Aristotle’s *Politics* is distinguished by the place of honour it accords to the concept of nature. At the outset, the political relations of ruling and being ruled are among the things that develop naturally (cf. *Pol.* 1.2, 1252a24–6). In addition, the polis or city-state exists by nature and a human being is by nature a political animal (e.g. 1253a2–3). Most of Book 1 is concerned to show that the household is natural because its constituent relations—master/slave, husband/wife, parent/child—are natural. Again, in Book III the inquiry into political constitutions commences with the significant remark that one must first make a hypothesis about the end of the polis and about the kinds of rule found in human communities. Aristotle recalls his earlier argument that a human being is by nature a political animal (III.6, 1278b15–19), and he observes that some forms of political rule are natural, namely, those whereby the rulers seek the advantage of the ruled (cf. 1279a8–13). These characterize constitutions which are correct or just without qualification (1279a17–21). This lays the ground for his detailed classification and evaluation of political systems. Finally, in his account of the best constitution (*Politics* VII–VIII) he states that the lawgiver must follow nature in planning the education of the citizens (VII.17, 1337a1–3).

Unfortunately, Aristotle does not offer an explicit analysis in the *Politics* of his use of the term *phusis* or ‘nature’ and derivative terms, so that it is difficult to interpret and evaluate his version of political naturalism. However, in the *Metaphysics* and works devoted to natural science, especially *Physics* II, he analyses the concept of nature and develops distinctions which resurface in the *Politics* and the ethical treatises. This suggests

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1 Aristotle also makes reference in the *Rhetoric* to ‘common’ or ‘natural’ law which is ‘eternal and never changing’ (1.13, 1372b9–13; 1.15, 1375a31–b2). However, he does not develop a theory of natural law as do the Stoics and Thomas Aquinas. Indeed, he seems to retreat from the *Rhetoric*’s equation of the natural with the eternal in his discussion of natural justice in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Here he distinguishes two senses of ‘by nature’: for the gods the natural is immutable, but ‘for us something exists by nature, but everything is changeable, and yet some things exist by nature and some do not exist by nature’ (V.7, 1134b24–30; cf. I.33, 1194b37–9, 1195a3–4). On the difficulties of reconciling these different discussions, see Miller 1991.
that Aristotle's account of nature in his natural philosophy may shed light on the role of this concept in his political philosophy.

1. 'Nature' in Aristotle's natural philosophy

Aristotle uses the term *phusis*, 'nature', in different ways. Following the Presocratics, he calls the universe or cosmos as a whole 'nature' (e.g. *Metaph.* iv.3, 1005a32-3; xii.10, 1075a11). More important for him, however, is the nature of a particular entity. *Metaphysics* v.4 distinguishes several senses of 'nature':

1. the coming-to-be of growing things, i.e., growth
2. the primary internal component from which the growing thing grows
3. more generally, the source of the primary movement which is present in each natural entity intrinsically and not accidentally
4. the primary matter of which something consists or out of which it comes to be
5. the form or substance which is the end of the process of becoming
6. by extension, every substance, because the nature of a thing is a kind of substance.

The original senses are (1) and (2), for a tree grows (*phuetai*) to maturity, the tree is a growing thing (*phuomenon*), and the process is biological growth (*phusis*). The other senses of 'nature' are related to Aristotle's four causes (explained in *Metaph.* v.2): nature operates as an efficient or moving cause (cf. 3), as a material cause (cf. 4), and as a formal and final cause (cf. 5 and 6). Of these, however, sense (3) is arguably the most basic: nature as a causal principle explaining the movements of things in themselves independently of anything else.

The canonical text for this concept is *Physics* 11: 'Some beings are by nature, and some are due to other causes. Those which are by nature are animals and their parts and plants and the simple bodies (i.e. earth, fire, air, water), for we say that these and such things are by nature.' The definition of nature follows: 'each of them has in itself a principle of motion and rest, some regarding place, others growth and diminution, and others qualitative alteration' (ii.1, 192b8-15). The concept of nature is thus used to explain the phenomenon of self-motion, for example a stone falling downward or an acorn growing into an oak tree.

Nature is distinguished from any external force acting on a body. However, the most illuminating contrast is with artistic production (192b16-33). A product of art (*techne*) such as a bed exists because an...
external cause, the artisan (technitēs) or craftsman (dēmiourgos) practising
the art of bed making, fashions some matter, namely wood, into the form
of a bed. The bed qua material thing still has a nature, as is evident from
the fact that it has an innate impulse to fall downward. But qua bed it is
due to art rather than nature. Aristotle adds that the nature is an internal
cause in an intrinsic rather than accidental sense. An intrinsic cause pro-
duces an effect always or for the most part: for example, a sculptor makes
a statue, or a doctor heals a patient. An example of accidentally caused
self-motion would be a doctor curing himself. In this case, it merely hap-
pens to be the case that the same man is both a doctor and a patient. The
characteristics linked in a particular instance of accidental causation will
at other times occur separately, so that they are not regularly conjoined.
Nature by contrast is an intrinsic cause of self-motion: a thing moves or is
at rest in a regular way (e.g. an acorn grows into an oak tree rather than an
olive tree) because it possesses a distinctive nature.

Although art differs from nature as a cause, Aristotle frequently com-
pares them, remarking in particular that 'art imitates nature' (Phys. 11.2,
194a21–2; Meteor. iv.3, 381b6). The most important parallel is that a natu-
ral process, like the practice of an art, is for the sake of something:

When things have an end (telos), the earlier and later stages are for the
sake of this end. Therefore, things occur naturally in the same way that
actions are done, and each action is done in the same way that things
occur naturally, if nothing stands in the way. An action is done for the
sake of something, and thus things also occur naturally for the sake of
something. If a house had come to be by nature, it would have come to be
in the same way as it does now by art. And if things that come to be by
nature came to be not only by nature but also by art, they would come to
be just as they do naturally. One thing then occurs for the sake of an-
other. Generally sometimes art completes what nature is not able to
accomplish fully, and other times it imitates nature. So if artistic pro-
cesses are for the sake of something, it is clear that natural processes are
too. For the early stages stand to the later in the same way in artistic and
natural processes. (11.8, 199a8–20)

Aristotle's concept of nature is thus inextricably linked to his teleology: the
theory that natural phenomena occur for an end (telos).2 Natural pro-
cesses also resemble human actions in that they are for the sake of a good.

