

### **The Phases and Future of the Noosphere: Segment 3**

**David Sloan Wilson:** So, you are a Greek scholar, classic scholar, and political scientist. I've learned so much from you about ancient Greece, from an evolutionary perspective. And this project centers about the concept of organism and society as an organism. And I wanted to ask you, I think, two questions. One is the degree to which the Greek city-states were kind of an organism, and also how that was understood by the people at that time, the whole metaphor of society as an organism, of course, was present in people's minds, such as Aristotle and so on. So not only did the Greek city-states qualify as an organism, in ways that we'll get to, but also that's how people were thinking of it. So, could you comment on that?

**Josiah Ober:** I think the interesting thing about Greek city-states is, first, these were indeed pretty tight collections of substantial numbers of individuals, anywhere from a few thousand to a few hundred thousand individuals in a given city-state in an ecology of city-states. So, by the time we're at the age of Plato or Aristotle, there's something like a thousand of these around the Mediterranean. So in some ways, like the ant colonies that Deborah Gordon studies, what we have is these individual groups, which are cohesive, they act cohesively as, in some ways, quasi-organisms in an ecology of similar, as it were, quasi-organisms, with which they both compete and cooperate. We have, I think the key way of thinking about what goes on within the city-state, as well as between city-states, is the management of cooperation in the face of conflict.

**DSW:** Right. So, in strictly biological terms, what we have here is what would we call a meta-population. We have a population of populations. You just said there were nearly a thousand, and that they're competing, they're in some sense replacing each other, and they're certainly trading information extensively, and they have a subsistence ecology. So, that was very easy for me, with my ecological background, to appreciate what you were writing, as definitely a multi-level evolutionary process. Evolutionary change, including cultural change, could take place within anyone of these polities, and did, including of the disruptive variety, and I think that we could focus on that, but also extensively taking place between these polities. So, to what extent were the people at the time self-aware of this, and thinking of their polis as organisms?

**JO:** So, Aristotle probably is our best evidence for this. He's very self-conscious about the relationship between human systems of organization, and other biological systems. So famously, Aristotle says that humans are political animals. And he uses as the example of other political animals: Ants and bees. He doesn't think that we're genetically related to them in a way that would be closer than to, say, other mammalian species, but he does think that our mode of interaction is meaningfully analogous to what they're doing. So the way in which Aristotle thinks about organizing the animal world is, in the first instance, between animals that he calls social, as opposed to sporadic, that is: Animals that live just one off, like bumblebees or carpenter bees or something, and then animals that live in colonies and in groups. And then he has a secondary division in which he divides the sociable ones into ones that are political and ones that are not political.

The political ones create something that is of value to the commonality. Whereas the not political ones are meant to be like antelope in a herd or something, that aren't doing anything together, although they live together and benefit from living together, but they don't create honey or the kind of things that humans create together. So, he thinks that humans are like ants or bees that do, in fact, create this thing in common. And they can only reach...now here he gets beyond or outside of a contemporary science, because he imagines that we, through living together in these groups, achieve our final end, our telos, so he's a very systematically teleological kind of thinker. He imagines that the city state is the proper natural environment for humans just as the hive would be for bees or the nest is for ants. And he supposes we can't achieve the capacity that we have as the kind of organisms, individually, that we are outside of

that, that any human who could flourish outside of a state, he imagined, would either be less than a human or more than a human, a beast or a God.

So, that if we are to be the creatures that we are, we must do it within these organized systems, for which he thinks we have a natural tendency. The trick is, however, unlike the honeybees or unlike the ants, we don't always look towards the good of the whole. We have the capacity to aim at our own individual good or own family good or only factions.

**DSW:** So, he was really aware of basically the tension between within group processes and between group processes.

**JO:** This is, if you look at Aristotle's politics, this great work, that really is the driving idea, is that: Yes, humans are naturally sociable. They are sociable, aiming at this life together to create something together, but they also have this capacity to aim at their own advantage. Managing that becomes the whole work of politics.

**DSW:** I think the reason that this is so relevant to the human energy project and Teilhard is that the way I see what took place back then was a miniature version of what the project is of the worldwide Noosphere, and so on, is the deliberate creation of an organism-like entity, at the planetary scale in our case, but what was taking place back then was exactly that in miniature, but for the city-state. And they succeeded to a degree. And so what does democracy have to do with it? Because this is the cradle, a cradle, of democratic governance. So why is democracy a very important part of this story?

**JO:** Yeah. So the question then, once you have these humans who are, naturally, for Aristotle, living in these states is: How are they going to organize themselves? And he supposes there are several ways they can do it. One, under a master, to have a king. One, under a small coalition, an oligarchy. And the third way is that you held self-government by the residents, or at least the citizen residents of the city-state, and that's democracy. The trick here, I think, is that, and here Aristotle gets into difficulties, but we don't have to worry about his difficulties, but the logic of his humans being, by nature, political animals, suggest that we all have this tendency to be sociable, and furthermore, to use our natural capacities of speech and reason towards these prosocial ends, and to do so at the highest level, the level that's closest to the divine, he would suppose.

So, that sounds ultimately like a democracy, all of us aiming at something together using speech, using reason, putting together what we know into some prosocial end. So, by that reasoning, the states that are democratic should do well because they ultimately maximally use human capacity. And interestingly enough, they do seem to do well. But, in order to do that, it's necessary to solve these large scale collective action problems. Because as soon as you don't have a boss telling you what to do, you have to find some way to organize decision-making in a distributive process that answers to the environmental challenges. For example, the Persian empire is coming, trying to take you over, the environmental challenge is surviving in that environment. So, that's really the interesting story, I think, about democracy in the Greek world is that it actually did turn out to be an effective form of human organization. And in fact, seems to have, over time, been the most successful form of organization, at the city-state level anyway, in that democracies tended to replace oligarchies or tyrannies over time and to become more prevalent over time.