

Politics as public affairs

A second and broader conception of politics moves it beyond the narrow realm of government to what is thought of as 'public life' or 'public affairs'. In politics, Aristotle declared that 'man is by nature a political animal', by which he meant that it is only within a political community that human beings can live 'the good life'. From this viewpoint, then, politics is an ethical activity concerned with creating a 'just society', it is what Aristotle called 'the master science'.

The traditional distinction between the public realm and the private realm conforms to the division between the state and civil society. The institutions of the state (the apparatus of government, the courts, the police, the army, the social security system and so forth) can be regarded as 'public' in the sense that they are responsible for the collective organization of community life. On the basis of this public/private division, politics is restricted to the activities of the state itself and the responsibilities that are properly exercised by public bodies. Those areas of life that individuals can do and

manage for themselves (economic, social, domestic, personal, cultural and artistic spheres and so on) are therefore clearly 'nonpolitical'. An alternative 'public/private' divide is sometimes defined in terms of a further and more subtle distinction, namely that between 'the political' and 'the personal'. Feminist thinkers in particular have pointed out that this implies that politics effectively stops at the front door, it does not take place in the family, in domestic life, or in personal relationships.