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2 Aristotle tries to defend his natural teleology elsewhere, for example in Physics 11.8 and Parts of
Animals i.1. This theory has been widely discussed by commentators. For overviews of the liter-
For example, animals sleep because this is beneficial for them (Somn. 2, 455b17–18).³

However, the analogy between natural teleology and human purposiveness is also carefully qualified. Whereas art is a human capacity involving reason (cf. EN vi.4, 1140a6–10), natural processes do not involve inquiry, deliberation, or intelligence (199a20–3). Although Aristotle frequently speaks of nature in personified terms—e.g., it acts as a craftsman (PA 11.9, 654b31; GA 11.6, 743b23), like a god it ‘does nothing in vain’ (Cael. 1.4, 271a33; PA 11.13, 658a8; GA 11.4, 739b19)—these expressions are metaphorical. In natural things the natural end is an innate form or substance which guides the process of development (Meteor. iv.2, 379b25–6; cf. Phys. ii.2, 194a28–9). In the case of plants and animals their seeds contain forms which direct their development so that the offspring become the same natural kind as their parents (PA 1.1, 641b12–30; GA 11.4, 740b24–741a5). Thus, sense (5) of ‘nature’ in Metaphysics v.4 is related to sense (3). However, Aristotle also speaks of things as ‘natural’ in an extended sense if they arise as a part of a natural teleological process. For example, birds make nests and spiders spin webs in order to promote the natural ends of sexual reproduction or self-preservation. These are due to natural impulses in the birds and spiders not to deliberative choice. Hence, bird nests and spider webs, along with the birds and spiders themselves, are called ‘things which come to be and exist by nature’ (Phys. 11.8, 199a6–8, 29–30).

Aristotle remarks that other philosophers identified nature with the material constituent of a thing (Phys. 11.1, 193a9–30). Their view is that ultimately the elements out of which a thing is composed determine its affections, states, and dispositions. Aristotle’s view is that ‘the form rather than the matter is nature, for each thing is called [what it is] when it is actually rather than when it is potentially’ (193b6–8; cf. PA 1.1, 640b28–9). Nonetheless, he recognizes that matter as well as form has a claim to be called the nature of a thing since it also explains certain of its inherent characteristics (Metaph. vii.7, 1032a20–5). Thus he sometimes speaks of matter as ‘necessary nature’ in contrast with the form or final cause (Phys. 11.9, 200a8–9; cf. 11.8, 198b10–14). This is sense (4) in Metaphysics v.

Two related expressions have important uses in Aristotle’s natural science as well as his political science: kata phusin and para phusin. First, kata phusin, ‘according to nature’, is associated in natural science with regular-

ity, because it involves intrinsic rather than accidental causation. 'According to nature' implies 'always or for the most part'. It is on this ground that Aristotle rejects Empedocles' view that the adaptive features of animals result from chance or spontaneity — for example why teeth grow in such a way that the front teeth are suitable for biting and the back teeth useful for grinding (Phys. 11.8, 198b16–199a8). Similarly, in generation a given seed does not give rise to any plant or animal by chance, but each organism arises from a specific parent (PA 1.1, 641b23–30).

Second, behaviour para phusin, 'contrary to nature' — opposed to kata phusin — is typically due to some external power (dunamis) or force (bia) which contravenes the operation of nature. For example, an arrow's natural motion of falling to the earth is contrasted with its violent, unnatural upward motion when it is shot from a bow. Whereas a body has a single natural motion due to its own nature, its unnatural motions are indefinite and innumerable (Cael. 11.2, 300a21–7; 301b17–30). This distinction between natural and unnatural motions is central to Aristotelian mechanics. The unnatural also occurs in the biological realm, whenever the formal nature is unable to control the material nature in the process of sexual reproduction (GA iv.4, 770b9–27). The result is a monstrosity or mutilation, for example an offspring with superfluous toes or androgynous sexual organs. In general, the unnatural is posterior to the natural, because it is a deviation from the natural during its generation (Cael. 11.3, 286a18–20).

2 The naturalness of the polis

The *Politics* begins with two observations: First, the polis as the most authoritative and inclusive community aims at the highest good. Second, some have erroneously thought that there is only one type of rule, which is called by different names depending on the number of subjects: despotic, household, kingly, political. As we shall see, Aristotle argues...
against this that different forms of rule are appropriate for different forms of natural association. But first he applies his method of analysis: 'In other matters a compound must be divided into its uncompounded constituents, for there are smallest parts belonging to the whole. So too if we look at the components out of which the polis is composed we will also see better how these types of rule differ from each other and whether something pertaining to an art belongs to each of them.' He adds that one will theorize best about such things 'if one looks at things developing naturally (phuomena) from the beginning' (1252a18–26). This is the context in which Aristotle undertakes his defence of his three naturalistic doctrines:

1. The polis exists by nature.
2. A human being is by nature a political animal.
3. The polis is prior by nature to the individual.

*Politics* 1.2 combines these three claims with praise for the lawgiver: 'Therefore, the impulse for the [political] community is in everyone by nature, but he who first established it is the cause of very great goods' (1253a29–31). The phrase 'he who first established it' is clearly a reference to the lawgiver, since Aristotle's subsequent argument emphasizes that humans need law and adjudication which are found only in the polis. The emphasis on law and legislation is not surprising in view of Aristotle's overriding concern with how the polis is to be ruled. However, Aristotle here implies that the existence of the polis is due both to nature and to the lawgiver or politician. The interpretation of his argument is made difficult by the fact that he does not explain in *Politics* 1 how he is using the concept of nature.

2.1 'The polis exists by nature'

Aristotle argues that the polis is natural because it develops naturally out of natural communities (1.2, 1252a26–b34). The first communities are unions of male and female, which result not from deliberate choice but from a natural (phusikon) striving to leave behind offspring like the parents, and associations of natural ruler and subject (viz. master and slave), which are for the sake of self-preservation and mutual advantage. The household arising from these two communities is itself a community established according to nature (kataphusirk) for everyday needs. The village in turn comes to be out of several households for non-daily (i.e.

