

# History of Philosophy

## 09 Plato (conclusions) and Aristotle's Metaphysics

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#### Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes examines the transition from **Platonic idealism** to **Aristotelian metaphysics**, using the **divided line analogy** to illustrate how Plato's focus on **transcendent forms** influenced his views on ethics, politics, and the soul. Holmes explains that while Plato viewed history and the soul through a **cyclical lens** of decay and rebirth, Aristotle shifted toward a more **systematic and scientific** approach. A primary distinction lies in **hylomorphism**, Aristotle's theory that forms are **immanent** within material objects rather than existing in a separate realm. This shift suggests that every particular thing possesses an **inherent potential** or **telos**, driving it toward a specific natural end or "flourishing." Consequently, Aristotle redefines **metaphysics** as the "science of being," focusing on the internal power and essential reality of all things.

#### Briefing Document:

A Synthesis of Platonic Conclusions and Aristotelian Metaphysics

Executive Summary

The transition from Platonic to Aristotelian thought marks a fundamental shift in Western philosophy from a literary, transcendent idealism to a systematic, imminent realism. Plato's philosophy is anchored in the "Divided Line," which separates the eternal, unchanging Forms from the unstable realm of particulars. This duality informs a cyclical view of history and a focus on the disembodied soul.

Aristotle, while maintaining Plato's concern for the "Good" and the soul's improvement, rejected the notion that Forms exist separately from matter. He introduced **hylomorphism**, the doctrine that particulars are composites of form and matter. This shift redefines metaphysics as the "science of being qua being" and

establishes a teleological framework where every entity possesses an inherent potentiality moving toward a specific "telos" or end.

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### The Platonic Framework: The Hub of the Wheel

Plato's philosophy operates as a cohesive system where a central thesis—represented by the **Divided Line**—serves as the hub from which all other inquiries (ethics, politics, cosmology) radiate.

### The Epistemological and Ontological Divide

The Divided Line establishes two primary distinctions:

- **Epistemological:** The difference between **Knowledge** (certainty) and **Opinion** (changing belief).
- **Ontological:** The difference between **Forms** (eternal, ideal archetypes) and **Particulars** (temporary, physical instances).

### The Cyclical View of History and Reality

Plato posits that without the rule of Reason, all things are subject to "change and decay." This leads to a cyclical understanding of existence:

- **Governmental Cycles:** Four forms of government (Aristocracy, Tyranny, Democracy, and Oligarchy) contain inner seeds of self-destruction. As one fails, it gives way to the next in a recurring loop.
- **The Individual Soul:** Characterized by the "struggle to fly aloft" toward the sun (the Good) and the subsequent "falling down" due to the wayward appetitive elements of the soul, often expressed through incarnation and reincarnation.
- **Contrast with Linear History:** Unlike the later Judeo-Christian linear view of history (moving toward a divine destiny), the Greek view, exemplified by Plato and the Stoics, is one of cosmic and historical repetition.

### The Nature of the Good and Love

For Plato, the "Good" is the ultimate Form, synonymous with Truth and Beauty.

- **The Unifying Virtue:** Love is viewed as a driving force and a unifying virtue. It is the "ruler of the soul" that focuses all human energy toward the attainment of the Good, Truth, and Beauty.
- **Attitude Toward the Physical:** Because the physical realm is unstable, Plato (and notably Socrates) viewed the body as an impediment to pure thought, favoring a disembodied afterlife over physical existence.

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### Aristotle's Systematic Correction

While Aristotle was a student of Plato, his approach was more analytic and scientific, swapping Plato's dialogues and myths for succinct, highly organized summaries.

### Technical Terminology

Aristotle developed a specific vocabulary to describe reality:

- **Essence:** Translated from the Greek for "what is," referring to a thing's inner reality.
- **Substance:** Refers to anything that has being.
- **Being qua Being:** The study of being in its most general sense, rather than as a specific category (like an animal or a chair).

### The Definition of Metaphysics

Though the term "metaphysics" was an accidental title given by his students (meaning "the books after the physics"), Aristotle defined the field as **First Wisdom** or the **Science of Sciences**.

