

A History of Philosophy

09 Plato (conclusions) and Aristotle's Metaphysics

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Okay, anything we want to pick up on Plato before we leave? One way to think about Plato, and this may help you pull threads together a little, is to think of him as developing a core thesis that you can represent by virtue of the divided line analogy. Okay, on the one hand, you have the distinction between knowledge and opinion, the epistemological side of the divided line, and then when you talk of the objects of knowledge and opinion, the difference between forms and particulars. In other words, with that conceptual model of eternal unchanging ideal forms, to which the particulars are in some way that Plato struggles to discover, related, okay, with that central theme, then everything else begins to come into focus.

So you can see this as the hub of the wheel from which everything else moves out to the perimeter, you see. So that it's in the light of this, of course, that he gets his discussion of ethics going. It's in the light of this that he understands the human soul.

It's in the light of this that he talks politics. In the light of this, he develops some educational ideas, you see. In light of this, he develops some cosmology.

In the light of it, some emerging conception of God, the good, you see. And whatever else he gets into, you may be interested in the fact that in the Republic, he develops something of a philosophy of history, as he traces the way in which four different forms of government, characterized by the predominance either of the appetitive or the spirited, the honorable, contain the seeds of their own destruction. Because unless you're ruled by reason, you see, all you're going to have is change and decay.

And because then these different forms of government contain their own inner self-destructive process, what you get is a cyclical view of history, so that number one is succeeded by number two, by number three, by number four, one succeeded by two, three, four. So just as the Greeks had a cyclical cosmology, a cosmos going through cycles of integration and disintegration and so forth, so Plato developed a cyclical view of history. And of course, a cyclical view of the path of the individual soul, reaching upward and falling down, you see.

Or if you like, incarnation and reincarnation. Now that the cyclical conception runs through Greek thinking, Plato particularly handles it well. Well, anything about Plato you want to pick up on? Yeah.

Yeah, there are two aspects to it, I suppose. In this life, with the analogy of the chariot and the winged horses, you struggle to fly aloft towards the sun, okay? In all its beauty, the light which floods the soul, and because of the wayward horse

sneering the whole thing, you come down and keep struggling. So you can read that in one way as the ups and downs of the soul in one incarnation.

You can also read it as the successive incarnations, you see. That is to say that this struggle is this life, but that's as far as you get, and so down you come, and you start again, and so forth. But in any case, you get successive experiences of that sort, cyclical history.

Very characteristic of Greek thought. Something similar in the Stoics, we'll find. They had the notion that the cosmos went through periods of development and then a vast cosmic conflagration in which everything is destroyed by fire, and then things begin again, you see.

Some of the influence of Heraclitus there, the notion of the basic element fire. So that cyclical thing keeps on and on and on. And somebody has pointed out that the first linear view of history, that history is going anywhere, emerges really with St. Augustine and his City of God.

Why St. Augustine? Well, because he had a theological view of history, you see. A view of history in which God was moving history towards its destiny. So his theology comes into work in his history.

And the fact that the Greeks had a cyclical view and then here comes Christian thought with a linear view is sometimes seen to explain the expectation of historical progress, which of course gripped Western civilization with the scientific revolution and dominated thought in the Enlightenment and 19th-century optimism about human progress, and so forth. And we still hear it. So, interesting contrasts there.

Why cyclical though? Well, in Plato, I think the rationale for it is easy once you trace back to the divided line. You see, you're not going to get any stability, any unchanging achievement, without full participation in the reality of the forms. Time is the realm of change, instability, change and decay, you see.

So history, the realm of time, is cyclical. Which is why the Greeks were so focused on a disembodied afterlife, as it were, you see, escaping this world of time and instability. When Socrates was to be executed, you know, he thanked his executioners.

What more could a philosopher ask them to get rid of a body that gets in the way of thinking all the time? And when in the early years of the Christian church they preached resurrection of the body to a life everlasting, you know, the story of what happened to Paul in Acts 17, when at Athens he talked of the resurrection of the dead, and they sort of took a rain check politely and said, oh, we'll listen to that another time. That was characteristic of the first three or four centuries of the

church. Resurrection? Who wants a body back? You see, if you've got a Greek view of the instability and hopelessness of the earthly.

