2 Aristotle’s Topological Politics; Michael Sandel’s Civic Republicanism

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In book 8 of Plato’s Republic, the first sustained critique of democracy in Western philosophy, Socrates raises a fundamental question about the form of government that is now widely regarded as unambiguously the best. Simply put, in a political system whose primary values are freedom and equality, what will prevent the citizens from becoming staunch individualists who have little concern and make little sacrifice for the good of the community as a whole? As Socrates puts it, because it is “full of freedom” (557b) and “dispenses equality to equals and unequals alike” (558c), a democracy imposes no compulsion upon its citizens to rule or to participate in the working of their own government. Instead, it allows them to become accustomed to “gratifying the desires that occur to them” (561c). In other words, they will feel free to pursue their own conception of the good life in whatever way they see fit. As lovely as such a regime may seem to be, Socrates warns of what he takes to be a grave danger: citizens of a democracy will become resentful of any limitation or authority that is imposed upon them. He describes a regime in which leaders who do not pander to the citizens’ whims will be voted out of office and whose children, raised in the intoxicating air of equality, will feel no shame or fear before their parents or elders. Teachers, he says, will be frightened of their students, the old will curry favour with the young, and slaves will be as free as masters. Even the horses will cease to respect the commands of their riders and so they will bump into “whomever they happen to meet on the roads” (563c).

However hyperbolic Socrates’s picture may be, it inaugurates an abiding concern that has trailed democratic institutions like a shadow since their inception in Athens 2500 years ago. In contemporary political
theory this concern has been expressed as a critique of modern liberalism; more specifically, as a critique of John Rawls.

This chapter considers the work of one such critic: Michael Sandel. In formulating his own version of what has come to be known as “civic republicanism” as a response to Rawlsian “procedural liberalism,” Sandel turns back to ancient Greece for inspiration. In this sense he is exemplary of the project animating this volume. For he, as Geoffrey Kellow puts it in his introduction, considers “the challenges of modern republics” by drawing “republican lessons from republics and writers both recent and remote in time” (p. 5). He does not, however, invoke Plato’s critique of democratic freedom. Instead, he takes his bearings from Aristotle. What will be argued below is that Sandel’s neo-Aristotelian political theory is insufficiently grounded. While it effectively and invitingly revives several prominent principles from the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, it does not adequately examine or even acknowledge the more theoretical background on which these claims rely. Consider the following example, which I take to be paradigmatic and will become the focus of this essay.

Sandel argues that civic life in the United States has become “impoverished” (p. 6). Americans, he says, suffer from the justifiable “fear that, individually and collectively, we are losing control of the forces that govern our lives.” Such forces are enormous, distant, impersonal, and, because they are indifferent to the particularities of the local, politically enervating. As a result, Sandel complains, “the moral fabric of community is unraveling around us” (3). In response, he advocates a restoration of community, of the local. Without it, he believes, political engagement will continue to evaporate. As he puts it, “People will not pledge allegiance to vast and distant entities, whatever their importance, unless those institutions are somehow connected to political arrangements that reflect the identity of the participants” (346). He also says:

> The global media and markets that shape our lives beckon us to a world beyond boundaries and belonging. But the civic resources we need to master those forces, or at least to contend with them, are still to be found in the places and stories, memories and meanings, incidents and identities, that situate us in the world and give our lives their moral particularity. (349; emphasis mine)

A local institution or community, the sort to which Sandel believes people will pledge genuine allegiance, is one in which citizens have
a stake and which they can influence. It has a particularized identity expressed in “stories, memories and meanings” that differentiates it from other communities. Its boundaries are stable and recognizable; they are, so to speak, within reach.

In opposition to the prevailing theory of government – which, to reiterate, he identifies as the “procedural liberalism” championed by John Rawls – Sandel advocates a return to “a version of republican political theory” (5). Its central idea is “that liberty depends on sharing in self-government … To share in self-rule … requires that citizens possess, or come to acquire, certain qualities of character, or civic virtues” (6). In turn, this process of character formation requires the exercise of “soul-craft” on the part of government. In this context, the local is central: “Statecraft could be soulcraft without big government, provided that families, schools, and churches” – institutions that are by their nature particularized and small – “served as the primary agents of character formation” (326). To reinforce this conviction Sandel favourably cites Tocqueville’s remarks on New England towns whose “town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people’s reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it” (27). More generally he says this: “From Aristotle’s polis to Jefferson’s agrarian ideal, the civic conception of freedom found its home in small and bounded places, largely self-sufficient, inhabited by people whose conditions of life afforded the leisure, learning, and commonality to deliberate well about public concerns” (317; emphasis mine).