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Aristotle generally uses the term politikos, 'politician' or 'statesman', for someone possessing political expertise in distinction from an ordinary citizen (cf. iv.1, 1289a17; v.8, 1308a34). The lawgiver or legislator (nomothetis) is a politician who frames the constitution and 'lays down laws' (iii.1, 1274b36–7; vii.14, 1333a37).
higher) needs as a natural extension (apoikia, literally ‘colony’) of the household.

The community composed of several villages which is complete is a polis, and it attains the limit of total self-sufficiency, generally speaking. Although it comes to be for the sake of mere life, it exists for the sake of the good life. Therefore, every polis exists by nature (phusei), since the first communities are also such. For it is their end, and nature is an end: what each thing is when its coming to be is completed we call its nature, for example, of a human being, a horse, or a household. (1.2, 1252b27–34)

At first sight this argument might appear to be a direct application of sense (3) of ‘nature’ in Metaphysics v: namely, an intrinsic internal cause of self-motion. For nature first appears in the form of a natural striving or impulse for self-preservation and sexual reproduction, and the household, village, and ultimately the political community are natural extensions of this primal cause. The polis thus resembles a human being or a horse as a nature or end ‘growing’ out of more primitive communities. However, Aristotle never in fact says that the polis has a nature in the sense of an internal-cause of self-motion. Moreover, this interpretation seems to allow no role for the lawgiver who ‘first established’ the political community. For Aristotle compares the lawgiver to a craftsman practising an art (vii.4, 1325b40–1326a5). Just as a craftsman makes a bed by imposing a certain formal structure on wood, the lawgiver imposes a form, i.e. a constitution, upon materials, that is a given population and territory (cf. iii.3, 1276b1–11, vii.4, 1326a35–8). The polis is, then, a sort of artefact. But in the strict sense of ‘nature’, the same thing cannot both exist by nature and be an artefact with an external cause. Finally, it is questionable whether the argument so interpreted is valid: how is the naturalness of the first communities supposed to lead to the naturalness of the polis which arises out of them? Even if it is granted that the polis is prior to the households and villages in the sense of being more complete than they are, it does not follow that it exists by nature even if they do. A basket made out of straw is prior to the parts of which it is composed and the parts are ultimately produced by nature, but it nonetheless exists by craft rather than by nature. On this reading Aristotle’s conclusion that the polis exists by nature is a non sequitur.

However, these difficulties might be avoided if the polis is understood

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8 Cf. Keyt 1991b:119, ‘a polis is an artifact of practical reason just as a ship or a cloak or a sandal is an artifact of productive reason’.

9 These difficulties are detailed in Keyt 1991b. Favouring the strict interpretation of ‘nature’, Keyt concludes that ‘there is a blunder at the very root of Aristotle’s political philosophy’.
to exist 'by nature' in an extended sense. As noted above, the Physics speaks of the products of teleological impulses, for example, bird nests and spider webs, as existing 'by nature' in an extended sense (11.8, 199a6–8, 29–30). Similarly, the Politics may be claiming that a thing exists 'by nature' if it has as its function the promotion of an organism's natural ends and it results, in whole or in part, from the organism's natural capacities and impulses. On this interpretation nature and the lawgiver might function as joint causes of the completed polis. That is, the polis could come to be when a lawgiver devises a constitution for a sufficiently large population with the innate aptitude and inclination for political life. Because humans are by nature political animals, they will have this potential for the political community unless they are in deviant or unnatural condition – as Aristotle thinks is the case with many non-Greek or 'barbarian' nations (see Pol. vii.7).

This also suggests a way of understanding Aristotle's argument that the polis exists by nature because it comes to be from natural forms of association. He may be reasoning that if the polis is a natural extension of naturally existing communities it also exists by 'nature' – not in the narrow sense of having an internal source of motion, but in the wider sense described in the preceding paragraph. That is, the polis fulfils the highest natural ends of human beings in that it promotes the good life, and it arises out of the natural human impulse for communal existence. Therefore, the polis exists by 'nature' not in the sense that it possesses a nature of its own like a living organism, but in the sense that it arises from and promotes the nature of human beings. This would help to explain why Aristotle argues next that human beings have a political nature.

2.2 'A human being is by nature a political animal'

The argument that a human being is a political animal more than a bee or any gregarious animal explicitly rests on natural teleology: 'nature does nothing in vain' (1.2, 1253a7–18). Only human beings have speech (logos), other animals have mere voice. The nature of non-human animals has developed to the extent that they perceive what is painful or pleasant and can signify these things to one another. Because nature has given a young animal the capacity to perceive pain, nature has also provided it with voice so that it can communicate this perception to its parents. Human speech exists in order to reveal what is advantageous or harmful, and hence also

The comparison of humans to other political animals resembles a passage in Aristotle's *History of Animals*: "Political [animals] are those whose function (ergon) becomes some one common thing, which not all the gregarious animals do. Such are the human being, the bee, the wasp, the ant, and the crane" (1.1, 488a7-10). Aristotle evidently uses the term 'political animal' (*politikon zoion*) in a broad, biological sense to refer to any creature with the innate capacity to perform a common function with others of the same kind. Having a common function involves cooperation, and a group can cooperate in more complex and effective ways to the extent that its members can use reason and speech to coordinate their activities. Hence, human beings are political animals more than other species.11

This argument has been influential,12 but it contains an apparent difficulty. For it implies that a community such as a household or polis can exist only if its members are able to perceive goodness and justice. But Aristotle holds that humans can possess moral perception (in contrast with sense perception) only if they possess to some extent ethical virtue and practical wisdom, which they acquire not by nature but through habituation.13 Indeed, Aristotle concludes *Politics* 1.2 by arguing that it is only through the laws of the polis that human beings acquire ethical virtue and justice (1253a31–9). Thus, it would appear that Aristotle's argument undercuts rather than supports his claim that the polis exists by nature.14

However, Aristotle understands moral capacities, like other capacities, as having different levels or degrees of actualization (cf. *de An.* 11.5, 417a21–b2; *GA* 11.1, 735a9–11). Before being educated or habituated, young children may have the innate capacity to perceive justice, because they are human beings and as such are able to acquire practical wisdom and ethical virtue. But this is a first-level undeveloped capacity: until they are educated, they will not yet actually be able to distinguish just from

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12 The argument is even echoed by Charles Darwin in the *Descent of Man*, ch. 4, although he attributes the doctrine to Marcus Aurelius and Seneca. On parallels between Darwin and Aristotle see Arnhart 1994.

