
**Episode 1,007: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Liberty**

**Guest: Gerard Casey**

**WOODS:** I am really stunned at this book I just got done telling people about. It's overwhelming, and it's so well done. It's *so* well done. And I say this about a lot of people who come on here and write books, but that's because I only have good books on. If it's a terrible book, I don't want to talk to you. But this thing is an astonishing achievement. I don't understand why this didn't take you 30 years to write. It seems like you and I haven't spoken in probably at least two years, and somehow, you made a lot better use of your time than I did during that period [laughing].

**CASEY:** [laughing] I'm not so sure about that. And you know you were responsible for this book.

**WOODS:** Why don't you tell that story?

**CASEY:** The last time I was actually at the Mises Institute, you were kind enough to meet me at Atlanta airport, and on the way in the car — I describe it in the book as you kidnapped me, but that's not quite true [laughing]. But you made a proposition to me which I couldn't resist, which was to write some lectures for your Liberty Classroom. And I was of course very flattered and pleased to do so, and that really was the germ of this book. So I produced those, and then I started to write them up, and then it kind of grew [laughing]. Nobody in his right mind would attempt to write a book like this from the start. It sort of grew in the writing, sort of like a tall tree, it just grew. And eventually, it reached almost half a million words. My publisher had a nervous breakdown, and I was under strict instructions that it had to come in under 1,000 pages, so with a lot of elbow bending and wrestling, myself and the typesetter got it down to 960 pages. But it was an effort.

I have to say, and this is going to sound really funny, perhaps, but I actually have some moments of conscience where I think I should have done more. There are things I left out which I should have added in. But hey, you could go on forever writing this, and eventually you would end up like *Man, Economy, and State*.

**WOODS:** This may have more words than *Man, Economy, and State* if we don't include *Power and Market*.

**CASEY:** Indeed, take that out, yeah. So I think it came in at 480,000 words. I was hoping to make the round half million just so I could boast.

**WOODS:** That's incredible. That's like how much I've written in my whole career or something, probably. That's unbelievable. Well, anyway, it is a libertarian overview of periods of time and of individual thinkers and of trends that even David Gordon, who is the smartest person I know and maybe you feel the same way —

**CASEY:** I do.

**WOODS:** — says it is the best history of political thought he's ever read. So what we've decided to do is not try to cover all 960 pages today, but instead, to focus on a few chapters. And then maybe little by little over the next 25 years, you and I might be able to work through this volume.

**CASEY:** [laughing]

**WOODS:** So we started off with chapters — I guess it was two, three, and four, and we're going to talk about the Ancient Greeks, and in particular, talk about the sophists, Plato, and Aristotle. So let's start with chapter — am I getting the numbering right?

**CASEY:** Yes, absolutely, two, three.

**WOODS:** Okay, so let's start with number two. And we won't dwell too long on this, but I would like to get an idea of the sophist contributions to political thought that as libertarians we ought to appreciate. And I will add that, as you note, there is some historical controversy over the precise content of what these folks had to say, because we have it only in fragments or in maddeningly ambiguous formulations, the best known of which I would say is that line from Protagoras: "Man is the measure of all things of things, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not." And a lot of people have taken that to mean that he's saying, if I may use a 21st century turn of phrase, that may be true for you, but it's not true for me, and you have your truth and I have my truth. And then Socrates comes along and triumphantly explains that there are absolute truths and there are absolutes in the universe. And you say that maybe it's not quite as cut and dried as that.

**CASEY:** No, indeed. If you were to characterize very crudely the historians or political philosophers into the good ones and the bad ones, good guys and bad guys, black hats and white hats, for me, the sophists are generally — they get very bad press. And the reason they get a very bad press is that pretty much all we have of them are embedded quotations in thinkers who were opposed to their very existence. So imagine what people would think about you if all they knew of you were quotations from you embedded in the writings of you opponents, right? You're not likely to come across as a very nice guy.