As these remarks suggest, and his other writings confirm, Sandel’s defence of civic republicanism is neo-Aristotelian. But there is a decisive difference between Sandel’s argument and Aristotle’s own. Simply put, Aristotle can make very good sense of the crucial phrase highlighted above: “small and bounded places.” Sandel, it will be argued, cannot.

This chapter will unfold as follows. Part 1 will show that Sandel’s defence of the local echoes lines of thought first developed by Aristotle. Part 2 will argue that Aristotle’s defence of the political-local is philosophically supported by the fundamental role that locality or “place” (topos) plays in his physics and cosmology. In other words, Aristotle’s political theory, like his conception of nature itself, is thoroughly “topo logical.” Part 3 will argue that despite leaning heavily on Aristotle’s practical philosophy, Sandel himself invokes no corresponding background theory, and as a result his political convictions are not sufficiently supported. Part 4 will conclude by raising the pivotal question that Michael Sandel’s failed neo-Aristotelianism raises.
Part 1: Aristotle’s Defence of the Local

That Aristotle is a staunch advocate of the local in politics can be quickly ascertained by considering his discussion of the size of the ideal “regime” (politeia) he sketches in book 7 of the Politics. First and foremost, it must be neither too big nor too small. It must be big enough to achieve self-sufficiency, which means “having everything and needing nothing” (1326b30), but it must also be very careful not to become too big. For a too-big city cannot, Aristotle thinks, be well governed; that is, ruled by law (1332a25). Furthermore, “too many people will lead to more poverty, which in turn leads to instability” (1265b12) or factionalism, the disease that threatens all cities. Finally and most important, a too-big city would at some point simply cease to be a city at all.

Aristotle offers concrete descriptions of his ideal city. For example, rather than expanding its trading economy, it imports only necessities unavailable at home and exports only its surplus goods. It thereby resists the temptation of pleonexia (1327a31), the desire always to have more. It has a navy, which in antiquity required a large number of sailors (poluanthropian: 1327b7) to man the oars, but maintains it only “up to that number” (1327a42) required for defence of its harbour. Unlike regimes such as Sparta and Crete, it does not have imperial ambitions and so its well-trained army is solely for the purpose of defence (1333b40). In other words, Aristotle is not unlike Timothy Burns’s description of Thucydides, who is critical of Pericles for making Athens’s “grand leadership, her imperialism and martial victories, the highest good for his city” (20). To gauge just how small Aristotle’s ideal city must be, consider this: in order for a regime to qualify as excellent it must properly distribute the responsibilities for judging and ruling. And to do this well, “citizens must recognize one another and know what sort of person each other is” (1326b15). The ideal city now sounds like a small town in which gossip flows freely and keeps the citizens well informed of each other’s characters and actions.

Aristotle acknowledges that the limitations he recommends are rarely appreciated because “most people suppose that it is appropriate for the happiest [eudaimon] city to be great (megalên) … and they judge greatness on the basis of the number of inhabitants” (1226a10). Most people, in other words, think bigger is better. But this is false, since “to be a great city and a populous one are not the same thing” (1226a25).

In sum, the ideal city is a “small and bounded place” whose borders are visible, within reach, and respected. Nonetheless, the city cannot be
too small either. First, as just mentioned, it must become self-sufficient. But second, like a work of art it must be beautiful and fine, qualities it cannot achieve if it is does not have sufficient magnitude. In general, a city does not become great “by number,” but by its “capacity” (dunamis: 1326a12), by what it can do. Aristotle offers the following comparison: “as is the case with animals, plants and tools, for a city there is a certain proper measure (metron). For each of these will not achieve its own potentiality if it is too small or too big” (1326b35–8). A ship only a few inches wide or ten miles long cannot do what a ship is meant to do, sail the seas and transport cargo and men, and so is not really a ship. Similarly, living beings are big enough when they have matured, attained their proper form, and can actualize those capacities, perform those functions, that are intrinsic to their species. When it comes to politics, a city is big enough when it is self-sufficient and, most important, able to generate the conditions that allow its citizens, or at least some of them, to live excellent lives that fulfil their natures as human and political beings.