And it's not really until the Judeo-Christian conception of the creation as something good, made by God with purpose, going somewhere, that you have room for something like resurrection of the dead or a linear view of history. So Plato is a fascinating thing. Yes? Well, no.

Yeah. The first form of government disintegrates in giving way to the second, which gives way to the third, which gives way to the fourth, which recycles back to the first. Yeah.

Yeah. You see, if you start with, oh, an aristocracy in which they spirited the honorable rule, well, they gradually die off, and one of their heirs becomes something of a tyrant. It doesn't have the stature to command a following.

And so, with dictatorial force, he represses a people. And in reaction against that, when he's put out of the way, the demos, the people, take over. But because of the experience that Plato had with Socrates, the idea of the people taking over, where there's a direct vote by all the citizens on things, is really a form of mob rule subject to demagogical rhetoric.

You see? So democracy isn't the solution. But a few individuals rise to the surface, and you get an oligarchy ruled by a few. You see? And among the oligarchy, not all of the oligarchy is really capable, you see, and so that gives way, and you get to the aristocracy again.

And then from the aristocracy to the tyranny and from the tyranny to the democracy, you know, round and round the mulberry bush. You see? So the idea of historical progress in society, now, you don't find it in Plato. You find more optimism about it in the Stoics, thence in Rome, rather than in Athens.

Aristotle, yeah, I hesitate to say he's not as overtly, what shall I say, pessimistic about the world of time as Plato is. Yeah. Where do you get optimism about life? You see, that's the question.

Plato doesn't have much foundation for optimism, really. Not to say he thinks of matter as evil. No, I don't think so.

Inasmuch as it is ordered, it is good, but the problem is ordering it. Like the problem in any society is in controlling the appetites, the appetitive element, which is disorderly. Aristocracy may be governed by the honourable and the spirited, courageous, but tyranny is governed by the appetitive, democracy by the appetitive.

Oligarchy can go either way. So says Plato in that memorable statement, until philosophers are kings, or kings are philosophers, we shall never have peace or justice on this earth. By which he doesn't mean people with an academic specialty.

He means the lover of wisdom. The lover of the good, you see, who with dialectical understanding sees what is good and does it, which is another reason why the improvement of the soul is so important. Well, anything on that? Or are you ready for some Aristotle? No, not yet.

Sorry, quick question. Plato believed that love is the ultimate form, the ultimate God. And there are other forms of God's love.

He certainly thinks very highly of love, and the word God gets in some of these dialogues to be thrown around very promiscuously. I didn't intend that to be a pun. Love and promiscuous.

It gets thrown around that way. But I think in the overall picture of Plato, what he intends to be God is, if anything, the form of the good. The form of the good, which in the Phaedrus is the form of beauty.

Beauty itself, as it is in the Symposium. What's the relationship between goodness and beauty? Well, in the aesthetic realm, you see, in the aesthetic realm, beauty is the highest good. What is beauty? Unified, ordered harmony.

You see, a unified, rational harmony. The Platonic conception of beauty, which artists nowadays berate. Though I think they have a unity of another sort, you know, a work of art.

But what beauty is then in regards to the aesthetic, what truth is in regards to the cognitive, knowing, what goodness is in regards to the moral, the ethical. So in that sense, goodness, beauty, and truth are, for Plato, rough synonyms. And if there is one word that he uses to embrace them all, it's the word good.

So good has both a generic meaning for all kinds of good, the essence of good, and it has a more specific ethical meaning in addition. Now, if you're talking about the relationship of the soul to these, you see, the relationship of the soul to these, what is the highest virtue that the soul must achieve in relationship to these? And the response, of course, is love. Love, I was saying on Friday, is a... Friday? Is today Monday? Yeah, that's right.

Love is a moving force. It's a drive, a motivating thing. Activating, you see.

It's a desire that gets you going. Yeah. But he's after the virtuous desire.

But at the same time, love for the good, love for beauty, makes you want to be like it. You see? If you really love beauty, you'll have some interest in how you appear in the morning when you leave your room. You see? If you really love the morally good, you'll have concern about being good.

