

## Lecture 9.1: Plato and Aristotle

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Tuesday I said I would try to tie together the results of our brief but intense encounter with Aristotle. To that end I'd like to talk about both men today, pointing out the ways in which they resemble, and the ways in which they differ. Their different philosophical approaches, I'd like to suggest, are different means to the same ends. Addressing many of the same questions, they start from different starting points and are sometimes brought to those same questions by different perplexities—what Aristotle might call different passions.

Introducing Aristotle a few short weeks ago I presented him as the third member of a generational progression:

**Socrates**—the father of us all; surely one of the most captivating (and annoying) figures in all of literature: a conversationalist—wrote nothing, depicted by his most literate student as specializing in encountering his fellow-citizens in the streets and embarrassing them by pointed questions.

**Plato**—caught as a young man by the charismatic charm of an aging gadfly, followed him through the streets of Athens; watched him talking to his fellow citizens --trying by example and argumentation to bring them to realize what was most valuable in life

--in the *Euthyphro*, to realize that virtue might be better than money

--in the *Symposium* that love might be more than beautiful bodies

--in the *Crito* and *Phaedo* that it might be better to die than to compromise truth

Saw what happened to Socrates, put to death by his fellow citizens. Lost faith in the common understanding of virtues as a source of wisdom. Wrote the *Republic*, calling for spiritual reform of the polis. (Voegelin, *Order and History II*, p. 187: "It would be an unfortunate misunderstanding to interpret Plato's intense call for spiritual reform as a blueprint for a rational society.")

Plato devoted much of his writing to meditation on the problem of the good life for the individual, questions of the role of reason in the achievement of virtue, the excellent life. Talking about the *Republic* I introduced it as an answer to the question of what kind of society would not have put Socrates to death. But the question is much bigger than filial piety to one wise man. Plato realized that society included men of different capacities, different opinions, different values; and that any society bore a huge responsibility for the moral values and the character of its citizens. The *Statesman* and the *Laws* were meditations on how best to govern.

I concentrated in my lectures on Plato in his epistemology and the metaphysics that eventuated from it—his speculations about the nature of reality and how we are able to know it. In a sequence that I think of as Plato 101 I presented a three-stage progression in his theorizing.

Plato wants knowledge (not opinion) of the world we live in, the phenomena, what appears to us—perceptible objects. But the bloody thing keep changing, and differ from each other in observable ways. Experience, taken as passive, sensory, is unable to interpret itself. Between raw data and the mind's grasp of coherent patterns lies a gulf that puzzled Plato much more than it puzzled Aristotle. Knowledge consists in the awareness of connections between the items of experience. If the object of knowledge is but the impact of a changing world on a changing person, what is it that we know?

*Stage I:* In developing knowledge and understanding about things in the world, we rely on similarities between phenomenal things. It is these commonalities, not their brute individuality, that is most properly knowable. He notes similarities between *f* and *f*. He posits something which two similar things—*f*<sub>1</sub> and *f*<sub>2</sub>-- have in common—which is [what we are talking about when we predicate ‘*f*’ of them] and [what we mean when we call them *f*]. This is his so-called ‘Theory of Forms.’

Since he’s so fond of certainty (mathematics is his mental model of what ‘knowledge’ is) he thinks that this ‘that-which-they-have-in-common’ is better than, more knowable than, and (by an initially imperceptible elision) more ‘real’ than, the particular phenomena which we are trying to get to know. It gets somehow ontologized—it originates for epistemological purposes, and knowing is very important to us, and so we don’t want to say that it ‘be’s in an inferior way, so we say it ‘be’s too, and then we eventually say it ‘be’s more.

He’s using, of course, our ordinary language to talk about this relation between things that allows us to know them and talk about them, so he gropes around for various words and images and metaphors and models that he can use metaphorically to flesh out this ‘theory.’ He speaks of the resemblance between things, which becomes ‘that by virtue of which they resemble.’ He says sometimes that the particular *f*s ‘participate’ in the *F*. He says sometimes that they are ‘copies’ of the *F*.