To encapsulate this line of thought, Aristotle says that the best city must be of such a size as to afford a “synoptic” view of itself; it must be “easily seen as a whole” (eusunopton: 1327a2). It has visible borders that are sufficiently limited to be traversed by an individual and therefore small enough to allow participation. By extreme contrast, Babylon was so big that it took three days for some parts of it to realize that it had been invaded (1276a27). As a result, Babylon, due to its vast size, was not really a city at all. (Instead, it was what Aristotle calls a “people” [ethnos: 1276a29].)

To understand the substance of these claims, recall Aristotle’s definition of a city. It is, he says, a community (koinonia: 1252a1) composed of several smaller communities, such as the family, the household, and the village, which is a group of households (1252b10). The city is “prior to” and the most “authoritative” (1252a5) of these communities because it embraces them all as parts. It is a well-formed whole that “reaches a level of self-sufficiency” (1252b27). The notion of the “whole” (to holon) is crucial here. As Aristotle defines it in the Metaphysics, it is that “from which is absent none of the parts of which it is said by nature to be a whole” (1023b26). This definition comes close to that of the “all” or the “sum” (to pan). But there is an essential difference: in the case of an “all,” the position, the order of the parts, is irrelevant. “All” the letters of BAT are “b, a, t.” But these can be combined to form TAB as well as BAT. “If position does make a difference, then it is a whole” (Metaphysics 1024a1–3).
Alternatively formulated, the whole is that “which has a beginning, middle, and end (telos)” (Poetics 1450b27). It is an orderly, an in-formed, unity of parts. The city, then, is a whole community defined or characterized by “a certain order (taxis) of those who live in the city” (1274b36). This order or principle of organization is the politeia, the “regime” or “form of government.”

A genuine city, then, does not come into being simply upon the establishment of geographical borders nor can it be constituted simply by maintaining the continuity of a population through successive generations. Instead, it requires a form (eidos). It must be unified by means of its politeia, which makes the otherwise disparate and ever changing number of its parts into a whole.

The politeia is the organization of the city. It designates who is and who is not a citizen, who is responsible for the judicial, legislative, executive, and military activities. It determines the kind of education citizens require. As a result, simply living within the borders of a city or being subject to its laws is not sufficient to qualify an individual as a citizen (politês). For a citizen in the full sense of the word “is defined by nothing other than participating in decision and ruling” (1275a24) and must be engaged in the working of the city.

The preceding discussion helps us better appreciate Aristotle’s description of the “synoptic” character of the ideal city. It has a “form,” an eidos, a word that is derived from the verb “to see.” A city must thus be visible as a whole. This is possible only if it is of limited size, if its borders are within reach.

Finally, the ideal city is genuinely self-sufficient. It requires nothing other than itself in order to be fully itself. In political terms, it does not have to expand beyond its borders in order to succeed. Using some of his favourite metaphysical terminology, Aristotle says this: “A single city, the one which governs in manifest fineness, could be happy with respect to itself (kath’ heautên), if it is possible for a city to live by itself (kath’ heautên), using decent laws. Its form of government (politeia) would not be directed towards war or domination of its enemies (1325a1–4).

It should now be obvious that what Aristotle recommends is the ancestor of Sandel’s civic republicanism and his corresponding defence of the political centrality of “small and bounded places,” of the local. But, unlike Sandel, Aristotle rests his claims not only upon his definitions of the city, the citizen, and the regime, but on his conception of a natural world that is divided into places. His political theory is
thoroughly “localised” (from the Latin locus, “place”), thoroughly “topological” (from the Greek topos, “place”), because so too is his conception of the world.

Part 2: Aristotle’s Topological World

Aristotle’s conception of place (topos) is a fundamental to his conception of nature. He begins his discussion of it (in Physics 4) by saying that “everyone assumes that beings (ta onta) are somewhere. For what is not is nowhere. For where is the goat-stag or the sphinx?” (208a29–31). We regularly, perhaps even naturally, ask where something is, for if something is it must be somewhere. To illustrate, Aristotle cites the poet Hesiod, whose Theogony is the story of how the world and all its objects came into being.

