AUTARKEIA:
NOTES ON ITS CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT
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The concept of self-sufficiency in Greece during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. has an integral place within Greek thought and its cultural world-view. This paper will consider the concept of autarkeia from a political rather than from an ethical point of view. When Solonian wisdom argued, as reported by Herodotos, that no-one was sufficient (autarkes) in oneself (Hdt. 1.32.8-9), it was not a concept that was to disappear from Greek experience. For its logical, but far more conceptually developed successor was Aristotle’s notion of autarkeia. Self-sufficiency represented in Aristotle’s Politics not the capacity of a self-supporting individual but the interaction of oikoi and polis and their potential to harness the means by which society could renew itself (Arist. Pol., 1256b26-31). However, there was a limit to the amount of useful property that was needed to provide the necessary level of self-sufficiency for Aristotle’s good life within a polis (Arist. Pol., 1256b31-34ff).

Aristotle’s concept of self-sufficiency could only be understood if his reader was made aware of the limited nature of goods and property required to achieve a self-sufficient social ideal. This concept was as much the product of an ethical outlook on the roles of the citizenry and their oikoi within a polis as it was a concept for a preferred conduct of political life in the fullest sense of that term. Aristotle did not reject the material world which constituted his polis. Rather, in his critique, he sought to realign his polis world by presenting it with a model for its continual renewal. Wealth-getting (khrē matistikē: Arist. Pol. 1256b40-1257a1) and a man’s acquisitive, grasping behaviour, as represented by the term pleonexia (Arist. EN 1129b1-4ff), were rejected as desirable social ends in themselves. In this intellectual spirit, autarkeia became a model concept which stood in the vanguard of Aristotle’s evaluation of the polis. Autarkeia was the central ideal of his venture into the social engineering of the polis.

What then, were the general and peculiar origins of autarkeia which, by dint of Aristotle’s deployment of this term, embodied a self-contained cosmos? Autarkeia grew from within a cultural and historical environment which, whilst often intellectually adventurous, was characterized by the caution inherent in daily life within an agrarian world. This particular agrarian world was in turn circumscribed by its physical and cultural borders, the boundaries
which formed the limits of a polis. As Bloch succinctly observed in *The Historian's Craft*:

> Above and beyond the peculiarities of individuals of every age, there are states of mind which were formerly common, yet which appear peculiar to us because we no longer share them.¹

For an insight into the intellectual milieu which gave birth to the notion of *autarkeia* an enquirer would be well-advised to turn to the folkloric traditions which were represented by and associated with the name of Solon.

Solonian wisdom, as generally represented by Herodotos and Aristotle (Hdt. 1.30-32; Arist. *Pol.* 1256b33-34), is concerned with the conflict between limited and limitless wealth and its relationship to the maintenance of human well-being and happiness within the boundaries of a polis. This simultaneously moral and philosophical outlook found its heart within Aristotle's concept of *autarkeia*. For Aristotle, self-sufficiency was the ideal of a complete universe of human relationships (Arist. *Pol.* 1252b27-1253a1; Arist. *EN* 1097b6-8ff).

Of equal importance, Aristotle recognized the centrality of agrarian production in daily life (Arist. *Pol.* 1256a 38-40) but he did not disassociate this everyday productive activity from its immediate and broad human social environments, the *oikos* and polis (note the general argument and context of Arist. *Pol.* 1256a-1258a38). In this sense, there is a cultural and historical continuum between the agrarian outlooks and moral world-views of Hesiod and Aristotle. Hesiod's wisdom or, rather, astute peasant observations on agrarian survival, found agreeable philosophical companionship with Aristotle's critique of the Solonian view of *ploutos* in Aristotle's *Politics*. It is worth noting the intellectual symmetry of Arist. *Pol.* 1252b 9-14 and Arist. *Pol.* 1256b 26-34. For Aristotle, both these sources of Greek wisdom and traditional values signified his belief that limited needs were to be upheld as the model for polis existence (Arist. *Pol.* 1256b 26-34).

Whilst Aristotle recognized that the pursuit of material wealth as an end in itself existed within his own world (Arist. *Pol.* 1256b 40-1257a1), he held to an autarkic peasant world-view. Yet, of course, this world-view did not prevent Aristotle from commencing a formative analysis and critique of this 'new' phenomenon. However, continuity rather than change, limits rather than limitlessness, characterized his model of *oikos* and polis harmony. Nor

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was this philosophical and political belief system sprung from a naive view of the social and historical character of internal and external polis history.

Aristotle well understood the general historical environment within which a polis sought to maintain its existence. The principal forces which characterized this historical environment had a direct impact upon Aristotle's polis world-view which, in turn, was intimately associated with his support for an autarkic polis.

I turn to a consideration of the relationships of these forces to Aristotle's development of autarkea. Warfare between poleis was an everyday reality of Greek historical life and its ever-present menace bred a certain bellicose resignation to Aristotle's view of the polis. Whilst the martial outlook of polis societies can be accepted as given, and readily finds explicit support in Arist. Pol. 1254b 30-32; 1256b 23-26; 1265a 20-28; 1327a 40-1327b6, it is but one of three primary, contributory factors to Aristotle's ideas of self-sufficiency.