**WOODS:** In fact, that is where a lot of people get their views of me, as it turns out [laughing].

**CASEY:** But I take that example with great care. But the total amount of material we have of the sophists if you put it all together comes to less than 35 pages. It's astonishingly small, and most of it's found, as I said, in quotations embedded in the

works largely of Plato, to some extent Aristotle, and a few other writers. So we have very little to go on, and the writers whose works have survived were more or less opposed radically to the sophists, so it's hardly surprising they get a bad press.

You asked me then what's the interesting thing about the sophists from the point of view of liberty. I would say that, although the sophists don't form a school as for example the Cynics or the Epicureans later would do, they had certain themes in common. And they were all a product if you like of a very fluid social situation, in which the more self-enclosed, hermetically sealed city-states, the so-called poleis, were suddenly opened up to a wider world. And when that happens, you begin to see that what you took as being sort of natural and usual and customary in your own place was not how they do things elsewhere. And that raises the question — when you get over your astonishment that other people can do other things in different ways, it raises the question: is what we're doing somehow natural and the other guy is just crazy, or is there a large element of convention in what we do and the way we organize our society, and particularly how we organize our society in political terms?

And so for me, the key distinction that the sophists bring to the table and which, if you like, creates the space in which freedom for the first time can be entertained is the distinction between what I call *nomos* and *physis*. And *nomos* means law or convention, and *physis* means nature. You see, when you live in a traditional community, this kind of analysis doesn't really arise, because everybody does everything and you grow up in a certain environment and everybody does it in a certain way, and it's natural. But when you come across people who do things in a different way and they think it's natural too, well, they can't both be right, so there has to be some element of convention. And both Plato and Aristotle were opposed to the use of this distinction to critique the political realities of their time, Plato much more so obviously than Aristotle.

**WOODS:** Well, it's one thing to acknowledge the difference between convention and nature. We can all — whether or not somebody believes in natural law, he can appreciate the difference between the fact that in some countries you drive on the left side of the road and in other countries you drive on the right. This is obviously convention with no moral content. And by contrast, the law against murder, we can at least recognize that there's a qualitative difference in these types of laws. That's fair enough. But there's the impression one gets from what we have of the sophists that this distinction is not really so clearly made. Rather, the suggestion seems to be that all law is convention, or at the very least all law ought to be thrown into question or viewed as something merely utilitarian. And maybe that's not such a good thing.

**CASEY:** No, and one of the things that I point out at the end of the book — just skip right to the last chapter — is that I happen to be simultaneously politically a libertarian, socially a conservative, and religiously a Catholic, and those all have to fit together [laughing]. So unless you're like the white queen and can believe six impossible things before breakfast, they have to be capable of being believed simultaneously. So yes, you're absolutely right, but of course, remember that in a traditionalist society, it's not just what we would think of the core values, for example, prohibiting murder or theft that are considered to be natural things and everything else is conventional. The idea of what's natural extends really, really widely almost to everything that you do, including to how you eat, the gods you

worship, which hand you use to pick up your food and so on. All of those things are seen as natural.

And so when the sophists come on the scene, the shock is immense because people suddenly realize, well, the Persians do things differently, and indeed, there are over — and remember, this is the interesting thing I think that people don't know. There were almost one thousand poleis in Greece. We think of Athens, maybe, and Sparta as the big ones, but there a thousand, all with their own ways of doing things. And so therefore, once you start thinking of what's natural, you begin to see that the overlap on which they can all agree really does pretty much come down to things like the prohibition of homicide and theft, which of course fits very much in with the libertarian idea, at least the natural law libertarian way of thinking. So that's why from the libertarian point of view, this is pretty good, because as for the rest, these are matters of arrangement pretty much like driving on the left or driving on the right.

But you would be surprised, by the way, even today the extent to which trivial things like this seem perfectly natural, and it comes as a shock, especially to people if they come from the United States, to arrive in Ireland and suddenly find people driving on the wrong side of the road, which is to say the left side. And it takes a while to realize that this isn't just some idiosyncrasy, that it doesn't really matter what we do in this area of our lives, as long as we all do the same thing at the same time. So that's a matter of convention.

