



Aristotelian Teleology, Public Morality, and Statecraft: An Examination of Ethics and Politics in Classical Philosophy and the Development of Post-Colonial Nigeria

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Abstract

This inquiry investigated the structural and philosophical intersections between Aristotle's treatises on moral philosophy and statecraft, specifically the Nicomachean Ethics and the Politics and maps their diagnostic and prescriptive utility onto the socio-political evolution of Nigeria. Operating on the central Aristotelian premise that politics is an extension of ethics directed toward the realization of the highest human good (eudaimonia), this paper evaluated the systemic failures of post-colonial Nigerian governance. Based on the qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, the study argued that contemporary Nigerian politics suffers from an existential crisis driven by the deliberate severance of public action from moral accountability, institutionalized prebendalism, and the erosion of civic friendship (philia). Through an examination of historical trajectories, socio-cultural matrices (such as the omolúwàbí ethos), and structural governance deficits, the study concluded that sustainable political development in Nigeria requires a teleological realignment of state power with virtue ethics, institutional coercion for moral habituation, and the conscious cultivation of practical wisdom (phronesis) among leadership cadres. The study thus recommended that for Nigeria to transcend its current structural crises, its political culture must undergo an ethical renaissance. By embedding practical wisdom in leadership, reinforcing coercive institutional accountability, revitalizing civic friendship across ethnic fault lines, and anchoring public policy in virtue ethics

Key words: Aristotle, Eudaimonia, Political Ethics, Nigerian Politics, Prebendalism, Phronesis, Public Morality.

Introduction

The relationship between ethics and politics has historically constituted the foundational crux of classical political philosophy. For ancient Greek thinkers, most notably Aristotle, the domain of politics was not perceived as an autonomous arena of amoral power accumulation, strategic manipulation, or realpolitik. Rather, it was conceptualized as the architectonic science governing the collective organization of human life, subservient to and continuous with moral philosophy. The intersection of morality and statecraft has remained a central theme in political philosophy from antiquity to the contemporary era. Among classical thinkers, Aristotle established the most cohesive paradigm linking human action (ethics) to collective organization (politics). In his view, the state (**polis**) originates for the preservation of bare life, but continues for the sake of a good life (Dada, 2021).

When applied to developing democracies, particularly Nigeria, Aristotle's integration of ethics and politics offers a profound diagnostic tool. Despite abundant human and natural resources, Nigeria's political evolution since independence in 1960 has been plagued by systemic corruption, governance deficits, and ethnic polarization. This paper investigates Aristotle's philosophical linkage between ethics and politics and assesses how these classical concepts can illuminate, diagnose, and potentially reform the trajectory of Nigerian politics.

In contemporary developing democracies, however, this classical integration has frequently been fractured. Nowhere is this disjunction more pronounced than in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Since gaining formal independence from Great Britain in 1960, Nigeria has struggled to transition from an administrative extraction unit designed for colonial hegemony into an organic, cohesive political community (*polis*) capable of securing the welfare and moral elevation of its citizenry. Despite possessing vast human capital and immense material endowments particularly petroleum resources Nigeria's political trajectory has been continually disrupted by endemic corruption, identity-based polarization, and pervasive governance failures. This paper undertakes a comprehensive philosophical critique of Nigerian political development utilizing the conceptual toolkit furnished by Aristotle. By examining the structural parallels and divergences between Aristotelian political teleology and the historical realities of the Nigerian state, this study seeks to answer a fundamental question: Can the persistent institutional and developmental crises of contemporary Nigeria be diagnosed and ameliorated through a return to Aristotelian virtue ethics and the unification of statecraft with public morality?

Statement of the Problem

The primary problem confronting the Nigerian state is a profound crisis of public morality and institutional legitimacy. Decades after the transition to the Fourth Republic in 1999, the Nigerian political landscape remains characterized by neo-patrimonialism, state capture, clientelism, and elite self-aggrandizement (Dada, 2021). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle posits that every art, inquiry, and action aims at some good. The supreme good for human beings is *eudaimonia* (often translated as human flourishing, happiness, or fulfillment) (Adedoja, 2026). *Eudaimonia* is achieved not through passive pleasure or wealth, but through the active exercise of the soul's faculties in accordance with virtue (*arete*).

In the *Politics*, Aristotle defines the state (*polis*) as a community of citizens organized for the common good. Because politics encompasses all other practical arts and legislates what people should do and avoid, Aristotle calls it the "master science"

(*architektonike episteme*). The primary purpose of the state is ethical: to make citizens good and capable of noble actions (Ubani, 2022). Lawgivers must design constitutions that cultivate justice, civic virtue, and friendship among citizens. Therefore, for Aristotle, a political system divorced from ethics is tyrannical and unstable, as it serves the narrow interests of rulers rather than the universal flourishing of the political community.

