



# For Their Own Good: Moral Slavery 101— The Aristotelian *Cantus Firmus*

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How could it be, we might wonder today, that for centuries, indeed for millennia, most people, most of the time, in most places within Western civilization were convinced that slavery was moral? Already in the fourth century before Christ, Aristotle mapped the terrain and set the pace for the Western moral argument legitimizing slavery. All other Western moral defenses, Christian or not, have been variations on the Aristotelian *cantus firmus*.<sup>1</sup>

There was, however, a dispute over the morality of slavery already in the days of Aristotle, even though no one seriously proposed eliminating the institution of slavery itself. Imagine attending Aristotle's class, "Moral Slavery 101."<sup>2</sup> In Unit I he

<sup>1</sup>For an overview of the variations, see Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, I am presenting Aristotle's point of view, not my own. Aristotle's argument for the morality of slavery does not appear in any one single place within his writings. The task then is to weave a coherent tapestry out of fragments that appear throughout his writings. Other helpful analyses of slavery include: P. A. Brunt, *Studies in Greek History and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 343–388; Giuseppe Cambiano, "Aristotle and the Anonymous Opponents of Slavery," in M. I. Finley, *Classical Slavery* (London: Cass, 1987) 22–41; Eugene Garver, "Aristotle's Natural Slaves: Incomplete *Praxeis* and Incomplete Human Beings," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 32/2 (1994) 173–195; N. Smith, "Aristotle's Theory of Natural Slavery," in *A Companion to Aristotle's Politics*, ed. F. D. Miller and D. Keyt (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 142–155.

*"Moral slavery" will sound curiously—even immorally—oxymoronic to most of us, and a "course" in Aristotle's views on "moral slavery" will seem quaintly archaic or irrelevantly "academic." We will be surprised to learn how much these ideas have influenced our culture and continue to influence our lives and politics.*

would instruct us how the institution of slavery fits within his overall political imagination and its moral basis. In Unit II he would briefly outline the terms of the dispute. In Unit III he would take us deep into the natural beauty of human Soul with its distinctive capacities. In Unit IV he would make his specific moral argument for slavery. Finally, Aristotle would wrap up “Moral Slavery 101” by drawing out the muscular implications for his grander *cantus firmus*, which could carry Western civilization toward its colonial destiny.<sup>3</sup>

#### UNIT I. THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY AND THE PERFECTION OF THE HUMAN ANIMAL

Slavery was ubiquitous among the Greeks, the Romans, and all the peoples that were known to them. The primary institution of slavery in Aristotle’s Greece was chattel slavery, that is, the slave (*doulos*—δουλος) as personal and therefore as household property. Like one’s inanimate tools (*techne*—τεχνη), these “living tools” or “living chattel” were owned and at the discretionary disposal of the owner (*Politics* 1253b23–35).<sup>4</sup> As with cattle, the slave owner could buy, sell, bequeath, or hire out a slave to some other property owner. Chattel slavery, therefore, came under the topic of household management (*oikonomia*—οικονομια).

According to Aristotle, human beings, like other animals, form partnerships (*koinonia*—κοινωνια) because as individuals human beings do not have self-sufficiency (*autarcheia*—αυταρχεια). Self-sufficiency is “that which taken by itself makes life something desirable and deficient in nothing” and thereby is nature’s mark of completeness, wholeness, perfection (*entelecheia*—εντελεχεια or *telos*—τελος) (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b15). Every partnership thereby, like every action, “aims at some good”; it has some purpose. Every purposive action and partnership becomes a step toward some greater good on the way toward the greatest good, toward self-sufficiency, toward perfection. Self-sufficiency, purpose, and perfection are thereby inextricably connected. The household is, therefore, a partnership with purpose, with “a view to some good” (*Politics* 1252a1).

The household’s purpose is to provide the most basic necessities of life. The most basic necessity lies in the human being’s most vigorous natural instinct, one that it shares with all plants and animals, that is, the instinct to procreate, to leave behind another life form most similar to oneself. So we have the necessary union of male and female. Of course, there are other basic necessities, like clothing, food, shelter, and physical security, which make progeny and the household possible. In this way the household also anchors what today we call the economic means of securing these necessities. In Aristotle’s time the economy was not a sphere routinely separated from the household, but rather a key aspect of the household. Finally,

<sup>3</sup>There were other ramifications from “Moral Slavery 101” pertaining to matters like the relation between nature and morality; the significance of hierarchy and its connection with purpose, perfection, and moral agency and excellence; and the nature of male and female and the moral contours of gender and sexuality.