13 See *EN* 11.1, 1103a18–b6; v1.9, 1141b14–22, 1142b20–30; v1.13, 1144b1–14. Aristotle's accounts of nature, habit, and reason in *EN* x.9 and *Pol.* vii.13 are discussed below.

unjust deeds. After they have become fully educated, they have the developed capacity to perceive just and good actions, but they may not be exercising it because they are asleep or focusing on other things. This is a first-level actualization of the capacity. Only when the person actually perceives something just is the capacity fully actualized. Aristotle's conclusion that humans are by nature political animals only assumes that nature gives humans moral perception in the sense of an innate first-level capacity. This is consistent with the claim that the polis exists by 'nature' in the extended sense.

2.3 The polis is prior by nature to the individual

This thesis has totalitarian overtones for modern readers, which are reinforced by Aristotle's comparison of citizens to bodily organs (1.2, 1253a20–7). He argues that the whole is necessarily prior to the part, for if the whole is destroyed the foot or hand should not be called the same things, except in a homonymous sense, as one speaks of a stone foot or hand. For the part will be corrupted. The reason is that these things are defined in terms of their function and capacity, which they cannot perform when severed from the whole. But since the individual is not self-sufficient when separated from the whole, he stands to the polis in the same way as other parts to the whole. So it is clear that the polis is prior by nature to the individual.

This suggests that the polis is prior to the individual in the same way that an animal is prior to its constituent organs. The parts cannot exist in separation from the whole, but it can exist without some of its parts. This way of reading the argument is especially tempting if the polis, like an animal, is supposed to have a nature in the sense of a self-moving principle. However, this 'social organism' interpretation of the analogy faces the difficulty that human beings obviously can exist apart from the polis. This is not merely in the trivial sense that they do not slip out of existence whenever they leave the polis, but also in that they do not become subhuman beasts when this happens. Indeed, Aristotle himself implies that a human being can be separated from the polis by chance. An example

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15 See Barnes 1990. Popper 1962, i. ch. 11 views Aristotle's Politics as essentially a footnote to Plato's totalitarian political philosophy.

16 Things are homonymous if they have the same name but different definitions (Cat. 1, 121–6). For other examples of this homonymy argument see Meteor. iv.12, 390a10–13; de An. ii.1, 412b17–22.

17 1255a3–4: 'he who is without a polis (apolis) by nature and not due to chance is either a base person or better than a human being.' Two sorts are apolis by nature: 'he who is incapable of being in a community or who needs nothing due to self-sufficiency is no part of polis, but is either a beast or a god' (127–9).
that would have been familiar to Aristotle was the hero Philoctetes, who bemoans the fact that he is 'without a polis' (apolis) in Sophocles' play about him. Although Philoctetes was obliged to live in solitude on an island, he did not cease to be a human being.\(^\text{18}\)

There is, however, another way of understanding the argument. The thesis that the polis is prior to the individual is ambiguous, because Aristotle distinguishes different senses in which one thing can be 'prior' to another. One of these may be called 'priority in separateness': \(X\) can exist without \(Y\), but \(Y\) cannot exist without \(X\). For example, either Castor or Polydeuces is prior to the Dioscuri. The other sense may be called 'priority in completeness': \(X\) is more complete or perfect (teleioteron) than \(Y\). For example, a plant is more complete than the seed from which it grows.\(^\text{19}\) If the second sense of 'priority' is operative, then Aristotle's thesis is that the polis is prior in the sense of being more complete or perfect than the individual. This agrees with other statements in Politics 1.2: that the polis is complete or perfect (teleios) (1252b28), and that the individual is completed or perfect (teleothen) unless he is separated (choristhen) from the polis (cf. 1253a31–3). The point of the organ analogy, on this reading, is that, when humans are separated from the polis, they can only exist in an imperfect or corrupt condition.\(^\text{20}\) This suggests another view of cases like Philoctetes. Although human beings could exist apart from the polis, they could not develop their innate moral capacities if they lacked access to the laws and educational institutions of a polis. Further, even if their capacities had been previously developed, they could not fully exercise them outside of a polis. In this sense they would fail to realize their nature and would be 'less than human'.\(^\text{21}\)

In conclusion, the arguments of Politics 1.2 may be interpreted in different ways. If it is supposed that Aristotle uses the term 'nature' in the strict sense of Physics 11.1, his arguments contain serious internal difficulties. However, these may be alleviated if the concept of nature in the Politics is viewed in the extended sense suggested above. This interpretation has the disadvantage that it assumes an analysis of 'nature' which is not made

\(^{18}\) The Philoctetes example is due to Keyt 1991b, who develops an objection along these lines. Aristotle was acquainted with Sophocles' Philoctetes (cf. EN vii.2, 1146a219–20).

\(^{19}\) The several senses of 'prior' (proteros) are distinguished in Metaph. v.11 and Cat. 12. I have introduced the expressions 'priority in separateness' and 'priority in completeness' for the sake of clarity. Aristotle himself refers to both senses of 'prior' considered here on different occasions as 'priority in substance (ousiai)' and 'priority in nature (phusei)'.

\(^{20}\) Cf. Aquinas, Commentary on the Politics, 39 (Spiazzi 1951): 'just as a hand or foot cannot exist without a human being, so also one human being cannot live self-sufficiently by himself if he is separated from the city'.

explicit by Aristotle, but it permits a more charitable reading in which Aristotle's arguments at least appear coherent and plausible (if somewhat less exciting) when they are considered in relation to his other writings. This is not, however, to assert that these arguments are impervious to attack on other grounds. Aside from the natural teleological framework presupposed by his arguments, which has frequently been criticized by modern philosophers since Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, he makes other controversial assumptions. Aristotle himself regarded two of these claims as pivotal: first, that the household - the basic building block of the polis - exists by nature; and second, that human nature can be perfected only if individuals are habituated and educated within the polis. The following two sections will examine his arguments for these two assumptions.