Mainstream political analyses often attribute these failures strictly to economic variables, structural adjustments, or constitutional flaws. This paper posits that these frameworks remain superficial because they overlook the underlying *ethical* vacuum within Nigerian political culture (Adedoja, 2026). When political actors systematically divorce morality from statecraft—treating public office as private property for primordial accumulation the state ceases to function as an instrument for the common good and devolves into an apparatus for sectional dominance. Consequently, citizens experience deep alienation, losing faith in the social contract and retreating into ethnic and religious enclaves.

Objectives of the Study

The overarching objective of this research is to critically analyze Aristotle's integrated framework of ethics and politics and apply it as a philosophical lens to interrogate the trajectory of Nigerian politics. Specific objectives include:

1. To explicate Aristotle's teleological conception of the state (*polis*) and its organic linkage to individual and collective human flourishing (*eudaimonia*).
2. To trace the historical evolution of Nigerian politics from the pre-colonial, colonial, to the post-independence eras, highlighting systemic fault lines.
3. To diagnose contemporary Nigerian political malaises such as corruption, prebendalism, and ethnic fragmentation using Aristotelian categories such as *phronesis*, distributive justice, and the perversion of constitutions.
4. To propose an Aristotelian-inspired framework for political and moral reformation in Nigeria, incorporating institutional habituation, virtue education, and the reinvigoration of civic friendship (*philia*).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Aristotelian Nexus: Ethics, *Eudaimonia*, and the *Polis*

To comprehend Aristotle's political philosophy, one must first master his foundational ethical doctrines, primarily articulated in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle commences his inquiry with the teleological assertion that every art, inquiry, and human action aims at some perceived good. However, the supreme, self-sufficient end (*summum bonum*) of human existence is *eudaimonia* frequently translated as happiness, flourishing, or successful living. *Eudaimonia* is not achieved through passive states, fleeting pleasures, or the accumulation of external wealth, but through the active exercise of the soul's rational faculties in accordance with moral and intellectual virtue (*arete*). Moral virtue itself is characterized as a purposive disposition situated as a mean between extremes of excess and deficiency, cultivated systematically through habituation (*ethos*) and guided by practical wisdom (*phronesis*).

Crucially, Aristotle establishes in the opening books of the *Politics* that human beings are by nature political animals (*zoon politikon*). Man cannot attain moral self-sufficiency or complete virtue in

isolation from a community. The state (*polis*) is thus not an artificial social contract born out of fear or mere economic exchange; it is a natural growth. While the state originates for the sake of bare life, it continues for the sake of the *good life*. Therefore, politics is designated as the "master science" (*architektonike episteme*) because it legislates what citizens must study, practice, and avoid, with the ultimate objective of fostering moral excellence across the entire political body.

Contemporary Scholarship on Aristotelian Political Ethics in Africa

Scholarly engagement with Aristotle in African political philosophy has experienced a significant renaissance. Thinkers examining post-colonial governance structures frequently invoke classical teleology to critique the modern African predicament. For instance, Dada (2021) bridges Aristotelian character habituation with indigenous African ethical matrices, specifically the Yoruba *omoluwabi* ethos, arguing that public morality must be anchored in deeply internalized character traits rather than purely procedural legalisms. Similarly, scholars like Ubani (2022) utilize Aristotle's ethical rationalism to dissect the systemic entrenchment of corruption in Nigeria, asserting that structural anti-corruption campaigns fail when they neglect the moral formation of the political actor. Adedoja (2026) further emphasizes that the health of the African *polis* relies heavily on harmonizing distributive fairness, lawful governance, and civic virtue, demonstrating that political stability is fundamentally contingent upon moral integrity.

Methodology

The study adopted the historical research design based on the qualitative method (secondary sources) of data collection with emphasis on content analysis.

Results and Discussion

Historical Trajectory of Nigerian Politics

Pre-Colonial Socio-Political Formations

To fully appreciate the contemporary structural challenges of the Nigerian state, it is necessary to examine its historical antecedents. Prior to British intervention, the geographical space now known as Nigeria housed diverse socio-political configurations—ranging from the centralized emirates of the North, operating under Islamic jurisprudence and administrative hierarchies, to the centralized kingdoms of the West (such as the Yoruba city-states with checks and balances centered on the *Alaafin* and the *Ogboni*), and the decentralized, acephalous republican communities of the East (such as the Igbo, characterized by segmentary lineage systems and participatory democracies).