<sup>4</sup>All citations within my text are from Aristotle. Further, I am using the standard names of his books and the standard numbering system to locate citations no matter which publication house one uses.

the character formation of children is also a basic necessity. However, as we will see, the character formation of male children who are naturally born free (*eleutheros*—ελευθερος) must get started in the household, but the household is insufficient to bring male character to completion, though it is sufficient for the perfection of female character, which Aristotle covers in his course “The Moral Perfection of the Female.”

Like an individual, a household is also not sufficient unto itself. It too must be nested in a greater whole, a greater good, that is, in the city-state (*polis*—πολις). To discover the nature of human sociality the inquirer must use the “regular method of investigation” for anything in nature. First, dissect larger wholes into their smaller and smaller parts in order to see how these smaller parts are causally connected and assembled to make the larger wholes (*Politics* 1252a17–20; 1253b5–10). Further, focus your dissection on differences that matter because “to assign a property to something relative to something else is to assert a difference between them either universally and permanently or usually and in the majority of cases” (*Topics* 129a6–10). Finally, follow the bell curve principle when deciding what is natural and thereby what is normal and normative. “To study Nature we have to consider the majority of cases, for it is either in what is universal or what happens in the majority of cases that Nature’s ways are to be found” (*Parts of Animals* 663b27–29). These methodological principles help researchers get from what is statistically normal and natural to what is morally normative.

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Aristotle’s scientific methodology is also thoroughly suffused with his most basic imagination of reality. In this imagination every natural entity is in motion (*kinēsis*—κίνησις), in “development from [its] potentiality [*dynamis*—δυναμις] to [its] actuality [*energeia*—ενεργεια],” to its realization (*Metaphysics* 1045b22; also 1045b20–1046a35 and 1065b16, 33).<sup>5</sup> This comes from his overriding interest in the nature of change and generation. Every natural entity has inbuilt potential (*δυναμις*) that strives to reach its inherent end or goal (*entelecheia*—εντελεχεια). In other words, nature has purpose; it seeks perfection (*Physics* 192b8–193b21; *Parts of Animals* 639b15–20).

<sup>5</sup>Potentiality and actuality are two of Aristotle’s ten basic categories making up reality. Substance is his first and prime category with the majority of substances being potentialities (*Categories* 1b25–28; *Metaphysics* 1040b5–6; 1045b25–1046b28; 1049b4–16). Hugh Tredennick states: “the antithesis of potentiality and actuality is simply the antithesis of matter and form considered dynamically instead of statically. Unfortunately Aristotle is inconsistent in his use of the term *energeia*; he applies it sometimes to the form itself, sometimes to the process of actualization or realization of the form in the matter, and sometime to the result of the process, which is more strictly described as εντελεχεια or ‘complete reality’” (“Introduction” in Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, Books I–IX [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961] xxix).

While potentiality is real, what is really real, so to speak, is the actualization of potentiality. Act, therefore, has ontological priority—as philosophers put it—over potentiality (*On Interpretation* 23a21–27). The act (*poiein*—ποιεῖν) has priority over the acted upon (*paschein*—πάσχειν or *pathos*—πάθος), as Aristotle constantly remarks.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the active has priority over the passive; activity over passivity, action over passion, agents over patients, and agency over patiency, as English used to put it. Further, it is the ontological superiority of act that determines the hierarchical ordering of the great chain of being. Act is always hierarchically higher than what is acted upon. Agency is higher than patiency. Indeed, act’s ontological superiority is significant for all things Aristotelian, including his moral legitimation of slavery, as we will see.<sup>7</sup>

Aristotle’s scientific methodology helps him discover and understand the nature of perfection and the perfection of nature at each level of the hierarchical great chain of being. It is in his basic imagination of the act in combination with his scientific methodology that he most differs from his famous teacher, Plato. Plato’s imagination and method begin not in the nitty-gritty of things, so to speak, but at the top, in the loftiest ideas, in the purest forms, in the most immutable archetypes. Aristotle, though he learned much from Plato, also learned much as a child from his own father, who was a physician from a family of physicians with their hands daily deep in the biological, in the most bodily, down-to-earth nitty-gritty of things. Indeed, Aristotle himself was something of a biologist.<sup>8</sup> Plato was far too mystical, so to speak, for Aristotle’s palate.