3 The naturalness of the household

Aristotle begins his discussion of the household (Politics 1.3–13) by applying his analytic method, distinguishing the first and smallest parts of the household: master, slave, husband, wife, father, and children. If these are grouped in pairs, there are three corresponding parts of household management:

| Master/slave | Despotic rule |
| Husband/wife | Marital rule |
| Father/child | Paternal rule |

His main object is to determine the function of these different forms of rule, in order to distinguish them from each other and to relate them to the correct form of political rule. He first treats despotic rule in chapters 4–7 (the discussion of property acquisition in chapters 8–11 being an appendix to the analysis of slavery), and then considers the two forms of familial rule (marital and paternal) in chapters 12–13.

3.1 The master/slave relation

Aristotle assumes that the household exists by nature (1.2, 1252b12–14; cf. 30–1). Depending on whether it attains its natural end of serving human everyday needs, it will be in a natural (kata phusin) or unnatural (para phu-
condition, and the proper role of the household manager is to keep it in a natural condition. Significantly, Aristotle begins his discussion of the master/slave relation by noting a fundamental challenge to this assumption: ‘Other people think that being a master is contrary to nature (para phusin); for they think that one person is a slave and another free by law (nomoi), and that there is no difference by nature (phusei). Hence it is not just, for it is due to force (bia)’ (1.3, 1253b20-4). The presuppositions are that a relation is just only if it is natural (cf. 1.5, 1254a18-19), and that a relation cannot be natural if it is due to force.

Aristotle tries to meet the objection within the context of a general justification for property ownership. Just as the specialized crafts need their proper instruments to fulfill their function, the householder needs the proper instruments to fulfill his function, which is the maintenance of life. A possession (ktēma) is an instrument for life, and property (ktēsis) is a number of such instruments. One cannot live or live well without property. Hence, the household manager needs property to carry out his function. A possession is spoken of in the same way as a part. Therefore, just as a part belongs wholly to another thing, a possession belongs wholly to its owner. A slave is a human being who is the possession of a household manager, who is the master. Therefore, someone who belongs not to himself but to another by nature is a slave by nature. The implication is that if slavery is natural it is also just.

The upshot of this argument is that when the household manager uses things as instruments they become assimilated to him (or to the household) as if they were its parts. The analogy between a possession and a part is problematic, since Aristotle elsewhere points out that what functions as the necessary condition of a thing may not be a part of it (cf. vii.8, 1328a21–b37). Presumably the point of the analogy is that X belongs to Y by nature when X serves the natural ends of Y. However, Aristotle himself is aware that this argument as it stands is far from conclusive. For the household might acquire things which it is against nature, and consequently unjust, for it to possess – for example, human beings who are free by nature. So the argument requires qualification.

In order to argue that some human beings are slaves by nature, Aristotle invokes a doctrine which has important applications throughout his entire philosophy, which may be called ‘the principle of rulership’:

25 There is also the problem that property, including nonhuman possessions, may be unjustly acquired by a household, for example, by taking it in the wrong way from another. Aristotle addresses this problem in his discussion of the acquisitive art in Pol. 1.8–11.
Whenever a thing is established out of a number of things and becomes a single common thing, there always appears in it a ruler and ruled. (This is true whether it is formed out of continuous or discrete parts.) This relation of ruler and ruled is present in living things, but it derives from all of nature. For even in things that do not have a soul there is a sort of rule, for example, of harmony. (1.5, 1254a28–33)

On Aristotle's view, whenever there is an orderly community, this order must be produced and maintained by a ruler (archon) who is in a position of authority. Throughout the Politics Aristotle assumes that order within the household depends on the exercise of rule by the household manager, and, similarly, that political order depends on the exercise of rule by the politician. The principle of rulership thus underlies his general theory of political rule.

Aristotle first applies the principle of rulership to the soul, which is the natural authority (kurios kata phusin) within a living organism (1.5, 1254a34–6; cf. de An. 1.5, 410b10–15): 'The soul rules the body with despotic rule, but the intellect rules appetite with political and kingly rule. It is evident from this that it is natural (kata phusin) and advantageous for the body to be ruled by the soul and for the passionate part [of the soul] to be ruled by the part which possesses reason. And it is harmful to all of them if they are equal or the ruling relation is reversed' (1.5, 1254b4–9; cf. 1.2, 1252b30–4). This passage explains the rationale for the principle of rulership within a living organism: the resulting union will be natural and mutually advantageous for the ruled part as well as the ruler. Aristotle then applies the principle to cases of human rule: to the rule of humans over other animals, to the rule of the male over the female, and to the rule of the superior over the inferior in human communities generally (1.5, 1254b10–16). On the same grounds Aristotle defends natural slavery: if someone is inferior to normal humans in the same way that the body is inferior to the soul or that a beast is inferior to a human, then this person is by nature a slave. If someone has as his function the use of his body and is incapable of anything better than this, then he is inferior to normal humans in this way. Hence, he is a natural slave. Such a person has a defective rational faculty, in that he lacks the deliberative faculty and cannot reason for himself, but he can follow reasons when they are given. If his master possesses and exercises reason in the full sense, then despotic rule is both advantageous and just for the slave as well as the master (1.5, 1254b16–26, 1255a1–2; cf. 1.13, 1260a12).

26 The assumption was easy for a Greek to make, given the link between the Greek noun, taxis, 'order', and the verb, tassein, 'to order' or 'command'. The noun kosmos, 'order', and verb, kosmein, had similar associations.
Aristotle palliates his doctrine of slavery in certain ways. In addition to holding that despotic rule should be advantageous for the slave as well as the master, he recommends humane treatment: indeed, masters ought to inculcate virtue in their slaves (i.e., the sort of virtue slaves are capable of). This is because slaves are tools for (virtuous) action rather than mere production (1.4, 1254a1-8) and they share in their masters’ lives (1.13, 1260a39-40). He also disagrees with those who claim that slaves are devoid of reason and that they should just be given orders without explanations. They should be admonished even more than children (1.13, 1266b3-7). Aristotle also importantly accepts a fundamental point made by the critics of slavery:

Being enslaved and a slave are said in two ways. For someone can be a slave or be enslaved according to law (kata nomon). For the law is a kind of agreement by which those who are vanquished in war are said to belong to the vanquishers. This just claim (right) is indicted by many legal experts, just as they indict an orator for unlawfulness, on the grounds that it is terrible if that which is forced will be a slave and ruled by that which is able to use force and is superior in power. (1.6, 1255a4-11)

Aristotle maintains it is unjust and contrary to nature to use coercion to enslave a person who is free by nature. He thus implies that the common practice of Greeks enslaving other conquered Greeks was unjust (see Pol. 1.6), and that those who were enslaved in his day were for the most part unjustly so. Even so, his theory of natural slavery is manifestly flawed. He provides no empirical basis for his claims about the defective psychology of large numbers of human beings, and he seems to reason that if certain people act slavishly this is as a result of their innate inferiority rather than of coercion and habituation (1.13, 1260a9-14). Critics have also pointed out inconsistencies in his arguments. For example, his defence of slavery hinges on the claim that despotic rule is mutually advantageous for master and slave (1.2, 1252a34; 1.5, 1254b4-9; 1.6, 1255b4-15). But in Politics 111 he remarks that despotic rule is advantageous to the master primarily and to the slave only accidentally, because the continued existence of the slave is necessary for that of the master (1278b32-7). This implies that slaves can be sacrificed whenever their existence is no longer necessary. Thus this qualification seems to undermine the argument of Politics 1 that despotism is just and even ‘friendly’ because it is mutually advantageous (1.6, 1255b13).27

27 Cf. EN viii.12, 1161b2-8, which denies that there can be justice or friendship between master and slave because they have nothing in common. This passage does allow that the master can have friendship and justice with the slave, but only qua human not qua slave. Aristotle’s psychological argument for slavery is also criticized convincingly by Smith 1991, who provides further references to the critical literature, for which see also Garnsey 1996.
Aristotle’s theory of natural slavery cast a long historical shadow extending to the antebellum American South in the nineteenth century, when apologists for slavery sought, rather implausibly, to enlist Aristotle as an ally. One historian has remarked, ‘In the bitter slavery controversy, defenders of the peculiar institution found next to the Bible itself a deep source of inspiration in Aristotle, whose heavily qualified and contradictory statements on the justice of slavery were taken as a flat endorsement.’

Earlier Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1490–1573) defended Spanish colonization of the New World and the enslavement of native Americans, making appeal to Aristotle’s *Politics*. However, other Aristotelian philosophers such as Francisco de Vitoria (c. 1483–1546) and Bartolome de Las Casas (1474–1566) criticized the conquest and enslavement of the Indians as a violation of natural law on the grounds that these peoples were naturally free.

### 3.2 Property ownership and acquisition

Aristotle’s discussion of property ownership and acquisition in *Politics* 1.8–11 is essentially an appendix to his account of slavery, since a slave is a part of property (1.8, 1256a1–3). It involves further applications of the naturalistic theory discussed above. For example, he distinguishes natural from unnatural forms of the art of acquiring possessions (*chrēmatistike*). Aristotle claims that the natural, defensible form of the acquisitive art is a part of household management or at any rate a subordinate art serving household management (1.8, 1256a10–16, b26–7; 1.10, 1258a34). In support of this he deploys familiar doctrines. For example, food and other goods are provided to human beings by nature, which ‘makes nothing incomplete and does nothing in vain’ (1.8, 1256b20–1). He also argues that the acquisitive art is natural and just only if it provides the necessary means for the natural ends of the household and polis. Thus, ‘true’ or natural wealth is not unlimited, but is limited to the amount of property sufficient for the good life (1.8, 1256b30–9). This provides the main basis for Aristotle’s distinction in *Politics* 1.9–11 between natural and unnatural forms of acquisition. For example, barter involving useful things, such as the exchange of wine for grain, for the sake of natural self-
sufficiency is not against nature (para phusin). The innovation of money as a means of exchange makes possible the art of commerce (kapelike), which involves exchanging things for money in order to make a profit. In contrast to the natural acquisitive art, commerce has for its end the unlimited accumulation of wealth and is thus inherently unnatural (1.9, 1257b23-31).

A defender of commerce might object that it is no more unnatural than other arts such as medicine, which can also serve the ends of the household or polis. Aristotle, however, adds the argument that commerce is peculiarly pernicious because it engenders a false view of the good life: as consisting of the unlimited gratification of desires, which requires unlimited wealth. This leads one to use one’s faculties in an unnatural way (1.9, 1257b32-1258a14). Aristotle also suggests that commercial exchange ‘is not according to nature but from one another’ (1.10, 1258b1-2), which suggests that if one party makes a profit the other party must be a loser. Aristotle finds usury (obolostatike) even more objectionable, because the creditors use money to produce wealth. Their gain comes from money itself and not from the purpose for which money was introduced, namely to facilitate exchange. The Greek word for interest, tokos, means ‘child’, indicating that it is money generated from money. Hence, this is the ‘most unnatural’ form of acquisition (1.10, 1258b2-8).

Aristotle’s arguments that commerce and usury are unnatural were very influential in the ancient and medieval eras, but they have been largely rejected by modern philosophers and economists.30 For example, he in effect views all commercial exchange as a ‘zero-sum game’, failing to recognize the mutual gains from trade. Further, he fails to grasp that economic gains in the form of profits and interest may perform valuable economical functions, which modern economists have endeavoured to explain. His psychological critique of commerce is also questionable. From the definition of commerce as the art of exchanging things in order to make a profit (1.9, 1257b4-5), it does not follow that a merchant’s sole aim in life is to maximize his profits.