- **Theoretical vs. Practical Knowledge:** Aristotle distinguished between practical knowledge (aimed at action/production) and theoretical knowledge (aimed at understanding truth for its own sake).
- **Scope of Metaphysics:** It is the science of being and ultimate causes. Later 18th-century classifications divided this into:
  1. **Ontology:** Being in general.

2. **Philosophical Cosmology:** The study of nature.
3. **Philosophical Psychology:** The study of the mind and soul.
4. **Philosophical Theology:** The study of God as an ultimate cause.

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### The Shift from Transcendence to Imminence

The most significant disagreement between the two philosophers concerns the location of the "Forms."

#### Critique of Platonic Transcendence

Aristotle argued that Plato's "transcendent" Forms—existing apart from matter—were logically and scientifically insufficient:

- **Mathematical Properties:** Physical objects possess mathematical properties (like equality or triangularity). Aristotle argued these cannot be separate from the objects themselves.
- **Effective Power:** A transcendent "Form of the Good" has no power to move or order physical matter. If forms are not within matter, there is no explanation for the natural impetus toward order and beauty seen in the universe.

#### Hylomorphism and Potentiality

Aristotle proposed **hylomorphism**, the idea that every particular is a composite of **matter** (*hulæ*) and **form** (*morphe*).

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Imminent Form</b>	The form exists <i>within</i> the material object, defining what it is.
<b>Potentiality (Potency)</b>	The inherent capacity of a thing to become its actualized self (e.g., an acorn's potential to be an oak).
<b>Telos (End)</b>	The natural goal or purpose toward which a thing moves.
<b>Actualization</b>	The process of fulfilling a thing's potentiality.

#### Teleological Ethics

This metaphysical shift has direct implications for ethics. If every natural thing has a *telos*, then the "Good" for a human being is the actualization of their unique human potential. Just as a bulb "flourishes" when it blossoms into a flower, a human flourishes when they achieve their qualitative potential based on their essence.

## Study Guide:

A Study Guide to Plato's Conclusions and Aristotle's Metaphysics

This study guide explores the concluding themes of Platonic philosophy and the foundational concepts of Aristotelian metaphysics, as presented in the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. It focuses on the transition from Plato's transcendent forms to Aristotle's imminent forms, the nature of reality, and the differing Greek and Judeo-Christian views of history and the physical body.

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Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. **What does Dr. Holmes mean by describing Plato's divided line analogy as the "hub of the wheel"?**
2. **How does Plato's view of the soul and human government reflect a cyclical view of history?**
3. **Why did the Greeks generally favor a disembodied afterlife over the concept of the resurrection of the body?**
4. **How did St. Augustine's theological perspective change the Western conception of history?**
5. **In what ways did Aristotle remain a "follower" of Plato despite his criticisms?**

6. **How do the writing styles of Plato and Aristotle differ in their approach to philosophy?**
  7. **What is the distinction between practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge in Aristotle's system?**
  8. **What is the literal origin and meaning of the term "metaphysics"?**
  9. **What is Aristotle's primary critique regarding Plato's separation of form and matter?**
  10. **Explain the concept of "hylomorphism" in Aristotelian thought.**
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#### Part II: Answer Key

1. The divided line analogy serves as the central core from which all of Plato's other ideas—including ethics, politics, and cosmology—radiate. By establishing the distinction between unchanging ideal forms (knowledge) and changing particulars (opinion), Plato creates a conceptual model that brings his entire philosophical system into focus.
2. Plato argues that because time is a realm of change and decay, human structures like government and the individual soul are subject to cycles of integration and disintegration. He traces four forms of government that inevitably contain the seeds of their own destruction, leading to a repeating cycle of transition between aristocracy, tyranny, democracy, and oligarchy.
3. The Greeks viewed the physical world as unstable and the body as an obstacle to pure rational thought. Consequently, they sought to escape the world of time and decay, leading them to view the "resurrection of the body" as a regression rather than a reward.
4. St. Augustine introduced a linear view of history, suggesting that history is moving toward a specific destiny under the direction of God. This theological shift replaced the Greek cyclical view and laid the groundwork for the modern Western expectation of historical and scientific progress.
5. Aristotle shared Plato's fundamental concerns for the improvement of the soul and the distinction between appearance (opinion) and reality

(knowledge). He also agreed that there are unchanging forms or essences that represent the ideal "good" for various classes of things.