While these pre-colonial systems varied immensely, many maintained robust mechanisms for accountability, communal solidarity, and moral regulation, where leadership was inextricably linked to community expectations and customary ethics. Various indigenous societies (such as the Yoruba city-states, the Hausa-

Fulani emirates, and the Igbo decentralized communities) operated under distinct socio-political frameworks. Many incorporated systems of checks and balances, communal ethics, and accountability, albeit often bounded by ethnic affiliations.

The Colonial Interruption and Institutional Legacy

The imposition of British colonial rule fundamentally ruptured indigenous political development. Through the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates by Lord Lugard, disparate nations with divergent histories, cultures, and legal traditions were forcibly welded into a single administrative unit. British colonial rule introduced the policy of Indirect Rule and engineered the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates. This administrative setup prioritized resource extraction and administrative convenience over civic integration. It deliberately fostered regional and ethnic divisions, planting the seeds for future factionalism.

The implementation of Indirect Rule, particularly in Northern Nigeria, reinforced traditional hierarchies but insulated them from broader democratic accountability. Crucially, the colonial state was not designed to foster *eudaimonia* or the common good; it was an apparatus for pacification, resource extraction, and administrative expediency. Colonial authorities systematically utilized a "divide and rule" strategy, institutionalizing regional, ethnic, and religious divisions that would permanently scar the post-colonial national consciousness.

Post-Independence Turmoil and the Fourth Republic

Upon attaining independence in 1960, Nigeria inherited a fractured institutional framework characterized by weak national unity and intense regional competition. The First Republic collapsed rapidly under the weight of electoral malfeasance, census crises, and ethnic chauvinism, inaugurating a prolonged era of military dictatorships interspersed with brief, fragile civilian administrations. Independent Nigeria has transitioned through multiple political iterations from the First Republic to successive military regimes, and eventually to the current Fourth Republic established in 1999. Throughout these phases, politics has frequently operated as a zero-sum game centered on ethnic hegemony, patrimonialism, and control over national oil revenues (the "national cake"), rather than ideological or ethical governance (Adedoja, 2026).

The establishment of the Fourth Republic in 1999 restored civil democratic governance, yet the structural defects of the past persisted. Politics transformed increasingly into a high-stakes, zero-sum struggle for access to state-controlled oil rents. Rather than functioning as an ideological contest for the common good, Nigerian party politics became dominated by powerful elite networks, godfatherism, and transactional patronage, creating a wide gulf between the governing class and the impoverished citizenry.

Aristotelian Diagnosis of Contemporary Nigerian Politics

Evaluating the modern Nigerian state against Aristotle's political philosophy reveals profound systemic pathologies. The following comparative matrix outlines these theoretical divergences:

Aristotelian Principle	Classical Philosophical Ideal	Contemporary Nigerian Reality
Teleology of the State	The state exists to promote <i>eudaimonia</i> and moral virtue for all citizens.	State capture by political oligarchies, resulting in extreme poverty, infrastructural decay, and systemic insecurity.
Practical Wisdom (<i>Phronesis</i>)	Statesmen are guided by moral insight, justice, and long-term vision for the community.	Prevalent short-termism, rent-seeking behavior, and transactional politics devoid of ideological depth.
Civic Friendship (<i>Philia</i>)	Social cohesion, mutual trust, and goodwill uniting diverse citizens into an organic whole.	Intense ethnic, regional, and religious polarization that paralyzes national integration.

Distributive Justice	Allocation of offices, honors, and resources based strictly on merit and contribution to the <i>polis</i> .	Prebendalism and nepotism, where public offices are treated as private estates for ethnic or personal enrichment.
Constitution and Rule of Law	Laws must educate citizens and align with the common good; rulers are servants of the law.	Constitutional subversion, elite impunity, and the deployment of state instruments for selective persecution.

Source: Researcher 2026

The Perversion of Constitutions and Prebendalism

Aristotle famously classified constitutions based on two criteria: whether the ruling authority governs for the common good or for narrow, selfish interests, and whether power is held by one, a few, or the many. When power serves private interests, constitutions degenerate into perversions: monarchy corrupts into tyranny, aristocracy into oligarchy, and polity into democracy (in the Aristotelian pejorative sense of mob rule).

In Nigeria, political analysts frequently identify a culture of prebendalism a term denoting patterns of political behavior where public offices are regarded as prebends that can be appropriated by officeholders to benefit their ethnic kin, supporters, and themselves (Adedoya, 2026). Viewed through Aristotle, the Nigerian state operates largely as a corrupt oligarchy or plutocracy, where access to state power is dictated by financial capital rather than moral virtue or competence. Laws are frequently drafted or circumvented to protect elite privileges, leading to what Dada (2021) describes as a neo-patrimonial framework that willfully subverts the public interest.