If you love truth, you'll want to know and understand the truth. In fact, the love of truth, the love of beauty, the love of goodness, is not only a driving force, but it's also a unifying thing. Because it absorbs all of your energies.

You see? The girl who falls in love can't think of anything else but her beloved. At least, so we tease. You see? Because the whole of life seems to come into focus around the object of love.

And so when, in the Platonic tradition, Augustine, for instance, you find discussion of the various moral virtues and the question, well, among all the virtues, is there one unifying virtue that unifies the moral life? Yes, it's love! You see? So love is not only a driving, motivating thing, but it's a unifying thing. You see? And, of course, Augustine picks that up and ties it together with things you find in Jewish scriptures and in the New Testament about love, all your heart and soul and strength, you see? First and great commandment, love the Lord God with all your heart and soul, and so forth. The unifying virtue is love for the good.

So is love a deity? Well, it depends on what you mean by deity. If what you mean is the ruler of the soul, you see, which is one sense of the word gods in the Greeks, and for that matter in the ancient Hebrews, the ruler of the soul, yeah, love is a ruler of the soul, isn't it? Does that help? Sure, it helps. Okay, let's turn our attention to Aristotle then.

I hope you'll find that Plato is one of those points of reference you keep going back to in your thinking, and his stuff is something you keep going back to in your reading. After all, you're not educated, and you've read the Republic. Aristotle was a student of Plato's, which doesn't mean to say he agreed with him.

It does mean to say that where he disagreed with Plato, he was forced to give reasons and was sufficiently sold on Plato's overall project that he tried to push it further. In what he regarded as a corrective, corrected direction. He shared Plato's concern for the improvement of the soul and in the area of ethics, as in relationship to knowledge generally, he too was anxious to distinguish between what appears good to some people and what is really good in itself.

There are all sorts of things that to people appear to be good, the good, the highest good. Pleasure, power, wealth, success, Aristotle goes on and on checking them off. But what appears to people to be the good isn't necessarily the highest good, you see.

So he has this distinction between opinion and knowledge, between appearance and reality. And like Plato, he's concerned that the good is our goal. Our purpose.

Like Plato, he tends to see the good, in that consummate sense, as God. And he agrees with Plato about there being unchanging forms or essences that represent what is ideal, good, for various classes of things. Qualities, relationships, so forth.

So he's very much a follower of Plato, but he's also quite critical of Plato. And we'll get to that in just a moment. You'll find, however, that in one very obvious regard, he does not sound like Plato.

Plato writes dialogues, tells likely stories, and tells myths. Plato writes more like a literary figure. Aristotle was more like a scientist.

That is to say, Aristotle's style is one of producing succinct summaries in a highly organized form. With a detailed analysis of different senses of this term, different kinds of that sort of thing. Very analytic.

Very systematic. You won't have any difficulty getting the structure of a piece of Aristotle. Even if you have trouble getting the structure of Plato's Phaedrus, for instance.

But he has more of the air of an objective scientist detached from historical concerns than in the case of Plato, who is very much obviously involved in all the historical problems in Athens posed by, for instance, the sophists. Now, with that in mind, you'll find he's sort of hard to read. Part of it, perhaps, is translation.

But underlying the translation problem is the fact that, like many a scientist and theoretician, Plato has to develop his own terminology as he goes along. He has to develop his own terminology. And in English, it sounds like technical terminology.

Take the word, essence, for instance. The word essence. At least, that's the way it's translated.

It's a translation of the Greek, meaning simply, what is. So the essence of something is simply what it is. It's inner reality.

Or as we've learned to say, it's essential reality. Do any of you here do the New York Times crossword puzzle? Don't you? The Chicago Tribune crossword puzzle. Don't you? One person back there.

One person back there. If you want an easy one, do the local daily journal. You can do that in five minutes.

The New York Times crossword puzzle is the toughie. The Sunday Times is the worst that exists. Terrible.

If ever you feel not challenged, try it. But typical in the New York Times, if you do it enough, you get to recognize clues that keep recurring. One is a clue which says something like, what is.

Or, it is for Plato. And you know immediately that what they're after is the verb, "to be," which means simply, to be. You see, essence is what it is.

What is it? Just that. So don't be thrown by the term essence.

Render it more literally as you read if you prefer. But this is the way he goes. One commentator on Aristotle says this.