That there is place, and that it is independent of bodies, and that every body is perceptible as being in a place is a reasonable belief. Thus it would seem that Hesiod spoke correctly when he made “the chasm” (chaos) the first of all things. For he wrote, at any rate, that “first of all the chasm came to be, and then next broad bosomed earth.” He did so because he understood that it was necessary first of all for there to be room for things. Just like most people, he understood that every thing has to be somewhere and in a place. (Physics 208b27–33)

First, says Hesiod, there was chaos, the “chasm” or even “emptiness.” But immediately afterwards there came earth. This line, Aristotle suggests, reveals that Hesiod understood that there must be a place for all the many beings – trees, mountains, people, rivers, nymphs – whose coming-into-being his poem describes. The earth must be there for beings cannot exist nowhere or in the empty chasm. The goal of Aristotle’s analysis in Physics 4 is thus to provide an answer to the question “What is the where of things?” There are, he thinks, two possible answers: in a place or in the void. He opts for the former because for him the latter is no more than “a special case of place, i.e., a place with nothing in it.”

It is important to note that Aristotle’s void is similar to the neutral or indeterminate space through which all bodies move by following the same laws of motion that are central to modern physics. Such space “is internally undifferentiated – two spaces are identical, if they are of equal dimensions.” With this contrast in mind, we can quickly discern
the salient feature of Aristotelian place. Unlike modern space, it has a kind of “power” (208b11), which in turn is manifested in directionality. There are, Aristotle argues, six “divisions” or “directions” of place: up, down, left, right, front, back (Physics 208b12). The striking feature of his theory here is that, unlike us – that is, we who dwell in the unbounded and homogeneous space of modern physics – Aristotle thinks that these distinct directions are objective features of the world.

Up and down, right and left [front and back] are not only relative to us. For they are not always the same in relation to us, but instead depend on our position so that when we turn they change … In nature, however, each is distinct and exists independently of the others. For that which is up is not a matter of chance, but instead is to where fire or a light body moves. Similarly, what is down is not a matter of chance, but is to where heavy or earthy bodies move. They differ not only in position, but also in power. (Physics 208b14–22)

As indicated in this passage, Aristotle’s notion of place is closely tied to his account of the natural motion of the four elements: earth, fire, water, and air. Each has its natural place towards which it will move unless otherwise impeded. Fire and air, which are light, naturally move upwards, towards the heavens, which are above the earth. An earthy or watery body, one that is heavy, naturally moves downward, towards the earth. To say it again: up and down are objective features of the world. So too are left and right. In On the Heavens, for example, Aristotle argues that “the beginning of the heaven’s revolution is the side from which the stars rise, so that must be its right, and where they set must be its left” (285b20).

The objectivity of direction is, to put it mildly, a hard pill for us to swallow. We are vastly more accepting of the belief that directionality is relative. After all, our own version of physics requires an infinite or indefinite universe in which there can be no objectively up or down, left or right, but only relative position on an indeterminate grid. Aristotle sees things quite differently. As will gradually become more clear, he does so because his conception of nature, unlike our own, emerges from a specifically human, earth-based, and naked-eye perspective.

Aristotle defines topos as the limit “of the containing body” (211b14). As such, it is neither a material thing nor a part of one. Instead, it is more like the form or the shape of a thing. My computer has three dimensions and is sitting on my desk. It is made of stuff like plastic
and silicon; in Aristotle’s terminology, some bits of earth, air, water, or fire. The stuff has been moulded into a shape or form by the computer-maker. Its shape is visible. To reiterate an earlier point, the Greek word for “form,” *eidos*, is derived from the verb “to see” and so could also be translated simply as “the look” of a thing. Rather than being a separate part, the form is the entirety of the way the computer, shaped by its outermost edge or limit, looks.

Even though it too is a limit – and for the purpose of this paper this will prove to be its decisive feature – a place is not a form. A form is the limit of that which is contained, whereas place is the limit of that which contains. A place is thus like a “vessel” (210a24). Like a bottle, it is that which things are in. Like an immovable vessel, a place “holds” change.

This is hard to understand. For example, place seems close to being a body because it is three-dimensional, but the phenomenon of “replacement” shows that it is not. There may now be water in a bottle. When the water is poured out it is replaced by air. Where there was water now there is air. And the air also could be replaced by another body. Because the same place can be occupied by different bodies, place is not body. (See *Physics* 208b1–7.) Nor, as argued above, is it a form. Instead, place “is the first unmoved limit of that which contains” (212a20).

To do justice to this complicated topic would go far beyond the limits of this paper. Fortunately, the key point here is only this: place has “power.” It is the principle that renders the world directional. All beings are in places that are either up or down, left or right. In turn, it is precisely such directionality that renders the world orderly and is responsible for it being a “cosmos.” Koyré defines a cosmos as “a conception of the world as a finite, closed, and hierarchically ordered whole.” Within its confines everything has its place in which it naturally belongs. Stars are above us, earth below, and animals like us are in-between. By contrast, in a universe of indefinite space nothing belongs anywhere or is objectively above or below, to the right or the left. Since there is no fixed and immobile centre, such directions are strictly relative.