6. Plato wrote in a literary style, utilizing dialogues, myths, and "likely stories" to convey his philosophy. In contrast, Aristotle adopted the style of a systematic scientist, producing analytic, highly organized summaries and developing technical terminology to define his concepts.
7. Practical knowledge is instrumental, meaning its purpose is action or the production of artifacts (arts and crafts). Theoretical knowledge is speculative and has intrinsic value, as its goal is the understanding of truth for its own sake.
8. The term was coined by Aristotle's students who organized his notes; "metaphysics" literally means "after physics" because these writings were placed after his works on nature. However, Aristotle himself referred to this study as "first wisdom" or the "science of being."
9. Aristotle argues that forms cannot be separate from matter because material objects clearly possess mathematical and formal properties. He contends that if forms were purely transcendent and lacked effective power, they could not explain the natural changes and ordered development observed in the physical universe.
10. Hylomorphism is the view that every particular thing is a composite of matter (*hulae*) and form (*morphe*). Rather than forms existing in a far-off heaven, Aristotle believes they are imminent, meaning they exist within material objects to define their essence and drive their development.

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### Part III: Essay Questions

**Instructions:** Use the following prompts to develop deeper analyses of the themes discussed in the source text.

1. **Compare and Contrast the Concept of Form:** Analyze the fundamental differences between Plato's transcendent forms and Aristotle's imminent forms. How does this shift affect their respective views on how we understand the physical world?

2. **The Evolution of Historical Perspective:** Discuss the transition from the cyclical view of history held by the Greeks to the linear view introduced by Christian thinkers like St. Augustine. What are the philosophical and theological implications of each view for human progress?
3. **Aristotle's Hierarchy of Knowledge:** Examine Aristotle's classification of knowledge, from simple experience and arts to the "science of sciences." Why does he consider metaphysics to be the highest form of wisdom?
4. **The Role of "The Good":** Explore how both Plato and Aristotle relate the concept of "the good" to their metaphysics. How does Plato's synonymizing of truth, beauty, and goodness compare to Aristotle's view of the "telos" or natural end of a being?
5. **The Relationship Between Potential and Actuality:** Using Aristotle's examples of the acorn or the iris bulb, explain how the presence of imminent form creates "potency." How does this concept lead to the idea of human "flourishing" in ethical terms?

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#### Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Appetitive</b>	The element of the soul or government associated with desires and impulses; if not ruled by reason, it leads to disorder.
<b>Being qua Being</b>	A phrase used in metaphysics to describe the study of being in its most general sense, rather than as a specific type of thing (like an animal or a chair).
<b>Cyclical History</b>	The Greek view that history moves in repeating circles of integration and disintegration, rather than toward a final goal.
<b>Divided Line</b>	Plato's epistemological and ontological model distinguishing between knowledge (forms) and opinion (particulars).
<b>Essence</b>	Derived from the Greek for "what is"; the inner, essential reality of a thing.

<b>First Wisdom</b>	Aristotle's term for the study of the first principles and causes of all things; later called metaphysics.
<b>Hylomorphism</b>	The doctrine that all physical substances are a composite of matter ( <i>hylae</i> ) and form ( <i>morphe</i> ).
<b>Imminent Form</b>	Aristotle's concept that forms exist within material things rather than in a separate, transcendent realm.
<b>Linear History</b>	The view that history is moving forward toward a specific destination or destiny, often associated with Judeo-Christian theology.
<b>Metaphysics</b>	The science of being; the study of the most general and fundamental principles of reality.
<b>Ontology</b>	The branch of metaphysics dealing specifically with the study of being in general.
<b>Potency (Potential)</b>	The inherent capacity or power within a thing to develop into its actualized state or end.
<b>Substance</b>	A technical term for "a being"; anything that has being.
<b>Telos</b>	The natural end, goal, or purpose toward which a thing moves based on its inherent potential.
<b>Theoretical Knowledge</b>	Knowledge pursued for its own sake (intrinsic value) rather than for a practical application (instrumental value).
<b>Transcendent Form</b>	Plato's concept of ideal, unchanging archetypes that exist in a realm separate from the physical world.