He tortures the Greek language. He coins new words and twists old ones to suit his purposes. He puts a preposition and an indefinite pronoun together and treats the combination as a noun that we translate as a relation.

He turns a question into a technical term and asks, what is the what is it of this? What is the essence of this? He says that for a thing to be what it is, it is to be a being. And under the pressure of history, we still translate that final variation, being, in the perplexing term, substance. What is a substance? A being.

What is an essence? What the being is. So the word substance simply refers to anything that has being. Anything that has being.

Well, don't let the terminology throw you. Now, if we're going to get at the differences between Plato and Aristotle, undoubtedly the best place to begin is with Aristotle's metaphysics and to focus in as soon as we can on the forms. Because it is there that Aristotle's most far-reaching disagreements with Plato surface.

If, as I just suggested in terms of this diagram of the hub of the wheel and the spokes, in Plato's divided line, representing the forms, particulars, and relationships, is central to everything else, then any disagreement there is going to have consequences out on the periphery of the scheme. So we have to zero in on Aristotle's metaphysics to begin with. Now, in the Kaufman Anthology, we have book one of the metaphysics, Incompleteness.

In addition to some other materials from the metaphysics. And book one, chapters one and two, that is from 297 to 300, from 297 to 300, are really concerned with defining the scope, the subject matter, of metaphysics. And I think you can best get what Aristotle has in mind if you take a look at that simple scheme.

He starts by distinguishing two varieties of knowledge. Practical and theoretical. The end, the goal, the purpose of practical knowledge is, of course, action.

Practical knowledge can be productive. It has, therefore, as we say, instrumental value. It's a means to some other end than itself.

Whereas theoretical knowledge, the end of which, the purpose of which, is understanding the truth, knowing the truth. Theoretical knowledge is of value in itself. It has intrinsic value.

Intrinsic value. Theoretical knowledge is called speculative. And don't let those words confuse you.

The verb *theoro* is a Greek verb, meaning to see, to look at, to regard, to examine visually. And *speculo* is the Latin equivalent. That's where we get our word spectacles.

So speculative knowledge is simply a knowledge that wants to think, to look about something, to contemplate it. And so both theoretical and speculative speak of a knowledge that is valued for itself. We want to understand it, we want to think about it, and we want to note.

Intrinsic value rather than instrumental. Okay. Now, you notice that, of practical knowledge, there are two kinds distinguished.

One labeled experience, and the other labeled art. We might do better to call it an artifact. Because the emphasis is on knowing how to make something.

If art implies some sort of high art, then this would be arts and crafts. But things that are artifacts. The business of making artifacts, the knowledge of making artifacts, and how to do it.

Experience, however, the earlier variety. Experience would include memory and then the accumulation of experiences. Experience is simply a kind of knowing what is around.

Knowing what's happening. Like knowing what happened to you yesterday. That's a kind of knowledge that is useful.

But you don't do much with it. On the other hand, the knowledge that's involved in arts and crafts, well, think of all of the trades. All of the productive professions are involved.

In which you can, by understanding, by knowing what the efficient ways of getting things done are, you can cause all things to happen, all sorts of things to happen. With that knowledge, you can really do things. You can make things.

You can change things. It's the practical knowledge of the craftsman. But metaphysics is not a kind of practical knowledge.

It's a kind of theoretical knowledge that has intrinsic value. It is a science. And our word science, from the Latin *sciendia*, we usually confine to talking about particular sciences, natural sciences, and social sciences.

In Europe, the word science or the equivalent of *Wissenschaft* refers to any theoretical study. So the study of ethical theory is a science. Theology is a science.

Any theoretical study is a science. And the Greeks are using it in that sense. Theoretical study.

But you can distinguish between particular sciences and what he calls first wisdom, which is the science of sciences, the science of doing science. The overarching science of all the sciences. The most general of all the sciences.

Now, particular sciences are concerned with the various principles that are at work in a particular area of things. In different kinds of things. And it's Aristotle who introduces classification in terms of species and families and so forth.

Very much so. But in those areas, what the scientist is after is an understanding of the first principles. That is to say, of what causes things to function as they function.