So I'm not defending the sophists in every respect, and indeed, they range from people like Protagoras, who we just mentioned, to people like Thrasymachus, the only knowledge of which we have, by the way, is his appearance in Plato's *Republic*. And then of course there are different ideas of nature, because one idea of nature, which as you mentioned here for example relating to the laws against murder and theft, we would think of as being heavily moralized. And then there's the other idea of nature, sort of the Darwinian or at least a pre-Darwinian idea of nature, sort of nature, red in tooth and claw, the idea that it's just a matter of, as Thrasymachus has thought of expressing the idea, that what's natural is simply what can be had by the greater force or by the mass of people at any particular time. So these are quite complicated notions.

**WOODS:** Let's move on ahead then to Plato and Socrates. Now, if you take the customary view of the sophists, then the role of Socrates becomes clear, because the fact that he goes around asking questions can make people think that the purpose of Socrates is to raise doubts in people's mind for their own sake, just doubt for its own sake to make people despair. But that's not really his point. His point rather is that we can in fact reach conclusions, we can in fact, for example, figure out what courage is, because we know that it's somewhere between cowardice and foolhardiness. Somewhere in there, we can using our reason come up with an idea of what courage is. And once we've got that idea, then it applies universally and it's a virtue and it applies to everybody at all times and places.

So he's not a relativist, Socrates, even though he's asking — he's asking fools questions, or he's asking people who don't fully understand the real nature of what they're doing questions. So in other words, with the sophists, on the other hand, when we put them

up as a foil as being the relativists, then we can neatly place Socrates in one category and them in another. But maybe it's because this bifurcation between Socrates and the sophists was maybe not so clear to the Greeks, that that's why Socrates is lumped in with the sophists by Aristophanes.

**CASEY:** Oh, indeed, but in fact, it's not only the case that he's lumped in with the sophists by Aristophanes and indeed most of his contemporaries; he's lumped in with the sophists by the editors of *The Loeb Edition*. People might know that's for a classical edition of the Greek and Roman writers, *The Loeb* produced by Harvard, green for the Greek, red for the Romans. And the editors, in putting the writings of Socrates here categorized him actually as a sophist. And that's how he was thought of at the time. It's Plato who is anxious to make the distinction, but the distinction actually doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

So surprisingly — this is going to come as a shock, I know probably to you and to most of your listeners, but Socrates actually was a sophist. He had the interest in rhetoric, in persuasion, in making distinctions in the philosophy of language, and so on. And as I said, the sophists are a sort of broad church. Some of them are sort of relativists and some of them are sort of realists in the bad sense of that term — I mean political or social realists. But not all of them are, and Socrates in fact is and was thought of at the time and indeed is thought of even at present, as I said, by the editors of this prestigious series, as a sophist, which is actually quite surprising to many people.

**WOODS:** I feel sure that at least somebody held the view that the fact that the general run of sophists charged for their teachings, whereas Socrates spoke for free, was a distinction that was important to at least somebody in this dispute.

**CASEY:** That's right. Well, Plato of course had the aristocrats' disdain for money-making, and that's because he didn't have to make money. He had it. But that actually is not the root of the problem if you look through it, because of course lots of other people charged money. The poets charged money, the doctors charged money, and they weren't held in disrepute because of that. It seems to me — and this is what I write in the book — that the principal reason that the sophists were held in disrepute by Plato — and not by everybody, but by Plato. And remember, of course, that the sophists were actually not just people who wandered in and out of Athens, but they were brought there by the Athenian leaders. The sophists were held in disrepute because they claimed, whether correctly or not, to be able to teach people how to speak, and by doing so, to persuade.

And remember that what had happened in Athens was that it had come from being a monarchy to an aristocracy to a democracy, and in a democracy, policy was made by being able to persuade the assembly. Now, tradition, like family, good birth, and money still counted for a lot, but Plato among the other aristocrats resented the idea that the common people should indeed have a say in the assembly just as they did. And so the sophists claimed to be able to teach the ordinary Athenian in the street as it were to be able to stand up in the assembly and to be able to bring — if he was lucky enough — to bring the assembly around to his way of thinking. That's the key point of resentment in Plato. Plato of course wasn't a democrat, right? And because of the Peloponnesian War and the disaster that it brought to Athens, he held the democratic government of Athens to be responsible for that. So that was his problem.