In Aristotle’s imagination only the πολίς attains “virtually complete self-sufficiency.” This is true because “while it [the πολίς] comes into existence for the sake of life, it exists for the good life” (*Politics* 1252b25–30). That is, while the πολίς provides the protective nest for the household’s attainment of necessities, the greater purpose of the πολίς is to make the good life possible, to make the life of virtue (*aretē*—ἀρετή) possible, that is, to make perfection possible. The nature of any entity lies in its end, its perfection, its τέλος. “[T]hat which each thing is when its growth is completed we speak of as being the nature of each thing” (*Politics* 1252b30–35). Human nature is therefore only realized in the making of virtuous and just decisions within the decision-making assembly (*ekklēsia*—ἐκκλησία) of the πολίς. Virtuous political decisions are the supreme act that realizes human

<sup>6</sup>A fuller description of Aristotle’s politics and ethics would have to describe the difference, relationship, and position of his two different kinds of actions, the action of producing or making some object (*poiein*—ποιεῖν) and the moral action of doing some virtuous deed (*praxis*—πράξις).

<sup>7</sup>Finally, there is that which has no potentiality, no passivity, patiency, or passion; there is that which is pure action (*actus purus*; Latin); that is, there is divinity. In a Greco-Roman world that agreed with Aristotle’s *cantus firmus* regarding divinity, is it any wonder how foolish, indeed, how scandalous such a world would find a totally passable, passive, and path-etic deity as the crucified God of the gospel?

<sup>8</sup>For helpful biographical background for Aristotle, as well as for the nature of the surviving corpus of Aristotle’s writings, see J. Barnes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 1–26; and Ernst Barker, ed., *The Politics of Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948) xi–lxxvi; also see W. S. Hett’s “Introduction,” in Aristotle, *On the Soul (et al.)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964) vii–ix.

self-sufficiency. In this way the πολίς is ontologically prior to both the household and the individual as the whole is prior to the parts (*Politics* 1253a 19–25). This is why Aristotle categorizes human beings as the political animal (*zōon politikon*—ζῶον πολιτικόν) (*Politics* 1253a1–5; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b5–15).<sup>9</sup>

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The role played by the institution of chattel slavery now comes into focus. Given the ordinary vicissitudes of life in the ancient world, it would take 110% of the time, energy, and resources of a slave-less household, especially of its born-free male head, just to scrape by, attain and manage the most basic necessities of life, especially given how time-consuming it is to raise enough children so that some survive to adulthood. There would be virtually no time left over for activity outside of the household. There would be no freedom, no “leisure” (*eleutheroschronos*—ελευθεροσχρονοσ; Latin, *otium*) as Aristotle puts it, to engage in politics, which exercises one’s moral excellence, thereby actualizing one’s true nature. Chattel slavery makes this possible. Ironically perhaps, the slave frees the master to pursue his political purpose, his virtue, his perfection, indeed, to attain his nature as a human. In the case of a poor born-free male, an ox or his wife and children must take the slave’s place as much as possible (*Politics* 1252b10–13; 1323a5–7). The more slaves, the more freedom can be attained for the master of the household.

## UNIT II. THE DISPUTE OVER SLAVERY

First of all, Aristotle admits, “the terms ‘slavery’ and ‘slave’ are ambiguous” (*Politics* 1255a5–7), because at least two institutional forms of slavery existed at the time. While chattel slavery was an institution of the household, the recognized conventions of war at the time recognized a right of the victor beneficently to enslave the defeated as a lesser punishment than death, and this enslavement also served the expedient, utilitarian purpose of economically compensating for the victor’s costs of warfare. While the question of war and slavery was important, Aristotle’s chief interest focused on chattel slavery’s utility to the master’s pursuit of virtue and perfection.

Those who argued that chattel slavery was unjust said that slavery was merely a matter of convention, that is, of custom or conventional law (*nomos*—νόμος),

<sup>9</sup>It could be said that the U.S. Army cribbed its all-time most successful marketing slogan, “Be all that you can be, in the Army,” from Aristotle, whose marketing brand for the human would be, “Be all that you can be, in the εκκλησια.”

and “that for one man to be another man’s master is contrary to nature [*physis*—φύσις]...and there is no difference between them [master and slave] by nature, and that therefore it is unjust, for it is based on force” (*Politics* 1253b20–23).<sup>10</sup> Aristotle agreed with the critics in two ways. First, the question of chattel slavery is a matter of justice (*dikaiosinē*—δικαιοσύνη), and second, the matter of a just law must be grounded in nature. His moral task then was to establish slavery’s justice by establishing slavery’s naturalness. “It is manifest therefore that there are cases of people of whom some are freemen and the others slaves by nature, and for these [both slave and free] slavery is an institution both expedient and just” (*Politics* 1255a1–2). How will he establish this naturalness?

