

What Others Have a Right to Expect from Us

Aristotle said two things that seem to me uncommonly wise about the relation of one human being to another. Once understood, they are also common sense.

He said that if all men were friends, justice would not be necessary. He also said that justice is the bond of men in states.

Putting the two remarks together, we are led to conclude that the members of a state (which is the largest organized society to which we belong) are not all friends with one another. If they were, they would not need to be bound together by justice to form the society that we call a state.

Most of us belong to more than one society or organized group. We are members of a family, either as parents or children or as both. We may also belong to other organized groups, such as a school, a club, a business organization of one sort or another. All these are societies or associations of human beings who have combined with one another for some common purpose.

The purpose of the association distinguishes two of these organized groups from all the rest. Associations such as schools, universities, hospitals, business organizations, and clubs all aim at serving some particular good. Educational institutions, for example, aim at the dissemination and advancement of knowledge; hospitals, at the care of health; business organizations, at the production or distribution of things to be bought and sold; and so on.

In contrast, the family is a society that aims at sustaining the life of its members, and the state is a society that aims at enriching and improving that life. If there were no additional advantages to be derived from living in states, Aristotle thinks that human beings would have been content to continue living in the smaller society of the family or in the slightly larger society formed by a group of families, something like what we call a tribe. What led men to group families into tribes and group tribes into still larger societies was, in Aristotle's view, the advantages to be gained from the larger and more inclusive associations.

As we have seen, our aim as human beings should be not merely to stay alive but to live well—as well as possible. Staying alive, of course, is indispensable to living well. Not being solitary but social animals, human beings must associate with one another in order to sustain and preserve their lives and to bring into the world another generation that must be cared for and protected during infancy.

The family and the tribe, according to Aristotle, are the associations or societies that originally came into being to serve these purposes. They may not do so any longer, or not to the same extent, but Aristotle asks us to think about their origin. What caused human beings to form these associations in the first place?

One answer that may suggest itself is "instinct." Instinct causes bees to form beehives and ants to form ant colonies or ant mounds. Perhaps, then, it is a human instinct to form families, tribes, and states. If so, these societies would be completely natural, in contrast to such associations as schools, clubs, or business organizations. The latter are hardly the products of instinct. Men join together voluntarily to form these associations for the particular purposes they serve.

In Aristotle's view, families, tribes, and states are no more the products of instinct than are schools, clubs, and business organizations. They are not like beehives and ant mounds, which for a given species of bee or ant are always organized in exactly the same way, generation after generation, and wherever you find that particular species of bee or ant. But though all human beings belong to the same species, we find quite different patterns of association and organization in human families, tribes, and states.

That, according to Aristotle, indicates that these societies were, in origin, voluntarily and purposefully formed, and formed with some plan of organization that the human beings involved thought up for themselves. To this extent, they are like schools, clubs, and business organizations that human beings voluntarily, purposefully, and thoughtfully institute. But families, tribes, and states are also unlike schools, clubs, and business organizations because they are natural as well as voluntary.

Does not Aristotle contradict himself by saying that families, tribes, and states are both voluntary and natural? He would be contradicting himself if he thought that families, tribes, and states were natural in the same way that beehives and ant mounds are natural—the product of instinct. But, according to Aristotle, there is another way in which a society can be natu-

ral. It can be natural in the sense that it must be formed to serve some natural need—the need to stay alive or the need to live well.

A society can be natural in this sense and also be voluntarily, purposefully, and thoughtfully formed—to serve the need that makes the society natural.

Families, according to Aristotle, originated from the need of human beings to stay alive and to protect and rear their young. Groups of families, or tribes, being a little larger and involving more human beings working together, came into being in order to serve that same need a little more effectively. The even-larger organization of the state, which originally grew out of combinations of families and tribes, not only served that same need still more effectively but also served the additional purpose of enabling some individuals, if not all, to live well. Life itself being secure, attention and effort could be turned to improving life and making it richer and better.

When Aristotle says that man is by nature a political animal, he is saying more than is meant by the statement that man is a social animal. There are other social animals, such as bees and ants, wolves that hunt in packs, and lions that live in families. But only men organize their societies voluntarily, purposefully, and thoughtfully and establish laws or customs that differ from one human society to another.

That is one meaning of the statement that man is a political animal. He is a custom-making and law-making animal. There is another meaning. When Aristotle declares that man is by nature a political animal, he is also saying that human beings cannot live well, cannot achieve the best kind of lives for themselves, by living together only in families and in tribes. To do that, Aristotle thinks they must live together in cities or states.

The Greek word for a city or state is “polis,” from which we

get the English word "political." The Latin word for a city or state is "civis," from which we get the English words "civil" and "civilized." Being political by nature, men must live in states to live as well as possible. The good life is the civil or civilized life.

Now let us return to the two statements with which this chapter began. If all men were friends, justice would not be necessary. Since the members of a state are seldom if ever all friends with one another, justice is necessary to bind them together peacefully and harmoniously in that largest of all human societies—the state.