It had really nothing much to do with money, but really about the sophists' claim to be able to teach people the art of persuasion.

**WOODS:** More to come with Professor Casey after we thank our sponsor.

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Let's say something now about his actual views of government as laid out in the *Republic*. Now, as an American historian, I can't help recalling what Thomas Jefferson had to say about all of this. You made note that he wrote to John Adams more or less saying, I finally had a chance to sit down and read Plato's *Republic*, and this is just awful. I mean, I can't believe I spent my time doing this, basically, and I can't believe anybody took this nonsense seriously for so long. So is it really meant — is it meant to be taken literally that this is the way society should be run? Or does he mean the *Republic* to be some kind of allegory for the rightly ordered soul? The rightly ordered soul needs the reason to be in charge and to hold in check the passions and things like that. Are we really to think that we should have guardians who don't have private property and all the rest of that?

**CASEY:** My answer is yes, we are. In fact, the analogy between the tripartite structure of the polis and the tripartite structure of the human being really doesn't do a lot of work in the *Republic* when you think about it. I mean, all students who are taught are probably given this as a central point of its value, but in fact, Plato doesn't do a lot with this. And he is deadly serious. I mean, it's possibly — I mean, first of all, I have to say even when I was a young student, I hated the *Republic*. I just found it incredibly boring and dull, and that's nothing, by the way, to how dull and boring the *Laws* and the *Statesman* are by comparison.

So the key thing, however, it seems to me in the *Republic* is not so much the mechanics and the details of the tripartite vision of anything, whether of the city or the human person, but it's Plato's view as to who should rule. And Plato's view as to who should rule is that it's ruled by the experts, by those who know. And if you read through the *Republic*, you'll find a whole lot of analogies where he said, I mean, who knows the most about horsemanship? Okay, is it the cobbler or is it the person who trains the horses? And so on. And so again, who knows most about medicine? And so on. And then it goes through all of these, and then eventually, who knows most about how the city should be structured and run? And it's the experts.

And this theme of expertise, rule by the expertise has a very long line starting with Plato. You find it, for example, later — just to skip wildly ahead, you'd find it in Mill. And indeed, even today if you think about it, in our standard, Western liberal democracies, although allegedly are representatives or at least some subset of them in a cabinet effectively rule the country or are supposed to rule the country, the permanent members of the ruling class are indeed your civil service, those who are there permanently and who outlast any particular individuals who might claim to be the actual rulers and set policies. Same is true in Ireland; the same is true in Britain. So Plato makes his case for rule by the experts, and the experts are the ones who know what's truly good and truly perfective and truly fulfilling, whereas you don't.

And again, from a libertarian point of view, see, this has resonances that role down the centuries. For example, if you look at the Frankfurt school in the 20th century to bring it up to the modern day, again, you have this idea that the common people, the vulgar really don't know what's good for them. They don't know what they really want, and they need to be instructed in what they really want by those who do know. Now, that's not to make a point that people can't choose bad things or things that are not particularly good for them, but the point is it's an authoritarian way of thinking. You'll find it again, for example, in fascism and bolshevism in the early parts of the 20th century and so on. And Plato is the first one if you like to thematize this in the *Republic*. And that's the key theme to me. It's experts who rule the rest, who basically have to be told what to do because we're not really capable of thinking for ourselves.

**WOODS:** Now let's add to that a point that you make maybe a little bit earlier in the book, that when we're looking back at ancient societies, we have to be careful not to superimpose on them ideas that are current in our own day that are so prevalent that we can hardly think without them. And you're speaking here specifically about the very idea of the individual as not really being fully formed in the classical civilizations. Now, of course, to some degree, you have to recognize there are individuals because you can see them with your own eyes. But on a deeper level, that's a problem. How is that manifesting itself here?