And if you can understand those first principles, then you can understand that whole classification of things, work it out accordingly. We'll come back to that in a little while. Wisdom, however, he speaks of as the science of sciences.

Or the science of being. You see, there are different kinds of things. There are sciences having to do with animals.

There are sciences having to do with plants. There are sciences having to do with the heavenly bodies and their movements. Sciences having to do with all sorts of things.

But all of the things that sciences are about are beings. Who studies being, what it is to be, and to become? Now, that is the science of sciences. The science of being.

The first wisdom that we call metaphysics. And there I must add a footnote. Aristotle does not use the word metaphysics.

You say, oh, but the title of this work of his is metaphysics. Yeah, his students after his death gave him that title. Why? Well, apparently, they were organizing notes that he had left, and they had.

Notes that he had used in teaching and so forth. And they were organizing these compendious notes in various classifications of things. And they had some about the heavens that they called De Caelo.

Some about being born and dying that they called On Generation and Corruption. They had some things about nature that they called Physica, physics. And then they had a whole lot of stuff they didn't know what to do with.

So they lumped it all together, put it in the organization after the physics, and called it Physica, which comes after physics. And that's how we got our word metaphysics. You see.

So the word metaphysics is an accident. But the nature of metaphysics from the beginning, you see, since it was the label for all this material, the nature of metaphysics is that it's the science of being. The first cause of all causes.

Okay. And in that sense, it's very much concerned about forms and processes of becoming for every kind of being. Well, that's the sort of definition that's involved.

You'll find that in talking of being, he sometimes uses the phrase, or the translation does since it's Latin, being qua being, which means simply being in the sense simply of being. Rather than being in the sense of being an animal, or being in the sense of being a chair, or being in the sense of being a warm day. You see.

No, being qua being, being in the sense of being. So metaphysics then has those overall concerns. And that definition of metaphysics really stuck for centuries.

It was refined a little bit in the 18th century by a German philosopher who suggested that we do better to think of metaphysics this way. First of all, dealing with being in general, being qua being, ontology. The study of being.

Okay. But then there are three basic kinds of being. And so the study of them philosophically would have to be called philosophical cosmology.

The study of nature. Philosophical psychology. The study of the human mind and soul.

Philosophical psychology. And philosophical theology. The study of God.

And that apart from particular sciences. That is to say, apart from biblical or dogmatic or systematic theology as a particular science. Apart from what we now think of as experimental psychology as a particular science.

Or apart from physics or astronomy as particular sciences. That is to say, the philosophical concerns in these areas. But that's a classification which emerges in the 18th century.

And it simply is saying that it's pretty hard if you're looking at being qua being to keep your nose out of other things, more particularly. And we'll see that's the case with Aristotle because he can't help when he's talking of being qua being and ultimate causes in having to talk in terms of ultimate causes, of course, about God. You see.

Though he doesn't purport to be talking about the theology of any particular religion at all. So definitions. That's the first thing.

Any questions there? That's pretty straightforward, and I simply schematize it this way to help you read those first two chapters. Those first few pages. Okay.

Well, let's turn our attention then to the second topic, having to do with the forms and with causes. Yeah. When we were dealing with Plato's theory of forms, and particularly with the Parmenides.

We became very much aware of problems. Of problems, which Plato's version of the theory of forms addresses with its transcendent forms. And this world of physical particulars here below.

Runs into. And perhaps the overall problem is the problem of participation. However, do particulars participate in universals? What does it mean to participate? You participate in the part or in the whole? The third man argument.

You remember? And all that sort of stuff. Well, Aristotle's aware of a great deal of that, and you'll find in the remainder of book one of the *Metaphysics*. That he pulls out that sort of stuff and a lot more besides.

In criticizing Plato. I leave you to trace that line of thought out, but let me mention some points that he makes. Not just there but elsewhere in his writings.

Take, for instance, this. According to Plato, form is separate from matter. Forms are transcendent.

Material things don't embody forms, but they somehow or other are like forms. But there aren't any forms in material objects. Well, Aristotle finds that incredible.

You see, among the forms are mathematical objects. Yes, the form of equality. The form of a triangle.

The form of a triad. A threesome. So on and so forth.