Let us, for the moment, suppose that the members of a family are all friends with one another—friends in the highest sense of that word.

When two human beings are friends in this highest sense, they love each other. Their love impels each of them to wish for the good of the other—to wish to benefit the other, to do whatever may be necessary to improve or enrich the life of the other.

Each, out of such friendship or love, will act to promote the happiness or good life of the other. Neither would do anything to injure the other by impeding or obstructing the other's pursuit of happiness.

That is why justice would be unnecessary in a family in which the parents loved their children, in which the children loved their parents, and in which husband and wife, brothers and sisters, loved one another perfectly and at all times. But in most families there are times when love or friendship fails or falls short of perfection. Then one member of the family may say to another, "You are not being fair to me," or "What you ask is unjust," or "I have a right to expect this or that from you."

At such moments, love ceases to be the thing that binds the

members of the family together, and justice enters the picture—justice that tries to see that the individual obtains what he or she has a right to expect, that the individual is being fairly treated by the others, and that he or she is protected from being harmed or injured by them.

If justice did not intervene when love failed or fell short of perfection, the members of the family might not stay together, or at least they would not live together peacefully and harmoniously, trying to share in the enjoyment of goods common to them all. What has just been said is even truer of states in which the members are, for the most part, not related by friendship or love. Where love is absent, justice must step in to bind men together in states, so that they can live peacefully and harmoniously with one another, acting and working together for a common purpose.

Aristotle knew that there are several different kinds of friendship. Of these, he thought that only one was perfect friendship—the kind that exists between persons who love one another and wish only to benefit the other.

Aristotle also knew that such friendships are rare. More frequently, we speak of another person as being a friend because he is useful to us or because we get some pleasure from him. Such friendships are selfish. The person we call a friend serves some interest of our own, and we regard him or her as a friend only so long as that remains the case. In contrast, true friendship or love is unselfish. It is benevolent. It aims at serving the good of the other.

Justice, like love, is concerned with the good of the other person. However, there is a clear difference between them. Anyone who understands love knows that one individual should never say to another, "I have a right to be loved. You ought to love me."

When we truly love someone, we do not give the person loved what he or she has a right to claim from us. On the contrary, we give to them of ourselves generously and unselfishly, without any regard to their rights. We do for them more than they have any right to expect.

We sometimes even love persons who do not love us in return. We do not make their returning our love a condition for our loving them. But when we act justly toward others, giving them what they have a right to expect, we are selfish to the extent that we want justice from them in return. To say that we should do unto others what we would have them do unto us is selfish in this sense.

What do others have a right to expect from us? That we keep the promises we make to them. That we tell them the truth whenever telling a lie would hurt them in some way. That we return anything we have borrowed and promised to return. That we pay our debts to them. That we do not steal what belongs to them. That we do not injure their health, damage their bodies, or kill them. That we do not interfere with their freedom of action when their conduct in no way injures us. That we do not make false statements that would injure their reputation or give them a bad name.

All these things, and more of the same sort, can be summed up by saying that others have a right to expect from us that we do nothing that might impede or obstruct their pursuit of happiness—nothing that might interfere with or prevent their obtaining or possessing the real goods they need to make good lives for themselves. It is their need for these real goods that gives them a right to them, and it is their right to them that we are obliged to respect—if we ourselves are just.

We may not always be just, at least not perfectly just. Some

persons are the very opposite of just. Instead of having the habit of respecting the rights of others, they are habitually inclined in the opposite direction—to get things they want for themselves even when to do so they must run roughshod over the rights of others.

That is why laws are made to prescribe what the members of a state should or should not do in order to deal justly with one another. If everyone had the habit of being just in all his dealings with others, there would be no need for such laws or for their enforcement by the state. But since few individuals are perfectly just, and since some are habitually inclined to be unjust, laws that prescribe just conduct must be enforced by the state to prevent one individual from seriously injuring another by violating his or her rights.

Do others have a right to expect us to act positively to help them in their pursuit of happiness? Not interfering with, impeding, or obstructing their efforts to obtain or possess the real goods they need is one thing. Helping them to obtain such goods is another. Have they a right to claim our help?

According to Aristotle's understanding of the difference between love and justice, the answer is no. It is the generosity of love, not the obligations of justice, that impels one individual to help another to obtain or possess the real goods needed for a good life. That is why the laws that the state enforces do not require individuals to help one another by taking positive action to promote the pursuit of happiness by others.

However, the state does make and enforce laws that require the individual to act positively for the welfare of the community as a whole. The welfare of the community affects the pursuit of happiness by its members. A good society, a society in which the common good of the people is served and advanced, con-

tributes to the good life of its individuals. Aristotle says in so many words that the end that the good state should serve is the happiness of the individuals who compose it. It should promote their pursuit of happiness.

When, therefore, we, as individuals, obey laws that direct us to behave for the welfare of the community as a whole, we are indirectly helping to promote the pursuit of happiness by our fellow human beings. What we do directly for a few others out of our love for them, we do indirectly for all the rest by obeying laws that require us to act for the welfare of the community in which they, as well as we, live.