**CASEY:** The theme really of my book is sort of the emancipation of the individual, understood as you just expressed it, not as the physical being but as the determiner of his own destiny from the grip, as it were, of the tribe, or the connectivity. And in almost every traditional society, the individual is subsumed largely into the larger group. In other words, you don't have a distinctive personality, you don't have a distinctive goal or aim, and indeed, it becomes almost impossible to set yourself, whether for good or for ill and whether grounded or otherwise, against the determination of the larger society. In fact, the very term "idiot," which we have in English is from the Greek *idiotes*, and *idiotes* is one who does what is not commonly done in the society in which he lives. So the individual for the Greeks was an idiot.

Now, individuals may well be idiots, and it's possible to act well or to act foolishly, but the idea of the individual as a self-determiner of his own actions is something that emerges very slowly and spasmodically with lots of backtracking as we go through our history. I don't want to anticipate all of the podcasts we're going to be doing, but my story is that it's not a sort of Whiggish, every day, each day and in every way we get better and better. That's not the case. Sometimes we go backwards, and I would argue spectacularly in the 20th century we had a huge backwards movement, which maybe some of us will remember and some of us would remember through our parents.

So the emergence of the individual is something which takes a long, long time, and it's always a tension with the larger collectivity around, and there's always a danger that in particular times of panic, especially in times of war, the individual's rights and responsibilities and freedoms will be overridden when it suits the larger collectivity. Every state knows that if you want to impose upon civil rights, there's nothing like a good war or the threat of war to bring that about. I don't know if your listeners would be familiar with the BBC comedy series called *Dad's Army*, which dealt with a group of elderly men who made up a kind of reserve, army reserve in the Second World War.

But one of the constant refrains was, "There's a war on, you know?" And "There's a war on, you know?" is the clincher to any argument to get you to shut up and stop saying we shouldn't be doing this or we shouldn't be infringing on free speech and so on and so forth.

**WOODS:** Well, speaking of free speech, let's say something about the place of the arts in Plato's ideal society.

**CASEY:** Well, okay, I don't deal with this specifically in my book, but notoriously, Plato, although he is regarded as being one of the most artistic of Greek writers, paradoxically holds the view metaphysically that the world around us as we see it, the world of our ordinary experience is not what's fundamentally real, but there is another realm which is more fundamental and more real than the changing world that we witness. But the world of art, of sculpture and painting and music, is in fact an imitation of the world of our ordinary experience, and indeed, it is if you like at a second degree remote from what is fundamentally real. So Plato's view of art is that it's an imitation of an imitation, and metaphysically, he thinks clearly that the world of our ordinary experience has the amount of reality it has only because of its connection to a stable and abiding and unchanging reality. If the world of art is further removed, then to that extent, it's at another level of deception or unreality.

**WOODS:** So there isn't much space for these things then in his world.

**CASEY:** No, it's — there is a paradox, because while I'm not particularly impressed by Plato's writing, I think the dialogues are largely non-dialogical, and when I'm reading them I'm always on the side of Socrates' interlocutor and saying, why don't you say this? Why don't you ask him this question? Why are you saying, "Yes, Socrates. No, Socrates. Anything you say, Socrates." I've never been impressed if you like by their dramatic power. Nonetheless, many people have. And if that's the case, you have a conflict between Plato's actual practice in the writing of the dialogues. And there is no doubt one way or the other — I mean, I don't want to be misunderstood here. My critique of Plato is of Plato as a political philosopher. I'm not really discussing his metaphysics or his epistemology. Whitehead of course famously remarked that all of Western philosophy is a footnote to Plato, and to some extent, that is in fact true. But there is a conflict between his ability to write as well as he does and that for him his theorizing about art would seem to undermine in theory what he's actually doing in practice.

**WOODS:** It's a strange situation, because the political philosophy is something that almost everybody would have to reject at some level. There's something for everybody to dislike in it. Hard to find something like that, something for everybody to dislike that strongly to the point of rejecting the whole thing, and yet, when I think about his metaphysical commitments — you know, as an amateur, maybe I'm more of an Aristotelian than a Platonist, but the idea that, look, we live in a universe where human beings can't just invent what justice is — because justice is outside of us. Justice is something that through reason we can come to understand what it is, but it's something that we come to understand. We don't redefine it. We don't make it up. It's not something invented by us. It's something given to us.