Another fundamental, and to us jarring, point is expressed in Koyré’s comment. Aristotle’s world is “finite.” The uppermost heavenly sphere, which is as far as the eyes can see, is its outer limit. This cosmological fact has, for Aristotle, far-reaching significance. Consider, for example, his embrace of the Pythagorean “table of opposites” (in *Metaphysics* 1.5). It asserts that the finite is to the infinite as the one is to the many, as rest is to motion, as right is to left, and finally as good is to bad. Such an evaluation sounds preposterous, for finite and infinite seem to
be no more than quantitative designators and thus to be indifferent to questions of value. Nonetheless, this normative hierarchy – the finite is superior to the infinite – is central to Aristotle’s thought for, again like the Pythagoreans, he counts the finite as responsible for intelligibility. As he puts it, “insofar as something is infinite it is unknowable” (Physics 207a26). If intelligibility is then taken to be a good, as Aristotle takes it to be, then so too should the finite.

In *On the Heavens* 1.5, Aristotle asks “whether there is an infinite body” and he pleads for the urgency of this question: “for whether there is or isn’t does not make a small difference, but all the difference in respect to the study (*theoria*) of truth” (271b5–6). Everything, including his practical philosophy, hinges on the answer to this question, which for Aristotle is emphatically negative, for were the magnitude of the world to be infinite it would be unknowable. And no feature of the world is more apparent and impressive to Aristotle than its knowability.

Recall that the notions of place and natural direction are tightly connected. Unless forced to do otherwise, fire naturally moves upward to its place in the heavens. The sun rises in the East, to the right, and sets in the West, to the left. If there were an infinite body these notions would become meaningless. Aristotle explains:

> Every sensible body is in a place, and the forms and differences of place are the up and the down and before and the front and the back and the right and left. And these are not relative to us nor a matter of convention, but have been distinguished in the cosmos itself. And they could not possibly be in the infinite. Simply put, if an infinite place is impossible, and every body is in a place, an infinite body is impossible. Indeed, whatever is somewhere is in a place, and what is in a place is somewhere. (Physics 205b31–6a2)

To reiterate: directionality – up, down, left, right, front, back – is an objective feature of the world and renders it orderly and intelligible (and beautiful). The moon simply is above the earth; fire goes up towards its natural place, water down. The world makes sense and as a consequence must be finite.

Having eliminated the possibility of an infinite body or entity, Aristotle is not yet done with the infinite. For “if there simply were no infinite at all, many impossibilities would ensue” (Physics 206a10). For example, if there were no infinite we would be required to say that time has a
beginning and an end, and that continuous magnitudes are not divisible into further magnitudes, two notions that are absurd. We would have to say that numbers are not infinite, which again is obviously false since there is no highest number.

What, then, remains of the infinite? It is, but only in potentiality (206a18). A line segment can be divided into infinitely many smaller segments. Each segment subtracted from the original line is limited but the procedure of subtraction cannot be completed. The infinite, Aristotle tells us, is “that which is always beyond” (207a1). It is the potential of there always being more. Differently stated, the being of the infinite is “in thinking” (en noesei: 203b24). We can always think of a higher number and in our minds subdivide a line segment to infinity. We can always imagine a point beyond. But Aristotle cautions against “trusting in thinking alone” (208a15). Clever people can cook up puzzles and argue on behalf of paradoxical positions. But the goal of theoretical thinking is not just being clever, or doing elegant mathematics, but remaining faithful to (or saving) the phenomena, including sensible, naked-eye, ordinary phenomena. Indeed, a fundamental requirement of Aristotelian theory is that it make sense of the world as human beings here on earth actually experience it.

That the finite is prior and superior to the infinite is also reflected in one of Aristotle’s basic metaphysical principles: “For one man and a man are the same, and being a man and a man are the same” (Metaph. 1003b22). To be is to be this or that; it is to be determinate or singular. To be, in the fullest sense – that is, in actuality – is to be finite. Differently stated, the concept of the finite is intimately connected to that of the whole. As mentioned above, a “whole” is “that from which nothing is absent; for example, a whole man” (Physics 207a10). A whole is a complete (teleion) unity of parts. This description leads directly to the concept of the finite: “The whole and the complete (teleion) are either entirely the same or their natures are akin. For nothing is complete unless it has a telos. And a telos is a limit” (207a15).