*Stage II:* In the *Parmenides* he notices the following logical problem: If we explain the resemblance between *f*<sub>1</sub> and *f*<sub>2</sub> by a third thing, *F*, the following question arises: What is the relation between *f*<sub>1</sub>, *f*<sub>2</sub>, and *F*? If *F* **does not** resemble *f*<sub>1</sub> and *f*<sub>2</sub>, it cannot explain them. But if it **does**, the same need arises—of another thing, *F*<sub>2</sub>, to explain that relation between *F* and *f*<sub>1</sub> and *f*<sub>2</sub>—and so on, ad infinitum. This is the famous ‘Third Man’ problem, an infinite regress argument.

And as I hope I made clear, the problem is not about the nature of the forms per se; It is a problem in the logic of explanation. If it is a problem for you that things in the world are different than each other in some respects, and like each other in other respects, are changing and ephemeral, you have to develop an explanation of that fact that does not replicate the problem.

*Stage III:* Plato is flummoxed by the Third Man argument and proposes something different in the *Timaeus*: The Demiurge, looking to the (eternal and deathless, unchanging, wonderful) Forms, creates images of them in the Receptacle (=some kind of matrix of space and time). The images (the phenomena, the things in this world we live in) embody the various forms of the Forms—but because they are in the Receptacle, they are NOT deathless and eternal, but are changing, temporal, admit of the predication of opposites simultaneously, and all like that. So they have some of the characteristics of the Forms, which is why we can understand them, but some of the characteristics of the receptacle, too, which begins to look very much like—guess what? Matter. The object of knowledge IS the impact of a changing world on a changing person, and what we know in that impact is the Form, the world of Forms, reflected by the ever-changing Receptacle into the observing soul.

**Aristotle**, Socrates’ intellectual grandson, Plato’s best student, was as concerned as both of his predecessors with issues of knowledge and virtue.

Since this is where I stopped with Plato, it was inevitable that this would be where we started with Aristotle, and I concentrated in my first lectures on what we usually call his metaphysics—his inversion of Plato’s preference for the abstract as the most real and valuable. We looked in our introductory texts at Aristotle’s attribution of ontological primacy to things in this world, accepting as a given that they are both different and similar, both what they are, and subject to change in some respects.

But though they are the most—the only—real things, it is their abstractable natures, their essences, that are the basis for the body of knowledge that Aristotle wishes to build of the natural world. He can do this by keeping his attention on lots of the things that are important to Stage I Plato. He agrees with Plato that knowledge to be worthy of the name must be of something certain and unchanging, directly intelligible. He agrees with Plato that the objects of knowledge, our concepts based upon our experience, are to be prized; but he ascribes (at best) no ontological status (and at worse, lesser ontological status) to the universals that Plato considered most real. (That’s why I say sometimes that Aristotle is Plato turned on his head.) For Aristotle, as for Plato, knowledge is knowledge of universals—but the difference between a form *ante rem* and *in res* is a very important difference. Plato had to turn away from the world to get access to the intelligible. The forms as objects of knowledge are separate from the perceptible things in the world, although they have some responsibility not only for their natures but for their being. But for Aristotle, says Marjorie Grene,

...a thing’s nature is its form, and its growth is its passage to its nature as form. Moreover, its form is its own form, as this frog or this octopus... Yet it is the form of this individual which we as knowers universalize, so that we understand not this particular specimen, which we perceive and do not wholly know, but the universal inherent in the particular, the potential universal which in our minds we actualize.” (*A Portrait of Aristotle*, p. 55)

Forms are instantiated in real things, and they are the inner principle of change of natural things; they are dynamic, and act as a force for the realization (and reproduction) of the thing. Having a different epistemological starting point, Aristotle did not need to follow Plato to the same kind of externalizing of the form as static.

*Digression on the soul: another inversion*

There’s another inversion going on here, too. While Plato seems to have thought that the existence of things in the world required an explanation, he did not think that the existence and function of the soul was equally problematic. He accepts its existence; he’s convinced of its importance; but he’s pretty sanguine about pinning it down. It’s unified or tripartite, possibly pre-existent and desirably immortal. It plays an important role in his epistemology—for both Plato and Aristotle, the role of reason is crucial. But its connection to (and respect for) the body seems a bit fragile. Starting from subjectivity, it is the existence and solidity of what later thinkers called ‘the external world’ which is called into question.