And that sort of idea is at the root of a lot of conservatism that I can respect, that no, it's not true that we just are — that everything is convention that can be remade. That's the left liberal view of society, that there's nothing that's really fixed. Just when you think you've got, okay, here's one thing they have to admit is fixed and can't be fiddled with, they go fiddle with it. And here's a guy saying that's not what it's all about; you're missing the whole point of the world and man's role in it. Well, I can kind of get on board with that part.

**CASEY:** Yeah, absolutely. In fact, I agree with you entirely. What Plato really arguably, if we're talking about that aspect of his thought, is I think largely correct. He's only correct insofar as it's unbalanced and, like you, I would be by instinct an Aristotelian. When it comes to Aristotle, you find that Aristotle makes essentially the same point about, for example, justice, that it's not simply a matter of convention all the way through. But what you find, however, in Aristotle is a more balanced approach to the point that Plato's making, so you don't get the excess that you find in Plato. So yes, I agree with you. That's entirely true. And I mean, as a criticism if you like at least of some of the sophists, that would hold. In other words, those who thought that everything in society was purely conventional — not that I think — was there anyone who actually thought that? Maybe. I can't remember now [laughing]. Yes, I think you're absolutely right. And of course, that has been a major contribution to philosophy and to political thought, and indeed, insofar as philosophy has linked up with Christianity, a major contribution if you like to a development of the natural law tradition within Christianity. And hey, I'm all for that.

**WOODS:** All right, of course every philosophy professor everywhere would be scandalized at how this podcast host is pushing us along so quickly on these topics. Of course you should be reading *Freedom's Progress? A History of Political Thought*. Then you can get all the detail you like. But let's say something about — okay. A lot of times the conventional wisdom turns out to be incorrect about something, for example, about the sophists themselves. But other times, as Rothbard said with John Locke, for example, the conventional wisdom about John Locke is correct. Most people do get his philosophy correct.

And I think with Aristotle, it is basically correct to say that Aristotle in a way — it's not like you want to say he's more earthly, but in a way, he is more earthly, not only because he modifies Plato's idea of the Forms, but also, you look at his own personal interests. He wants to catalog and categorize everything he can find in the natural world. He's extremely interested in it. And maybe perhaps because his focus is so much on the real and the here and now, his political philosophy also seems more practical and based in real human beings.

**CASEY:** Yeah, I would agree. Aristotle is — I don't want to pull a tooth of it. Aristotle is my hero, a man who in just slightly over sixty years of life could be the world's first biologist, its first psychologist, a deep metaphysician who wrote the classic work on rhetoric, something which Plato would have despised. And indeed, the foundational texts in logic, which held the scene for almost 2,000 years. Any one of those achievements would have made somebody great. To do all those things together is simply stupendous.

But you're right: he is more down to earth. And what he tends to do, he tends to take some of Plato's ideas, because of course he was Plato's student for almost 20 years, and you could hardly be somebody's student for 20 years and not pick up some of their ideas. He takes some of Plato's ideas, particularly the notion of the Forms, which was what was ultimately real for Plato. But these Forms, if you like, existed in this separate realm and interacted in some mysterious fashion through participation with the world of ordinary experience. Aristotle took those forms if you like and embedded them in the world of our ordinary experience. They did not exist as it were in a separate realm ontologically. They were what made things to be what they were in the world around us of our ordinary experience. So there's kind of an earthiness, kind of — yeah, that's the only word I can describe this. There's an earthiness in Aristotle which I find particularly refreshing.

And that comes about too when you think of his politics, because if you remember how the polis worked in the time of Aristotle, it had gone from being a kingship to being aristocratic to being democratic. And Plato argued that it was no part of being a free man to be ruled by another. To be free was not to be ruled by another. So how do you organize your society? And remember that the *polis* is sometimes translated — the term *polis* is sometimes translated as if it were "city-state," but as I point out in the book, poleis were neither cities nor states. They didn't have to be urban entities, and they weren't states in anything like the modern sense. They were more like fellowships, more like I suppose a limited company in which people had shares.