A man is whole because he is a complete (teleion) set of parts; the list of his parts comes to an end, and each contributes to the functioning of the man. It’s important to note that teleion can also be translated as “perfect.” Something that has been gone through entirely is complete and thus “perfect.” The infinite is that which cannot be gone through. Furthermore, the words “perfect” and teleion also have evaluative connotations. What is “perfect” is not only complete or “that from which nothing is absent,” but it is also maximally good and “cannot be
exceeded in its kind. For example, a perfect doctor or flutist are those who, according to the form of the excellence that belongs to them, lack nothing” (*Metaphysics* 1021b16–18).

Finally, as the use of *teleion* above suggests, the lines of thought just sketched are basic to Aristotle’s teleological conception of nature. A being has a purpose determined by its form. The goal of an organism, to cite the crucial example, is to maintain itself and become perfect, whole, complete.

To sum up: Aristotle’s political theory and his physics work in tandem and both require the concept of place. The *polis* is natural and is the *telos* of the human urge to enter into communities. The best city is limited and has an intelligible form or *politeia* that renders it whole. It is localized, what Sandel calls a “small and bounded place,” and within its reachable boundaries its citizens are recognizable to one another. These political convictions are well grounded on Aristotle’s conception of nature, which is essentially topological and teleological.

It is arguable that a similar correspondence obtains between modern liberalism and the background theory, the conception of nature, from which it emerges. As Koyré puts it, the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century is precisely the transition “From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe.” ⁸ In the indeterminate or infinite space of the latter nothing has a natural place or belongs anywhere in particular and there is no possibility of perfection (at least here on earth). The fundamental consequence of this theory when applied to political life is that human beings are not bounded or determined to exist in one place or another. In other words, we are free … free to choose our place. By contrast, in Aristotle’s version of the closed world a woman’s place, for example, is in the home, where she naturally belongs and where she is, and should be, subordinated to the man. (See *Politics* 1260a10–15.) Nonsense, the liberal replies. A woman should have the right to occupy any leadership position in the community to which she aspires and for which she is qualified. She should pursue the path, occupy the place, that she wishes. For Aristotle, a (natural) slave’s place is under the thumb of a master, a principle that we moderns find repugnant. (See *Politics* 1.4.) In general, then, of fundamental practical importance in modernity is the freedom to move and this is made possible by an infinite universe where we ourselves are indeterminate beings who belong nowhere in particular. At the least, this political principle – that is, “liberalism” – is compatible with the background theory of modern physics.
Part 3: Sandel’s Insufficient Aristotelianism

Michael Sandel might well agree with the preceding paragraph. In one of his many criticisms of John Rawls – specifically, of what he calls Rawls’s “deontological liberalism” and its attendant doctrine of an unencumbered or atomic self – he says that “only in a universe empty of telos such as seventeenth-century science and philosophy affirmed, is it possible to conceive a subject apart from and prior to its purposes and ends.”\(^9\) If Sandel takes his “only” seriously, then he is claiming that modern physics is a necessary condition of modern liberalism. Therefore, a rejection of that sort of physics, that sort of background theory, would imply the rejection of its corresponding political theory. Unfortunately, however, Sandel fails to pursue this line of argument. In other words, he does not propose a conception of nature to compete with that forged in the seventeenth century nor does he realize that this is required in order to complete his neo-Aristotelian critique of liberalism. More specifically, despite his Aristotelian political convictions, he dismisses the theoretical world view that underlies them. As he puts it, “Today, no scientist reads Aristotle’s works on biology or physics and takes them seriously.” Even more pointedly he says: “The temptation to see the world as teleologically ordered, as a purposeful whole, is not wholly absent [even today]. It persists, especially in children.” Nonetheless, Sandel insists that it remains possible to deploy basic Aristotelian notions such as place and telos in political discourse. Indeed, he pleads for the urgency of doing so. He speaks, for example, of “the purpose, or telos, of a university” and does not flinch at asking the teleological question “What is political association for?”\(^10\) It is not clear how this question can possibly be meaningful in the purposeless universe that looms behind it.