### UNIT III. THE “BEAUTY OF SOUL”

What is the nature of natural-born slaves, and how is their nature related to the nature of those naturally born free? Every natural entity is composed of its material nature and its formal nature, its form being “of more fundamental importance than” its matter (*Parts of Animals* 640b28–29). “Matter is potentiality, while form is realization and actualization” (*On the Soul* 412a10). Further, “the Form of any living creature is Soul [*psyche*—ψυχή], or some part of Soul, or something that involves Soul” (*Parts of Animals* 641a18–20). Plants, animals, and the human animal all have Soul, which is something like the life force of a material entity.

Aristotle teaches, “it is the business of the student of Natural science to inform himself concerning Soul, and to treat of it in his exposition; not, perhaps, in its entirety, but of that special part of it which causes the living creature to be such as it is” (*Parts of Animals* 641a22–25). Because Soul is the difference maker, understanding the nature and “beauty of Soul” is crucial (*Politics* 1254b38). “The soul may therefore be defined as the first actuality of a natural body potentially possessing life; and such will be any body which possesses organs” (*On the Soul* 412a26–27). Soul is the site of any natural entity’s chief purpose for living.

Clearly the soul is also the cause in the final sense. For just as mind acts with some purpose in view, so too does nature, and this purpose is its end. In living creatures the soul supplies such a purpose, and this is in accordance with nature, for all natural bodies are instruments of the soul; and just as in the case with the bodies of animals, so with those of plants. (*On the Soul* 415b15–20)<sup>11</sup>

In addition to purpose, Soul is the site of a natural entity’s nature. “Now a corpse has the same shape and fashion as a living body; and yet is not a man....At any rate, when Soul is gone it is no longer a living creature” (*Parts of Animals* 640b34–36, 641a18). Finally, each distinct part of Soul, or organ of the body for that matter, has one and only one purpose, “for nature makes nothing as the cutlers make the Delphic knife

<sup>10</sup>For the possible originators of this dispute prior to Aristotle’s time, see Brunt, *Studies in Greek History*, 351.

<sup>11</sup>For Aristotle, clarity comes from evidence and logical reasoning. The more self-evident is the evidence, the more clarity is possible. Therefore, “to set about proving the obvious from the unobvious betrays confusion of mind as to what is self-evident and what is not. Such confusion, however, is not unknown” (*Physics* 193a6–10).

[which was multi-purposed, serving also as a spoon and as a dagger],...but one thing for one purpose; for so each tool will be turned out in the finest perfection, if it serves not many uses but one” (*Politics* 1252b1–5).

Soul, like body, consists of various, hierarchically ordered, species-specific capacities or faculties (*On the Soul* 415a10–20). Like other species, human Soul consists of higher and lower faculties. Also like other species—and this is absolutely crucial—each faculty of human Soul has passive and active components.

Since in every class of objects, just as in the whole of nature, there is something which is their matter [materiality], i. e., which is potentially all the individuals, and something else which is their cause or agent in that it makes them all—the two being related as an art to its material—these distinct elements must be present in the soul also. (*On the Soul* 430a10–15)

The higher a faculty’s ratio of agency to patiency is, the more superior that faculty is to faculties with lower ratios of agency to patiency.

Human Soul possesses a faculty that has an exceptionally high ratio of agency to patiency. That faculty is mind or reason (*nous*—*νοῦς*). “Mind in the passive sense is such because it becomes all things, but mind has another aspect in that it makes all things;...Mind in this sense...is essentially an activity; for the agent is always superior to the patient, and the originating cause to the matter” (*On the Soul* 430a15–20). There are at least two implications. First, reason’s higher ratio of agency to patiency means that reason is superior to human Soul’s appetitive faculties with their higher ratio of patiency. Second, human Soul’s ratio of reason is so high that it generally trumps the superiority that other animals indeed have over us in the sensory and appetitive capacities where the ratio of patiency is so high, like strength, smell, hearing, sight, procreation, and the abundant possible combinations thereof.

#### UNIT IV. THE MORAL DIFFERENCE OF NATURAL-BORN SLAVES

Having analyzed the “beauty of Soul,” we arrive at the pinnacle of the moral argument for chattel slavery. First, we must consider any evidence that the difference between natural-born slaves and born-free humans might lie in the materiality of the bodies of natural-born slaves and their born-free masters. While levels of bodily strength might be generally evident, this probably occurs because of nurture rather than nature, we might say. Also, born-free humans generally speaking are more erect in posture than are natural-born slaves. This again may have more to do with nurture than nature, although the erect posture of the human animal does indicate that human superiority over the other animals lies in mind or reason.