For Aristotle, positing as unquestioned the existence of things in the world and the body that interacts with them, the task with respect to the soul is to find it in, explain it in terms of, that body—as its life, its organizing principle, and as its ruler, through its reason. The soul is not separable, either pre-existent or immortal. But it is central to his thought; it is by virtue of being the kind of besouled substances that we are that we are

both knowers and agents. Starting from objectivity, it is consciousness which needs to be explained.

*Beings in the world and subjects of science*

We saw in the *Categories*, *Zeta*, *deAnima*, Aristotle's expansion on the subjects that interested him most—natural, animate, be-souled substances. We were led to see that human beings are essentially perceptive beings, with sensation and with higher levels of cognition based on, using, the data of perception to develop concepts that explained the generalities that unify our experience of the world. By virtue of our capacity for reason, we are able to develop our understanding of things in the world, substances, beings, *to onta*, as they are in themselves and as they are subjects of science.

The vocabulary of substance, form and matter in the *Categories* and *Zeta* permeates the corpus, as does his parallel vocabulary of potentiality and actuality. As subjects of science, Aristotle requires of us that we distinguish what characteristics of a thing make it the kind of thing it is—its essence; and to that essence attaches its definition, that which allows us to place it in his great scheme of the sciences. Its essential characteristics are thereby distinguished from all the ways in which it might change and still be the same kind of thing. Those inessential ways in which it might change represent its accidental properties; and some of the things that can happen to it represent accidents of occurrences. It is the kind of thing that it is that allows the oak tree to be made into a table; but its being so made, so used by us, is not a fulfillment of its essential nature, but only a fulfillment of my purposes as agent-carpenter.

Individual things DO change; and for Aristotle, change itself must be ordered, finite and intelligible. The orderliness of change implicates the analytic vocabulary of potentiality and actuality. There is a range of possible changes that a substance can undergo while remaining the same thing it is; those are the sum of its potentiality, which Aristotle often associates with its matter. The structure of a substance at a moment is what it is by virtue of the relation of matter and its dynamic form; what it is through time depends on the relation of the beginning of motion to its goal. Aristotle's '4 causes' are explanations of things as subjects of science.

How to understand a substance and its changes:

Formal  
Efficient → (substance) → Final  
Material

*Structure of the sciences*

I have told you about his endeavors in some texts we have not read to continue and expand the principles of the early works into a compendious articulation of the possibilities of human knowledge in a program of scientific investigation encompassing both theoretical speculation and empirical investigation: theoretical, productive and practical sciences.

*Aristotle's Ethics*

There is a sense in which the first week of dabs and pieces of Aristotelian texts were all leading up to last week's reading of the *Ethics*. If we did not have a sense of what it meant to be a natural substance in the world for Aristotle, we might not have been in a position to appreciate the way in which his ethics is based upon the importance of essences, of natures, of things. His ethics presents a view of human nature which includes an appreciation of human capacities, which in turn themselves recommend the

proper life for man, one in which he best fulfills his function in the world as defined by those capacities. The excellent life for man is one in which he does the best he can with the potential which he has. We get in the Ethics a vivid image of man as agent in the world, considering a range of possible actions in any given situation, choosing among them by rational consideration of the context, the consequences, the nature of the action involved, the people affected—and taking responsibility for those choices.

His ethics he considers a part of his politics. When we see that, we realize that as much as Plato, he too was concerned with the fate of a just man in an unjust society, and thus speculating both upon the best structure for the life of the individual and the best structure for the political unit in which the individual sought that best life. The standards for the best society, like the recommendations for the individual life, are based on the **nature** of man, his unique inner principle of motion and rest. We must have a systematic understanding of the nature of man if we are to have a systematic ethics or politics, so Book I of NE provides what we might think of as a philosophical anthropology. We examine the nature of man to suggest a science of action, and to determine the means to attain the highest good, to lead an active life which expresses his nature. For that highest good life of man we customarily use the term ‘happiness,’ eudaimonia—but the content of that life, what it consists in, is disputed. The principle candidates are the life of pleasure, the life of practical reason, in which pleasure is found through the practice of excellent character; or the life of pure reason, contemplation.