An even sharper display of Sandel’s odd and unsatisfying neo-Aristotelianism is found in his critique of genetic engineering. He opposes it because, to cite his favoured example of athletes, it corrupts “athletic competition as a human activity that honors the cultivation and display of natural talents.” He continues: “Arguments about the ethics of enhancement are always, at least in part, arguments about the telos, the point, of the sport in question.” In turn, that telos is determined by “the nature of the sport,” which in turn is derived from our “natural talents.” Sandel needs such Aristotelian terminology in order to make what for him is the crucial distinction between medicine and genetic engineering. The former is commendable because it “is guided
by the norm of restoring and preserving the natural human functions that constitute health.” By contrast, genetic engineering is problematic precisely because it knows no restraints. Instead, it represents “an unbridled act of hubris or bid for domination”; namely, the domination and transformation of our own bodies.11

Sandel’s “case” again genetic engineering manifestly relies upon a specific conception of nature, one which generates norms; in other words, a teleological conception of nature. At the same time, however, he rejects such a view as childish. He cannot, therefore, support his normative distinction between engineering and proper medicine.

Without a background theory to buttress his political convictions, what sort of argumentative strategy does Sandel actually deploy? To use a phrase he himself does not, he engages in what might be called “practical phenomenology.” He regularly appeals to “moral experience” in making his arguments. So, for example, in concluding his criticism of Rawls, he says that “the deontological vision is flawed … as an account of our moral experience.”12 In a similar vein, he argues that the conception of the human self that underlies procedural liberalism is flawed, for “it cannot make sense of our moral experience, because it cannot account for certain moral and political obligations that we commonly recognize.”13 And this: “Unless we think of ourselves as encumbered selves, open to moral claims we have not willed” – in other words, unless we think of ourselves in a fashion radically at odds with the liberal conception – “it is difficult to make sense of these aspects of our moral and political experience.”14 Finally, consider the following. In asking how one could possibly decide between “MacIntyre’s narrative conception of the person” and “the voluntarist conception of persons,” Sandel suggests that “we might ask ourselves which better captures the experience of moral deliberation.”15 On this basis he opts for the former.

This sort of argumentative appeal to ordinary experience is itself Aristotelian in spirit. Consider, for example, this well-known passage from *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.

It is necessary, just as in the other studies, to set down the phenomena (*tithentas ta phainomena*) and first of all to run through the puzzles. In this way, the reputable beliefs (*ta endoxa*) about these affections will be shown; ideally, all the reputable beliefs, but if not all, then most and the most authoritative. For if the difficulties are dissolved and the reputable beliefs are left intact, then the showing will have been adequate. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1145b2–7)
What exactly these lines mean, and therefore in what sense Aristotle is a phenomenologist, is far from obvious. The first order of business is to clarify the relationship between the “phenomena” and the “reputable beliefs.” On this issue Owen’s paper remains pivotal. He convincingly showed that “phainomena” refers to more than empirical observations, and that as such the word can even embrace the *endoxa*, or what he calls “the common conceptions on the subject.” More generally still, it can include the *legomena*, “the things said,” which Owen described as “often … partly matters of linguistic usage or … of the conceptual structure revealed by language.” In other words, the *endoxa* or *legomena* are themselves phenomena; they are aspects of the way the world shows itself to us. A successful theory must leave the *endoxa* intact; it must “save the phenomena” – a phrase Aristotle does not use, but has long been associated with him – rather than contradict or negate them. It must account for and harmonize with not only the way human beings register the world through sense perception but also with the way human beings, especially those who are counted as *endoxos* or “reputable,” have spoken about the world.

Aristotle’s stated methodology is – and this claim can only be asserted dogmatically here – supported by his robust accounts of perception, imagination, and ordinary language (largely found in *De Anima*), accounts which are themselves embedded in the more general theoretical project of which they are components. But what gives philosophical support to Sandel’s turn to ordinary experience? Nothing. When he speaks confidently of the primacy of the local, the *telos* of a university, or the “natural functions” of the human body, he has stripped these Aristotelian notions of their full meaning. In short, he operates with no background conception of nature. As a result, his political convictions, however admirably Aristotelian they may be, carry little philosophical weight.