And so Aristotle's idea was that political rule would be a relationship between equals, where citizens are ruled and rule in turn. So the idea is that if something needs to be done on behalf of everybody at any particular time, so we have somebody do it this year, you do it this year, and I'll do it next year. But nobody is intrinsically in a position to say I'm better than you or I'm superior to you; I'm one of the experts, and therefore I get to rule everybody all of the time.

It's more like — if, for example, just to take a very humble example, suppose you had a — oh, I don't know, a residents' association looking after the affairs of a particular group of houses. You would have the committee to look after the affairs, and then somebody will act as chair from time to time. But you know, this is a service to the community. It's not a matter of dominance, and the idea is that the person who does it this year and is giving the orders or making the decisions, next year will be in a position of having somebody else make the decisions.

So this was Aristotle's solution to the problem. You would have a relationship between equals, everybody getting an equal say in the determination of the policies of the polis, and some are ruled and some rule, but they take it in turn. And that's the root principle of the democratic polis for Aristotle and the key to liberty.

**WOODS:** What is the relationship between the individual and the polis? It wouldn't have made sense to Aristotle for me to say I have my rights, I have natural rights that precede the polis, and I'm going to assert them against the polis. But yet on the other hand, though, I know the work of Fred Miller suggests that there is, even though the language of rights is not present, there is still something you might be able to tease out of Aristotle that might point you toward the liberal tradition.

**CASEY:** Yeah, no, I think that's correct. Aristotle is the theoretician of the polis, and as much as Plato, he thinks of the polis as a natural entity, and he doesn't really have a theory of the individual. He along with everybody else would have used the word *idiotes* to refer to somebody who set his actions against the norms of the society in which he lived. But because all of the citizens in the polis are equally free, they are all in a position to have their say and to make their contribution and indeed to put themselves forward as those who should determine the policies of the polis for any given here.

Here's an interesting thing. I don't know if your readers will realize this, but almost all the offices in Athens were done by lot. They put their names in a hat and they drew them out.

**WOODS:** Right.

**CASEY:** Like to us, this is astonishing. The only ones that weren't done by lot were the ten *strategoi*, who were the generals that they, because of the expertise required in military affairs, they continued from year to year. And indeed, the ambassadors. But every other office in Athens was done by lot. This is quite striking, and this again shows you the radical equality that existed — politically speaking, anyway, certainly not in terms of wealth, but in terms of politics — in Athens.

Nonetheless, because the polis wasn't a state in the modern sense and certainly not a liberal state in any modern sense, it was a fellowship, and the idea was the people in the polis all thought alike on fundamental matters. And a very significant thing for all traditionalist societies — indeed, even Roman society, though we don't think of Rome in this way — was that religion was fundamentally important as a social glue. The city was determined by the gods which it worshipped, and it was a requirement that to be a citizen of a polis was to worship the city's gods. And almost everything in the city's activities, in the citizens' activities was determined by their relationship to the gods that they worshipped. When we read modern accounts, we tend to kind of filter this out and be —

**WOODS:** Yeah.

**CASEY:** — and especially when we — By the way, when we think of the Romans, we think of them as being sort of tough guys, going around smashing up the Celts and the Germans. But there's a classic example of the Roman general who returned to Rome and left the soldiers in the field because the auspices weren't auspicious and so on. And indeed, the Romans were every bit as religious indeed as the Greeks. So religion played a fundamentally important part in the social and political life of these societies in a way that I think even the most theocratic 21st century person would find it difficult to appreciate.