Second, given the difference-maker quality of Soul’s reason, there is little surprise that reason marks the divide between the born-free and the natural-born slave. Aristotle carries out an extensive inquiry into how mind thinks and how mind thinks about itself thinking. “Just as in the whole of nature,” the nature of mind hinges on the relationship between potentiality and actuality, between pas-

sivity and activity. “Mind in the passive sense is such because it becomes all things, but mind has another aspect in that it makes all things....Mind in this sense...is essentially an activity; for the agent is always superior to the patient, and the originating cause to the matter” (*On the Soul* 430a10–19).

Third, Aristotle readily grants that both born-free and natural-born slaves have speech (*logos*—λογος) and therefore both “are human beings and participate in reason” (*Politics* 1259b28–29; 1253a10). However, nature prescribes four classes of rulers and ruled: free ruling slave, male ruling female, adults ruling children, and free male ruling other free males. The first three classes comprise the household, with the fourth comprising the decision-making assembly of the πολίτις. “All [people in each class] possess the various parts of the soul”; however, they “possess them in different ways; for the slave has not got the deliberative part at all” (*Politics* 1260a13–14).<sup>12</sup>

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Fourth, the born-free “ruler must possess intellectual virtue in completeness” (*Politics* 1260a14–15). That is, masters possess both passive and active reasoning, the capacity to be shaped and to shape. Natural-born slaves—as well as free adult females and children—have “that share of this [intellectual] virtue which is appropriate to them” (*Politics* 1260a18–20). Natural-born slaves have passive reason but not active reason. Passive reasoning is the capacity to recognize, to be admonished by, and to obey a command. Active reasoning is the capacity to foresee coming vicissitudes, to formulate relative concepts, to deliberate morally about the commands appropriate to deal with coming events, and to promulgate those commands to the right person in the best way under the given circumstances (*Politics* 1252a32; 1260a13).<sup>13</sup>

Finally, having a master is unsurpassably “advantageous” for those born only with passive reason (*Politics* 1255b9). Without active reason humans cannot sufficiently rule themselves. Left to themselves, natural-born slaves succumb in various ways and degrees to the vicissitudes of life as they futilely try to secure life’s necessities, not to mention the good life. Having a master is for the slave’s own good. Having a slave is also in the interest of the master and, finally, Aristotle divulges, to a greater degree than for the slave. Masters should, therefore, provide suitable care for their slaves.

<sup>12</sup>The ratio of active and passive reason also determines the nature of rule across the other three classes.

<sup>13</sup>Of course, argues Aristotle, “the same necessarily holds good of the moral virtues: all must partake of them, but not in the same way, but in such measure as is proper to each in relation to his own function” (*Politics* 1260a20–22). The nature and acquisition of the moral virtues relating to the good life and their relation to the intellectual virtues and their relations to the necessities of life take on more complexity than we can cover in our course, Moral Slavery 101. These important complexities must wait for another occasion when we deal with the difference and relationship between productive activity (ποιησις) and virtuous activity (πραξις).



The authority of a master over a slave, although in truth when both master and slave are designed by nature for their positions their interests are the same, nevertheless governs in the greater degree with a view to the interest of the master, but incidentally with a view to that of the slave, for if the slave deteriorates the position of the master cannot be saved from injury. (*Politics* 1278b32–38)

For these reasons the natural “beauty of Soul” morally justifies the institution of chattel slavery.

#### OF COLONIAL CONSEQUENCE

Aristotle was born in Macedonia and at the age of seventeen went to Athens for twenty years to study with Plato until the latter died. Six years later King Philip of Macedonia summoned Aristotle, then nearly forty-three, to be his thirteen-year-old son Alexander’s personal tutor. For six years Aristotle groomed Alexander to become the greatest possible colonizer. Among the things learned was that when colonizing a people you must discern their Soul, whether this people are natural-born slaves or not. If you were to enslave a born-free people, they would never be content but forever in rebellion, requiring constant costly military control. Rather, grant free people a moderate measure of limited self-governance, which Alexander did with the Phoenicians, for instance. Enslave only natural-born slaves, for they will gratefully welcome their slavery for their own good.

Up through the sixteenth century, Western colonizers played one variation or another of Aristotle’s moral *cantus firmus* regarding slavery. He had admitted, however, “beauty of soul is not so easy to see as beauty of body” (*Politics* 1254b38–39). Already in the fifteenth century the moral rationale for slavery began to move dramatically from Soul to body in the form of racism based on skin color and other bodily markers, which were thought to indicate more reliably the quality of reason.<sup>14</sup> ⊕

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<sup>14</sup>Aristotle himself had already entertained the possibility that ethnic markers due to geographical location might indicate natural born slaves, but did not emphasize them (*Politics* 1327b23–33).