fitness. The reason why A is suited to — has authority
over B is because A is smart or smarter than B and B has some — well, not being
smart, has some physical capacity that A’s intelligence will fruitfully exploit and fruitfully
make use of. So we have here a clear example at the most fundamental social unit --
at the most fundamental social level we have a clear example of natural authority.

Now, these two relationships — men and women, ruler and ruled — comprise the
foundations of all social life for Aristotle. For Aristotle, if you deconstruct any social
institution, any social form of life, at the bottom of it all are men and women and rulers
and ruled. In the combination of these two elements — man/woman, ruler/ruled — out
of the combination of these two elemental relationships comes the household. So the
household is the next level of social institution. You have these two fundamental social
institutions — the institution of men coupling with women, the institution of marriage, on
the one hand, and the institution of ruler to ruled, of master to slave — you combine
these two in a single institution and you have what’s called the household.

The household serves the function of providing for daily needs of life — food,
gathering and cultivation, home maintenance and repair, etc. So in order for the basic
daily needs of life to be fulfilled, one requires both men and women together and
children and one requires masters and slaves. Now, this sort of sounds harsh to us
and today, of course, we don’t have slaves, but we have relationships that serve the
same function. Managers and workers, homeowners and servants or hired help. But
those two elemental relationships still exist, simply in modern forms. So the household
is also a natural institution. It exists in order to serve a natural need. It arises out of a
natural need, the natural need of sort of daily necessities.

Interestingly enough, Aristotle directly compares the leadership, the authority, that the head of the household exercises — and, of course, to Aristotle the head of the household was also a male. Aristotle directly compares the authority that the head of the household wields with the authority that a political ruler wields. He says — this is on page 36: “This is why cities were at first under kings and nations are even now, for those who joined together were already under kings. Every household was under the eldest as king and so also were the extensions of the household constituting the village as a result of kinship.”

Aristotle believes that the model of authority that arises within the household, sort of the patriarch who rules over both family and servants, that this is the model upon which political leadership is based. That the ruler of the state or the mayor of the village is a father respectively to his social unit, to the social unit over which he rules, and that his authority derives from exactly the same natural source of ability or fitness that the head of the household’s authority arises from.

We mentioned in this quotation the village and, of course, this is the next level of social organization. A village, Aristotle says, is a collection of households and it’s at this level of social organization that political life begins to enter into the picture. And Aristotle is kind of sketchy here. He doesn’t give a specific set of needs that the village serves. But he does say that the village serves needs that go beyond the needs of daily life. He says, quote — this is on page 36: “The first partnership arising from the union of several households and for the sake of non-daily needs of the village.”

Notice up until now all the levels of social organization, all the social institutions we’ve been talking about up until now, have served primarily biological needs, physical needs. Remember in the Nicomachean ethics the human good does not consist merely of remaining alive, remaining fed, reproducing. In this sense of the good human
beings share the same good with animals. The distinctively human good for Aristotle consists of moral and civic virtue. And it’s only once you reach a level of social organization which fosters activities that go beyond mere survival and preservation that you begin to have the frameworks and context within which moral and civic virtue can be cultivated and exercised. The village is the first level that occurs because the village is the first level at which one has institutions and forms of life which go beyond merely serving daily needs. It’s in the village, at the level of the village, that you begin to have political forms of life, political institutions.

The final level of organization, the highest level of social organization for Aristotle, is the city. Now, we think of cities today in the context of larger political units that we call nation states. But in Aristotle’s time, the chief political union was the city/state. So you have a sort of a set of lands or a series of villages, etc., that join together and there’d be a single sort of city which would be the seat, the head, of that polis. And which would be the seat of the government.

This city, Aristotle said on page 37, serves the end of, quote, “living well.” Again, a very terse, short, not expanded upon description. But if you take this in the context of the ethics, he clearly means by “living well” the idea that it’s in the city, at the level of city/state social and political organization, that we finally have the kinds of frameworks that make possible human flourishing as described in the ethics. By living well here, he clearly means Eudymonia. Happiness. The human good as described in the ethics.

And if you think about this, this makes perfect sense. It is only at the level of the city/state that we have civic and political life on a large, complex scale. We have all sorts of institutions and forms of life centered around institutions in which human activity rises to the level of the kind of flourishing described in the ethics. And here’s just a short list of some of the institutional — institutions and forms of life that exist at the
city/state level. So one of the things that city/states does, one of the functions of a city/state, is to engage in relations with other city/states. Almost every city/state has a foreign policy. Well, what does that mean? That means if one is organized and large enough to the extent to which one is now engaging as an entity with other city/states, that means that there’s an opportunity for diplomacy. It also means that there’s an opportunity for war. Those are both activities, diplomacy and war, which make possible a whole number of human virtues. So here’s a very clear example of a form of life that only exists at a certain high level of social/political organization that provides the environment within which human capacities are exercised and developed and can flourish.

Another example is that, of course, a city/state will support a complex political system, a legislature, an executive, a judiciary. These institutions and the activities that occur within them make possible a whole range of human activities that operate at a very high level, that also make up these moral and civic virtues. A city/state will also, of course, support universities, institutions of learning, arts, etc. These provide further frameworks in which people can flourish. You remember that Aristotle says that one of the human goods is the life of contemplation, the pursuit of knowledge. Well, one has to have a sufficient level of social and political organization for there to be the institutions, not to mention the wealth, that make it possible to flourish in this way.

And so for all of these reasons — and, of course, these are only a handful of examples — the city/state which constitutes the highest level of social/political organization for Aristotle serves the ultimate need of living well, of flourishing as human beings, and this really brings home the sense in which Aristotle says, as we’ve already quoted, that man is by nature a political animal.

We’ve said enough about the ancient Greek way of thinking about politics for the purposes of this course and for the purposes of contrasting it with the modern view of
social and political life which we’ll get to later in the course after we talk a little bit about modern moral theories. Next time we’re gonna start John Stuart Mill’s Utilitarianism. And as you’re reading Utilitarianism, I’d like you actually to compare what you’re reading with what you’ve heard already about the ancient world, about ancient ethics.

Two specific things I’d like you to think about. One, how does Mill’s conception of happiness differ from Aristotle’s conception of human flourishing? And, two, what kind of picture of human nature emerges from utilitarianism and how does it compare with the pre-modern conception of human nature? You see, one of the things that I’m most interested in your coming away with from this course is a real sense in which — of the ways in which the modern world and the ancient world are similar and of the ways in which they’re different. And of what that tells us about our development as a civilization. That’s one of the things I’m really interested in your leaving this course with.

So until next time and until we start Utilitarianism, have a good day, afternoon, evening. Thank you very much.