**WOODS:** Right, and that's a point you can — there's that book *The Ancient City* that goes into the exact details of exactly what the — it was like religious cult around hearth and home that spilled into every aspect of life. And yet, as you say, when we look back on these civilizations, it's like we're looking at them through an Enlightenment or a Renaissance kind of a lens, which makes it look like these were people who believed in reason, unlike the stupid Christians who came after them, so

that's why we have to imitate these people. So as you say, this whole aspect that permeated their societies is completely absent in this account. So it startled even me when I went back and read. And you talk a little bit about this, because you talk about the reforms of Cleisthenes and Solon, which also had a religious dimension to them. But really, you would not get this in the typical textbook.

**CASEY:** No, I think — because again, we're prejudices because — again, this is a very dark statement, but for the typical citizen in any Western democracy, religion is largely a private matter — that's if it has any significance at all. And we tend to think of the separation between church and state, between the spiritual and the secular as something that's natural. But it may be natural to us, but it wasn't natural to the Greeks and to the Romans. In fact, it was very far from being the case. And maybe their idea of what religion was and their idea of the gods wasn't what we would think of being a relationship to the gods, but that's neither here nor there. They had the religions that they had, and they worshipped together, and everything was done in relation to the gods of the state.

And remember, Socrates of course fell into trouble because he was accused, whether rightly or wrongly, of teaching a form of atheism — that is to say, denying the gods. And remember, the early Christians were charged with atheism. Now, that sounds really funny to us, but why is that odd? They were charged with atheism because they refused to worship the gods of the state, not because they didn't have their own god, but because they refused to worship the gods of the state, and so they were charged with atheism. And that was a serious charge. I'm not saying again that it was right, but I'm just saying that we have to be aware that the people who were making these charges, at least some of them, were serious and genuine in making these charges.

**WOODS:** Now, when we look at Aristotle then, what can we draw out — it's obvious that, for example, he's much more favorable to private property than Plato is. He has a fairly standard view of this, that people are more likely to take care of property that belongs to them and stuff like that. But would we necessarily say Aristotle is where we go back to to look for the beginnings of political liberty, given that political liberty is not even a phrase he would have used?

**CASEY:** No, I think I'd have to say no to that, because I think it would be slightly anachronistic to put that question to him in that particular way. He probably wouldn't have understood what you were asking him. Remember, just to repeat a point I made earlier, for him, liberty was the ability that any citizen had to make a contribution to the direction of the polis. That's what it was. It wasn't the ability to wear different clothing or eat different kinds of food or do whatever you liked. In fact, these societies were heavily regulated by social norms and to some extent by laws in almost every respect: in what you wore, what you ate, and when you did it.

I mean, even in Sparta, if you think of Sparta, everything about Spartan life was determined by the laws of the state. What you wore, the food you ate, when you ate it, and all of these things. As somebody once said, even the ephors, the people who were more or less in charge of the state, couldn't change the string on a lyre. They couldn't have — like if the lyre was only four strings, they couldn't have a — a three-string lyre would be a matter of state policy that had to be determined from on high. So from our point of view, very unfree, particularly socially, and Aristotle really

wouldn't have understood that. But the key point here and where he is opposed to Plato is his denial as it were of expertise. Political rule, as I said, is this relationship between equals, all citizens. Not everybody is a citizen of course in Athens, but those who are citizens are equal before the law and have an equal right to speak in the assembly. And that is a key advance. It doesn't go all the way. It doesn't go near far enough, but it's definitely a move in the right direction.

**WOODS:** All right, well, believe it or not, we're going to have to leave it there, but that is at least a taste of some of the kinds of topics you can expect to encounter in *Freedom's Progress*. It's a little tricky. You can get the book on Amazon, but you may want to shop around to see if you can get the best price wherever, because although I've had much more expensive books than this on the show, I want to remind people this book is — I'm not joking. It is the equivalent of maybe 4 books. So it will cost maybe as much as 2 or 2.5 books, but you're getting 4 books for that, so it's actually a steal when you think about it correctly. So I'll have some links for ordering at TomWoods.com/1007, and we can simply look forward to the next time we talk to Professor Casey and continue to tantalize you about this book until finally you surrender and just say, "All right, already. I'm going to go get my own copy." Professor Casey, thanks so much.

**CASEY:** Thank you so much, Tom.