The Collapse of Civic Friendship (*Philia*) and Practical Wisdom (*Phronesis*)

Aristotle asserts in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that friendship (*philia*) holds cities together, and lawmakers seem to care more about it than about justice. It creates a sense of shared destiny and mutual obligation. In Nigeria, primordial identities such as ethnicity, indigeneity, and religious affiliation frequently supersede national loyalty. Political mobilization is routinely weaponized along ethnic lines during election cycles, fracturing the body politic. This absence of *philia* prevents the emergence of a unified national consensus on development. Furthermore, the deficit of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) among leadership cadres ensures that policy formulation is characterized by immediate gratification, ephemeral populist theatrics, and a total disregard for intergenerational sustainability.

Towards an Aristotelian Reformation of Nigerian Politics

Reforming the Nigerian political architecture requires moving beyond mere institutional engineering or superficial electoral reforms. Drawing directly from Aristotle's blueprint for moral and political restoration, the following multi-dimensional strategies are imperative:

Institutional Coercion and Moral Habituation

A common critique of Aristotelian ethics in modern pluralistic states is how virtue can be cultivated when citizens exhibit diverse moral frameworks. However, Aristotle maintains that because human beings naturally lean toward passion over reason, coercive laws are indispensable for forcing moral habituation until citizens develop an internal appreciation for righteousness. Aristotle emphasized that laws should shape citizens' habits. Nigeria requires robust, independent anti-corruption and judicial institutions that enforce the rule of law impartially, making corruption economically and politically unviable.

In contemporary Nigeria, the rule of law frequently suffers from systemic laxity; anti-corruption statutes and ethical codes lack coercive deterrence because judicial and law enforcement frameworks are frequently compromised. To restore public morality,

legal institutions must operate with absolute autonomy and unyielding severity, ensuring that public malfeasance carries absolute penal consequences. When the law consistently exacts a heavy cost for vice, it gradually shapes public behavior and re-establishes a baseline of civic discipline.

Cultivating Practical Wisdom (*Phronesis*) in Leadership Recruitment

Political recruitment in Nigeria must undergo a paradigm shift away from transactional godfatherism, monetization of primaries, and ethnic tokenism (Adedoya, 2026). Political parties must be transformed from closed shops of elite bargaining into ideological incubators that evaluate candidates based on intellectual competence, moral track records, and devotion to public service. Leaders must demonstrate *phronesis* the capacity to deliberate discerningly about what is good and expedient for the entire federation.

Educational Reform and Virtue Ethics Integration

Aligning with Aristotle's insistence on comprehensive moral education (*paideia*), the Nigerian educational curriculum from basic schooling to tertiary levels must be systematically re-engineered (Ubani, 2022). Educational systems must move beyond hyper-specialized technical training to incorporate rigorous courses in civic ethics, philosophical reasoning, and indigenous moral philosophies (such as the *omolúwàbí* paradigm or African communitarian ethics) (Dada, 2021). Citizens must be taught from youth to view their civic duties such as voting, paying taxes, and community engagement not as transactional inconveniences, but as essential moral practices constitutive of human flourishing. Educational curricula must revive civic ethics, emphasizing duties to the community alongside fundamental rights. Citizens must be educated to view voting not as a transactional commodity, but as a moral responsibility directed toward the common good.

Rebuilding Civic Friendship: National integration policies must deliberately bridge ethnic and religious divides, ensuring equitable distribution of resources to foster a genuine sense of shared destiny among all Nigerians.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Aristotle's classical synthesis of ethics and politics offers an enduring, incisive framework for critiquing contemporary governance deficits. This doctoral study has demonstrated that Nigeria's protracted political instability, pervasive corruption, and developmental stagnation are symptoms of a deep-seated philosophical malady: the artificial and destructive severance of statecraft from morality (Adedoya, 2026). Aristotle's conceptualization of ethics and politics provides a timeless critique of governance deficits. His core thesis—that politics is fundamentally an ethical enterprise dedicated to human flourishing—serves as both a mirror and a roadmap for Nigeria. The developmental challenges facing the Nigerian state are, at their root, moral crises born of a severance between statecraft and soulcraft. For Nigeria to achieve sustainable political stability and socio-economic development, its political culture must evolve beyond the pursuit of sectional power and return to the classical ideal: politics in service of justice, virtue, and the common good.

When politics is reduced to a commercial enterprise devoid of ethical teleology, the state fails in its primary Aristotelian mandate the facilitation of human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) for all members of the community. For Nigeria to transcend its current structural crises, its political culture must undergo an ethical renaissance. By embedding practical wisdom in leadership, reinforcing coercive institutional accountability, revitalizing civic friendship across ethnic fault lines, and anchoring public policy in virtue ethics, Nigeria can reclaim the classical ideal: a vibrant, just, and flourishing *polis* dedicated to the common good.

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