3.3 Familial relations

Aristotle applies the principle of rulership to the male/female and father/child relations in a familiar but somewhat sketchier fashion. He contends that wives like children should be ruled as free persons, but

30 For critical overviews see Susemihl and Hicks 1894: 23-31 and Finley 1977. A more sympathetic treatment of Aristotle’s economic arguments is offered by Meikle 1995, who provides additional references to the secondary literature.
wives should be subject to political rule and children to kingly rule. For 'the male is by nature more capable of leadership than the female, unless he is constituted in some way contrary to nature, and the elder and perfect [is by nature more capable of leadership] than the younger imperfect'. In political rule individuals generally take turns in ruling and being ruled because they are inclined to be equal by nature, 'but the male is always related in this manner to the female' (1.12, 1259a39–b10). He remarks further that the female (unlike the natural slave) has a deliberative faculty but it is without authority (akuron) (1.13, 1260a13). By this he seems to mean that a woman's rational faculty does not have authority over the woman herself, because she cannot control her passions fully and is thus unable to act in accord with practical wisdom unless she is under male governance.31 He does maintain that women should be educated to be virtuous because they comprise half of the free citizens in the polis (1.13, 1260b13–20), but he also thinks that women have a subordinate form of virtue and that their proper role is in the household rather than in the political sphere (cf. 1.13, 1260a20–31; 11.5, 1264a40–b6; 111.4, 1277b21–5). However, Aristotle offers no evidence for his thesis that women are not psychologically equipped to rule, apart from the fact that males are generally observed to rule over women (1.13, 1260a9–10). It did not occur to him that the dominance of men over women in ancient Greece might instead be the result of deeply ingrained traditions and the absence of technologies favourable to greater freedom for women.32

Aristotle's arguments that slavery and female subservience are natural and that usury and commerce are unnatural contain serious difficulties. Moreover, such doctrines point to a general problem for political naturalism: the difficulty of disentangling the strands of nature and convention in the social fabric. There is an understandable temptation to deem what is normal in one's own culture to be 'natural', and what is abnormal to be 'unnatural'. But even if a practice or institution is ubiquitous, it does not follow that it must be explained in terms of innate psychological facts.

4 Nature and education

Aristotle's defence of political naturalism in Politics 1.2 concludes with the following argument:

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31 This is the traditional interpretation, defended by Fortenbaugh 1977 and Smith 1983. Another interpretation is that the deliberations of women do not have authority over men because men will not follow them: cf. Saxonhouse 1982: 208. However, this interpretation seems to make Aristotle's argument that male dominance is natural, rather than merely conventional, fallacious. 32 See Miller 1995: 240–4.
The impulse for this sort of community is in everyone by nature, but the one who first established it was the cause of the greatest goods. For just as a human being is the best of animals if he is perfected, he is the worst of all if he is separated from law and the administration of justice. For injustice is cruellest when it possesses arms. But when a man is born he possesses arms to be used for practical wisdom and virtue, although they can be used for the opposite ends. Therefore he is the most unholy and savage when he lacks virtue and he is the worst concerning sex and food. And justice is political; for the administration of justice is the order of the political community, and justice [as a virtue] is judgment about what is just. (1.2, 1253a31–9)

This argument assumes Aristotle's philosophy of education: that is, human nature can be perfected only through the acquisition of virtue and practical wisdom, which requires education and habituation in the legal system of a polis. This passage also supports Aristotle's thesis that it is the task of the lawgiver and politician to make the citizens good.33

The assumption that human nature can be perfected only through the acquisition of virtue and practical wisdom agrees with central doctrines of Aristotle's ethical works: for example that a human being is excellent (spoudaios) by nature, and that a wicked person is in an unnatural condition (para phusin) (EE vii.2, 1237a16; viii.6, 1240b20–1); and happiness is analysed by reference to the distinctive function of a human being or his soul (EN i.7, 1097b24–5; EE ii.1, 1218b38–1219a1). Nature serves as a standard of value: 'what is proper to each thing by nature is best and pleasantest for it' (EN x.7, 1178a5–6; cf. i.9, 1099b21–2; ix.9, 1170a13–16; 1170b1–2, 15).

However, the claim that virtue is a 'natural' condition for human beings presents a difficulty of interpretation, because Aristotle himself argues that ethical virtue does not exist 'by nature':

Ethical (ethike) virtue comes about as a result of habit. Hence, its name involves a slight variation from that of habit (ethos). From this it is also clear that none of the ethical virtues arises in us by nature. For none of the things that exist by nature can become other [than its nature] by habituation. For example, a stone which moves downward by nature could not be habituated to move upward, not even if you threw it up ten thousand times in order to habituate it, nor could fire be habituated to go downward nor could anything else that naturally does a specific kind of thing] be habituated to act otherwise. Therefore, the virtues do not

33 Pol. vii.13–14; EN i.9, 1.13 and 11.1. Aristotle also emphasizes the educative role of the laws especially in EN x.9. He is following Plato, who discusses public education at length in the Republic and Laws.
arise either by nature or against nature, but we are naturally able to acquire them and we are perfected [or completed] through habit. \((EN\ 11.1, 1103a17-26; \text{cf.}\ EE\ 11.2, 1220a39-b5)\)

If Aristotle is consistent, he must evidently be using ‘nature’ in different senses when he claims that virtue is a ‘natural’ condition of human beings but denies that virtue comes to be ‘by nature’. This closely parallels the problem discussed above concerning his doctrine that the polis exists by nature: a consistent interpretation requires that we impute to him a distinction between different senses of ‘nature’ not made explicitly in his extant writings. According to such an interpretation, when Aristotle claims that virtue arises by habit rather than ‘by nature’, he understands ‘nature’ in the sense of a person’s mere nature, namely the person’s innate constitution, apart from habituation or any other intervention. When Aristotle speaks of virtue or happiness as a ‘natural’ condition, he is thinking of the natural end of human beings. When he equates ‘natural’ with ‘good’, he evidently has the natural end in view. He is talking about the condition people are in when they have properly developed. By ‘natural virtue’ Aristotle has in mind the aptitudes and tendencies inherent in persons to acquire full moral virtue if they are properly trained and educated.\(^{34}\)

What, then, are the respective roles of habit and nature in the process of education? Aristotle in fact states that three different factors are involved in human development: nature, habit, and reason. This triad is discussed somewhat differently in two separate passages: *Nicomachean Ethics* x.9, 1179b20–1180a24 and *Politics* vii.13, 1332a38–b11. The aim of the former passage is to argue that the laws are necessary for the acquisition of virtue. Here nature is perfunctorily dismissed as a source of virtue: the goodness belonging to nature is not under our control but is due to ‘some divine causes’ and is found only in the truly fortunate. Thus, he seems to have mere nature in view. Regarding reason, he notes that arguments and teaching do not have strength with all persons, ‘but the soul of the student must have been moulded beforehand with habits for enjoying and hating in a noble way, just like earth that is to nourish seed’. Habituation is necessary for moral education, because a person who is governed by his passions will not respond to argument: ‘His character must first have an affinity with