He supplements his philosophical anthropology with a discussion of moral psychology: the soul of man has a rational and an irrational part, and one or the other can be further sub-divided. We end up with something very similar to Plato’s tripartite soul: a vegetative and sentient part; a range of functions associated with passion and desire, which can be educated to obey reason; and the rational faculties. Pleasures and pains are part of life; but they are not fixed by nature; they can be distributed and organized by training and habit.

If the specifically human function should be understood as an activity of the soul, the proper function of man, actualizing his specific excellence, is activity of the soul in accordance with its own excellence; or if there are several, in accordance with the highest. And there are several, corresponding to the practical and theoretical functions of reason.

One desirable life is that of ethical virtue, the practice of excellent character. Virtue is neither a state of the soul, like pleasure; nor is it a faculty, like perception, which can “see” right action. It is a quality of the character, inculcated by instruction and practice until it becomes a habit. Those excellences are the habit of choosing the mean between excess and falling short, to which our passions or pleasures might otherwise lead us; action such as the prudent man would choose, according to reason. Ethical virtue has its seat in the will. Socrates was wrong when he thought it was purely a matter of knowledge. It is not the knowledge of moral requirements that is wisdom, but their application.

Beyond those virtues lie the intellectual virtues; scientific knowledge, art or skill, prudence, wisdom and intellection—the excellences that enable us to attain truth in all its varieties.

The point of Aristotle’s ethics, Lear suggests, is not to persuade us to become good. There is nothing in it compelling to someone who is not already leading an ethical life. The argument is internal in that it is directed toward those who have good natures,

good temperaments, who have been brought up to live virtuously. The texts are intended to help such men to develop a self-conscious and coherent ethical outlook; to reinforce reflectively the lives they are already inclined to live; contributions to the examined life that Socrates thought was the best life for man.

I have quoted Marjorie Grene above, and she has a few useful contrasts between Plato and Aristotle in *A Portrait of Aristotle*. Grene is a philosopher of biology, so her focus is primarily on the difference between the two in metaphysics and epistemology.

(1) What do our senses tell us about reality?

For Plato, the answer is: very little. He emphasizes the flux, the changability, of the phenomenal world, and contrasts it with the stability and unchangability of the world of forms. He seems to have a view of perception as a series of unconnected fragments: a sequence of unconnected events, unable to interpret itself. (Grene's description is like Hume's problem: successive perceptions are separate events, and 'causation' is a puzzle.)

Aristotle refuses to ask the question. "We shall not inquire whether there are natural objects," he says somewhere, "for that would be to try to explain the obvious by the non-obvious." Causation is not a problem, because he does not divide the world into successive events of perception; instead, it is a movement or change in a substance that is the object of concern, and it is explained by the formal element of that object itself.

(2) The problem of naming: things have to stand still long enough to be named, or we can't communicate.

For Plato, this seems to be a real problem. Both words and the world are slippery. We start with a name and ask for a definition, then take it back to the world again to see if it fits all instances; we work with language, but its descriptive use is often less helpful than myth or model or metaphor. Indeed, if we are to believe the 7<sup>th</sup> Letter is authentic, at the end of Plato's life he denied that language was adequate to communicate the most important truths. In the last analysis, any hope we have for certainty is internal and mental, not experiential; that is why math is the ideal of knowledge for Plato.

Aristotle has less of a problem with language. Not only does he have a more subtle analysis than Plato's of the many ways in which language can work (cf. Cat I 1), but he also has the hypothesis of the essential form in things, a firm basis to which we can hook unequivocal essential predication, which justifies the scientists' belief that their language is fit to deal with the world.

(3) What is the reality behind the appearances? How can we bridge the gap between what seems to be and what really is?

The gap seemed HUGE to Plato; exposed to some occasions of misleading appearances, he timidly assumed that all appearances might be misleading, instead of taking as his model veridical experience. Grene hypothesizes that the Sophists loomed large for Plato as his natural enemies, and they were relativists. (Protagoras, for instance, as is discussed at length in the dialogue of that name, was famous for claiming "Man is the measure of things: of what is, that it is, and of what is not, that it is not." See Frag 18 of Democritus, as well: "sweet by convention, ...but in reality, atoms and void...")

Aristotle was simply of a more realistic temperament, bolstered by a metaphysics and epistemology that assumed the reality of the world and took misleading appearances as anomalies, rather than the norm (although he does admit in the EN that "different things appear good to different people").