And mathematical objects cannot be separate from material objects. Because material objects have mathematical properties, don't you know? So if mathematical objects are a sample of forms. Cannot be separated from material objects, physical objects.

Then forms cannot be separate from matter. Plato should have known that. He was so influenced by Pythagoras, and he knew that physical things had a mathematical order to them.

Or try this. That's an argument that comes out in book two, chapter two of the physics. Try this other one, which comes out in some of his ethical writings.

Plato's form of the good. Is only an ideal. To be contemplated.

It has no effective power. Itself. Form of the good is an ideal without effective power.

But on the other hand. Particulars. Have no form in them.

Only matter. Matter. What then inclines the particular?

Towards orderedness. Beauty. It's good.

What is there in matter, material things? To give them their natural impetus, direction. Towards the good.

When forms are transcendent and not imminent in matter. How can you explain natural changes in the physical universe? Changes that produce order, beauty, goodness naturally.

When there's no form in the material thing. And the transcendent forms have no effective power. How do you explain it? Well, you know, having thought about Plato.

You probably say, well, what's the world sold for anyway? Isn't the world sold the effective power? But, um. Aristotle isn't happy with that. He's open to the conception of the good as God.

But the idea of a world power animating sounds too, um. Well, I suppose if he were here today, he'd say it's unscientific. It sounds too much like a story.

Surely there's a much easier explanation than that. You see? If material objects have mathematical properties. Then there must be the form of mathematical objects in the material objects.

You see? And if plants and animals and natural processes spontaneously produce order and beauty. There must be the potency of form within the material things and processes. So where's he getting? What's he getting at? Why? Why do we need to talk about transcendent forms? Why not imminent forms? Forms.

Forms are not transcendent in some far off platonic heaven. You see? Forms don't exist by themselves wandering around looking for a home on this earth. Forms are the forms of things.

They're imminent within the things that they inform. So you take any particular. A cat, a cabbage, a king, a cauliflower.

You name it. Any particular is a composite. A particular is a composite of form and matter.

Not just matter somehow or other without any power struggling to copy some ideal. No, but the particular itself is a composite of form and matter. And consequently, Aristotle's view of particulars comes to be known as hylomorphism.

Hylomorphism, the Greek word *hulae*, being one of the words for matter, material stuff. And of course, *morphe*, being form, as in morphology. So forth.

So that is the primary change which Aristotle makes. That's the primary change that he makes. And it makes a whale of a difference.

A whale is a big fish. A whale of a difference. Huge difference.

And, well, we'll have to trace out that difference. Now, what it means, really, is that if the form is inherent within the particular, then the particular has some inherent capacity. Some inherent potential.

It has an inherent end, or *telos*, in its very essence. Yeah, if it is the form which makes the particular the kind of thing that it is, it is the form which defines its essence, what it is, to exist in what it is, you see. If the form makes it what it is, then the form means that it has an inherent capacity to be that kind of thing.

A potential that can be actualized in the acorn is to be an oak tree. The potential to be actualized in the tulip bulb is to produce tulips. Every kind of natural thing and natural process has a potential that can be actualized.

Sometimes the word potency is used in translations. Potency captures the sense of power. You see, power.

Yes, an acorn has the power to become an oak tree. Those iris bulbs I plan to plant in the next few weeks, I hope, have the power to produce beautiful irises. Conditions being appropriate.

So the essence of a thing is such that it has capacity, it has potency, potential to be actualized, and it's the actualization of that potential which is its natural end, its telos, its goal. It is the good for that particular kind of thing. What's the good of those little tiny iris bulbs sitting in my garage? The good is that magnificent display of irises I shall have next late spring.

And if they didn't have that capacity, frankly, I'd dump them in the garbage. No, they have a natural telos, a natural goal. And of course, when it comes to ethics, the question is going to be, what is the human telos? What's the human capacity? What is the essence of a human being, by virtue of which we have a corresponding potential? The actualization of which potential would mean that, as one writer likes to phrase it, and it's called on, we flourish.

Sure, when bulbs flourish, they blossom. When a child grows to adulthood, she blossoms, flourishes. And so there's a qualitative achievement out of this inherent potential.

Well, that's as far as we can take it today, but we'll pick it up next time there and go on to talking about his notion of causes and causation.