The second contributory factor resides in the notion of territorialism. In this context, territorialism can be defined simply as the defence of a polis' borders from disputes over boundaries or external threats of encroachment from a neighbouring (but not necessarily benign) polis or combination of poleis. Aristotle's discussion of territorialism was closely associated with the historical experiences of the polis. A significant reminder of the impact of these experiences upon a polis' historical fortunes can be found in a prime example of border politics-as-territorialism as recorded by Thucydides, 1.103.4. Here Thucydides reports upon the impact of a boundary dispute between Corinth and Megara, and discusses how Athens' intervention in support of Megara was, whilst timely for Megara, a long-burning fuse attached to Corinth's animosity towards the Athenian polis. However, the notion of territorialism did not reside exclusively in the realm of historical incidents. Territorialism was given a theoretical dimension in the philosophical and political writings of Aristotle and Plato (Arist. Pol. 1265a 10-20; Plato, Rep., 422-423, and cf. 373). Of course, as the previous references indicate, this did not mean that Plato and Aristotle were as one on the subject of polis and territory. In terms of Plato's schema of a model polis, Aristotle argued against Plato along the following lines: a large population's need for increased territorial space inevitably carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction because of insuperable problems of scale. The Mediterranean polis was a limited, known world governed by agrarian routine and tradition rather than a ready harbinger of social experimentation.
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The third factor which contributed to the notion of autarkeia was land. Every polis and its oikoi needed land and a preferably well-regulated land tenure and inheritance structure if it hoped to perpetuate itself successfully. Without this socio-legal balance, a polis and its oikoi, and hence, its citizen manpower, were directly endangered. (Note Arist. Pol. 1265a 18-20; 1270a 16-39 and see earlier re Sparta, Aristotle and the demise of the Spartiate population base, pp. 46-52).

Aristotle's advocacy of autarkeia as an ideal polis form of existence was not premised on any anachronistic notions of 'conservatism'. Rather, his preference for an autarkic model of social existence arose from his moral view of the world. That this can be called 'conservative' misses the point or obscures the fact that his idea of self-sufficiency arose from a notion of the polis as a model for citizen life which sought renewal rather than expansion. This was a view of the polis which was philosophically coloured by the notion of the polis as a continuum in Greek social experience. It should be remembered that our contemporary notions of 'conservatism' and, for that matter, 'radicalism' still have a concept of progress inherent within them. Aristotle's morality arose from his view that material relations should serve as a means to an end, namely, the reproduction of the oikos and the polis, not as ends in themselves.

Aristotle's morality was inseparable from his intellectual advocacy of balanced and harmonious decisions which perpetuated the ideal polis formation (Arist. Pol. 1256b 26-39; the polis itself was an ideal form: 1252b 27-30). Aristotle's use of the term autarkeia reflected an intellectual capacity to incorporate with seeming ease a preferred moral order of the world within a carefully structured critique of the polis. Yet, Aristotle's model polis was not the work of a dispassionate philosopher; it was the product of an intellectual commitment.

Aristotle's model polis was an autarkic ideal which was dependent upon the culture of its citizenry and cannot be extricated from it. Without that environment self-sufficiency would have been a nonsense. The drive for self-sufficiency could only be perceived within a context which accepted that human beings were social beings who were self-defined within the political orbit of a polis world (Arist. Pol. 1252b 30-1253a3; EN 1097b 6-11). In other words, notions of self-sufficiency were not expressions of a singular, isolated existence (Arist. Pol. 1253a 3-4ff; 1253a 25-29; EN ibid.); they were only germane to a gregarious existence within a polis. Within this context, it must be clearly recognised that Aristotle's ideal world consisted of a dual carriage-way which linked a self-sufficient existence in society to the realization-in-society of prosperity and happiness, eudaimonia (Arist. EN
Eudaimonia found its fulfilment in its accomplishment of a self-sufficient standing. Further, a self-sufficient life could only be understood within the context of the full social life of a citizen. In turn, a citizen’s life, by definition, included the gamut of relationships within the citizen’s own oikos as well as his external household relationships with those citizens with whom he had formed close personal and political associations, his philoi (Arist. EN 1097b 8-11). These relationships constituted the cultural realm of the polis and the social world within which autarkeia was given place and meaning within a particular historical time.

The polis represented the pinnacle of a structured series of social relations-in-society which aimed to make its citizenry more self-sufficient (Arist. Pol. 1261b 11-15). To the extent that this was achieved, qualitatively and quantitatively, a polis was described as being in a more independent or self-reliant mode of existence (Arist. Pol. 1261b 12-13 and note 1252b 27-1253a2). Aristotle’s concept of self-sufficiency was formed by a combination of moral and economic (and hence political) values which sought to realize a philosophical ideal within the cultural context of Greek social existence, the polis. In this sense, whilst self-sufficiency remained an ideal goal as well as a paradigm, it never put aside or over-turned the world of necessary relations of exchange (Arist. Pol. 1257a 28-30). Aristotle’s critique of the polis world did not reject the need for useful goods and property in daily life: it viewed them as tools or means to an end. The parameters of human, that is, citizen happiness, were given by the polis as a self-sufficient, gregarious entity. Aristotle’s model polis world was as much constrained by cultural and intellectual boundaries as it was restrained by the physical borders and scale of any given historical polis.