**Part 4: A Concluding Question**

The argument of this paper might now be construed as terribly pessimistic, at least for critics of liberalism. If civic republicanism requires a topological world view and teleological conception of nature as support, and if that world view is no longer tenable, then Sandel’s neo-Aristotelian political theory is untenable. In fact, however, this paper does not counsel despair. Instead, it is designed to raise a question, one which can best be explained by means of a short detour.
In 1935 Edmund Husserl wrote “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity.” There he claimed that “the European nations are sick. Europe itself, it is said, is in crisis.” He offered a concise diagnosis: “I am certain that the European crisis has its roots in a misguided rationalism” that gave rise, beginning around 1600 in the work of Galileo, to mathematical physics and the technology it spawned. Commenting on a later scientific achievement, namely, Einstein’s theory of relativity, Husserl pinpointed what is misguided about European rationalism.

Einstein’s revolutionary innovations concern the formulae through which the idealized and naively objectified physis [nature] is dealt with. But how formulae in general, how mathematical objectification in general, receive meaning on the foundation of life and the intuitively given surrounding world – of this we learn nothing; and thus Einstein does not reform the space and time in which our vital life runs its course.17

The universe studied by mathematical physics, the backbone of modern science, tells us nothing about the “meaning” of our lives, about the space and time, the world, in which we actually pass our time. It grants no privileged status to ordinary human experience, for it is a science thoroughly purged of anthropomorphism. To grasp what this means, and how radically it diverges from the modern scientific project, consider what Spinoza, writing around 1670, had to say: “Men commonly suppose that all natural things act like themselves.” Thus, to take the prime example, because men “do all things with an end [or purpose] in view; that is, they seek what is useful,” they (falsely) believe that there are “final causes” – purposes, goals, ends – built into nature itself. For Spinoza this teleological or Aristotelian conception of nature was no more than anthropomorphism run amuck. Human beings projected themselves onto the screen of a non-human universe, which in reality operates mechanically rather than purposively. They deluded themselves into seeing what they wanted to see, namely, a natural order that operates like themselves. But Spinoza’s nature does not work this way. For him teleology was no more than a “misconception” that had hardened into “a superstition.” The centuries spent looking for final causes had inhibited the search for real or efficient ones, and so had stopped the progress of science dead in its tracks. In defiance of what was then traditional wisdom, Spinoza proudly declared that “nature has no fixed aim in view, and ... all final causes are merely fabrications of men.”18 Freed from its pathetic search for
purposes, liberated by mathematics, scientific research was poised to penetrate the workings of nature itself.

Husserl’s “crisis” is a response to this form of mathematized and thoroughly dehumanized science. He pleads with us to return to the phenomena and treat them as epistemically significant. In other words, he urges us to invest our own ordinary experience with evidentiary value. In making these claims he is revisiting Aristotelian terrain, for this sort of phenomenological science is, as the passage from Nicomachean Ethics 7 indicated, at the core of his philosophical work. In radical contrast to the moderns, Aristotle is indeed concerned with “the space and time in which our vital life runs its course.” And so his conception of nature, expressed in his physics and cosmology, is topological at its core and serves as the foundation of his political theory as well. To reiterate the central (and Aristotelian) complaint this paper is leveling at Michael Sandel: he wants to revive a politics of place and he relies upon ordinary human experience in order to muster his arguments in its defence. But he stops short. While he is willing to grant that a university may have a telos, he thinks that nature itself has none at all. In other words, he is unwilling to follow Aristotle in extending the phenomenological project beyond the limited confines of ethics and politics. As a result, his advocacy of the political primacy of place floats without any stable support. The question his work raises, then, is this: is it possible, even at this late date, to follow Husserl’s lead and insist that, like Aristotle, we must never lose sight of the phenomena, of the ordinary human experience of the world, even when we are studying non-human nature? Do we have the courage to fight against the tide of modern science and insist that our very humanity, determined as it always is by places, is epistemically significant? Aristotle does and so we must wonder whether we, especially those of us willing to defend a conception of “the small and bounded places” intrinsic to civic republicanism, can as well.

NOTES
3 All translations from Aristotle are my own.
4 Aristotle assumes that the poor will always be many: “The rich are everywhere few and the poor many” (Politics 1279b37–8).

5 Helen Lang, The Order of Nature in Aristotle’s Physics: Place and the Elements (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 68. To paraphrase her point: “where” is one of the questions the answer to which is a category. See, for examples, Categories 1b26 and 2a1, as well as Metaphysics 1017a26.

6 Ibid., 69.


8 This is the title of Koyré’s book cited above.


12 Sandel, Liberalism and the Limits of Justice, 177.

13 Sandel, Democracy’s Discontent, 13.

14 Ibid., 228.

15 Sandel, Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do? 223.


18 These remarks come in the “Appendix” to part 1 of Spinoza’s Ethics.