\(^{34}\) On these two senses of ‘nature’ in Aristotle’s ethics and politics, see Annas 1993: 142–58, who refers to them as ‘mere nature’ and ‘nature proper’. Similar distinctions are made by Irwin 1985: 416–17 and Nichols 1992:18. Of the different senses in *Metaph.* v.4, ‘mere nature’ seems to correspond most closely to sense (4), i.e. nature understood as a material cause, and to be opposed to nature in sense (5), i.e. nature as a formal or final cause.
virtue, loving the noble and hating the base. Young persons should be taught to enjoy or disdain the appropriate sorts of activities. Otherwise, they will enjoy the wrong things and be resistant to moral reasoning. The household alone is not sufficient, because parents and private individuals generally lack the influence and compelling power of the laws. Further, individuals are more likely to abide by rules than other individuals. Hence, coercively enforced laws are necessary to produce virtuous citizens.  

Politics vii. 13 takes a somewhat different view on the triad of nature, habit, and reason, with each of them having a necessary role in the educational process. Nature is a precondition: ‘one must first grow as a human being and not as another animal, and thus have a certain sort of body and soul’. But growth alone does not suffice, because some natural attributes can develop for better or worse, depending on how one is habituated. ‘The other animals live mostly by nature, although in some slight ways by habits as well, but a human being also lives by reason, for he only has reason.’ In human beings these factors should be in harmony. ‘For people do many things contrary to their habituation and nature as a result of reason if they are persuaded that another condition is better’ (1332b3-5). Aristotle does not, however, explain this ‘harmony’ (sumphonia). Is his point that reason should adapt itself to the dictates of nature and habit, or that the latter pair should conform to reason? Unless this issue can be clarified, there is a serious ambiguity in Aristotle’s naturalistic philosophy of education.

Aristotle’s account of the best system of education in Politics vii and viii conforms to this natural hierarchy. He distinguishes between two parts of the soul, the rational faculty and the desiring faculty, and notes that the former is better. Similarly, Politics viii. 1 advocates a public system of education. Appealing to the above mentioned doctrine that the polis is prior by nature to the individual, Aristotle argues, ‘one should think not that any of the citizens belongs to himself, but that all belong to the polis; for each citizen is a part of the polis; and the care of each part naturally (pephuken) looks to the care of the whole’ (1337a27-30). However, in contrast to Politics viii. 1, Nicomachean Ethics x.9 makes an important qualification at 1180a24-b13: where there is no public system of education, then, faute de mieux, private individuals should try to educate their children and friends, although they should acquire the legislative science which guides the lawgiver in framing a system of laws favourable to education. Further, a father’s statements and habits have an influence like the laws and habits of the cities, because his children are ‘predisposed to love and obey him by nature (tli phusei)’. Aristotle even adds that individual education may have an advantage over common education in that it can be adapted to individual needs. Nonetheless, like a gymnastics teacher or a doctor, the educator will be most effective if he knows the universal principles for producing morally virtuous citizens.

Newman 1887-1902: ad loc. understands the passage in the former way, Annas 1993: 143, in the latter. This is explained elsewhere as due to the principle of rulership: cf. Pol. 1.2, 1252a31-4; 1.5, 1254b6-9.
worse parts: contemplative and practical reason. The activities associated with these parts also form a hierarchy, because the activities belonging to the part which is better by nature \( (\text{phusei}) \) are more choiceworthy \( (1333a27-8) \). The educator is thus to be guided by the maxim that ‘what is most choiceworthy for each individual is always the highest it is possible for him to attain’ \( (1333a29-30) \). Aristotle recalls the triad of nature, habit, and reason in \textit{Politics} vii.15, and reiterates that they should be in harmony. He asserts that the three form a normative hierarchy: ‘reason and intellect are the end of our nature, so that birth and care for habits should be provided for the sake of these things’ \( (1334b14-16) \). This corresponds to the natural order of generation: ‘just as the body is prior to the soul in generation, so also is the irrational \[ \text{part of the soul} \] to the rational part. And this is evident: for children have spirit and wishing, and also desire, directly when they are born, but reasoning and intellect naturally \( (\text{pephuken}) \) arise as they develop’ \( (1334b22-5) \). This defines the main stages of education: ‘Therefore first it is necessary to care for the body before the soul, and next the appetite; but the care of appetite is for the sake of the intellect, and care of the body is for the sake of the soul’ \( (1334b28) \). In general, then, education should follow the natural development of the individual: ‘one ought to follow the distinction of nature, for all art and education wish to fill what is left out of nature’ \( (1337a1-3) \). In making this injunction, however, Aristotle does not explain how education can ‘follow’ nature if it supplies what has been ‘left out of nature’. For example, if moral virtue is not itself the result of nature, how can we say that the morally educated person is ‘naturally’ superior to the uneducated? It would seem that Aristotle is again using ‘nature’ in two senses: education should follow nature \( (\text{i.e. the natural end}) \) and supply what is left out of nature \( (\text{i.e. mere nature}) \).\(^{38}\)

Aristotle’s political naturalism thus presupposes his philosophy of nature. Even if it is agreed that in the \textit{Politics} and ethical treatises he often uses ‘nature’ in an extended sense rather than in the strict sense of the \textit{Physics} and other natural scientific treatises, it is still true that the naturalism of Aristotle’s politics and ethics depends upon the naturalism of his physics and biology. Moreover, even if a polis is not to be thought of as a living organism, it resembles an organism in an important respect. An organism has within it an organizing and guiding formal principle: its soul. The polis also has a similar internal principle: its constitution (cf. \textit{Pol}).

An organism can function well and be healthy, or function badly and be sick; hence it can live in a natural condition (kata phusin) or unnatural condition (para phusin). Similarly, a polis can be in a natural or unnatural condition; that is, it can be in a just or unjust condition, or have a correct or deviant constitution. Accordingly, political justice and the analysis of constitutions are two central components of Aristotle’s political theory, which are to be discussed in the following two chapters.39

39 I am grateful to David Depew for valuable suggestions.