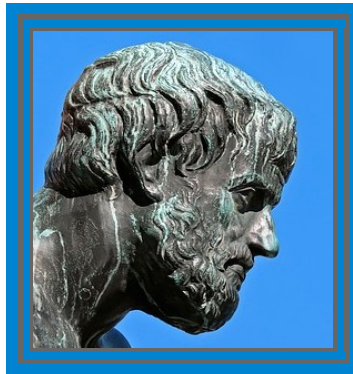


*Ars sine scientia esse non potest.*¹

Classical Thought²



Aristotle (384BC-322BC) 3

In the last lesson we looked at Aristotle's use of the term *form* and how it differed from Plato's use of the same term and at Aristotle's explanation for the change that we observe in the world around us.

Why do rocks fall?

Aristotle's explanation for change seems plausible, especially with regard to living things or manufactured things but what about other changes? The falling of rocks, was an example Aristotle considered. How would we account for something like a rock fall or avalanche in Aristotle's scheme? Remember that the Greeks had no knowledge of the force of gravity when you consider their ideas. The Atomists³ said that everything tends downwards. Aristotle resorted to the strange idea that there is an *entelechy*⁴ within rocks that moves them downwards. It was, he said, part of their tendency or final purpose to move downwards. This seems arbitrary.

The four aspects

Aristotle taught that any individual thing can be understood by means of its four aspects or causes that can give an account of it:

1. efficient cause
that which efficiently brings something about e.g. a carpenter in the case of a table.
2. material cause
the material of which it is composed e.g. wood in the case of a table.
3. Purpose
being a table for putting things on in the case of a table.
4. form or shape
in the case of a table, rectangular, a certain height etc.

The four causes do have some value when looking at human beings. The stages of life are all connected. We would always understand a person better if we understood his background.

¹ Art is not practicable without science. Cicero.

² These lessons are derived from material in *The History of Western Philosophy* 3 Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnow.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

³ Term 1 Week 8 Day 4.

⁴ A guiding force. See Term 2 Week 9 Day 4.

Everything is connected and to understand a thing we need to know history and future of a thing or person.

Complete knowledge impossible both for Aristotle and Plato

Both Plato and Aristotle said individual entities cannot be understood without transcending or going beyond the individual and considering the *forms* or universals. Both considered that to know just an isolated entity is not to know at all. Plato therefore looked outside the world to a realm apart from time and space, a realm of the *forms*, for a universal and beyond that to the *form of the good*. He thought the soul was recognising the *forms* it had encountered when in the realm of the *forms*. This made complete knowledge in the here and now impossible since you have to know form of which we only have a vague recollection. Rational language is no good for describing the *form of the good* you need, said Plato, a flash of insight.

Aristotle, in contrast, thought that knowledge is here and now and part of present experience. He taught that context is needed but it is a natural context not supernatural context like Plato's realm of the *forms*. Aristotle wanted to transcend the individual too but he did not want to be a dualist.⁵ He therefore had a different approach to *form*. He went back to the history, the purpose and also the future of what the entity is developing into. Since we know everything about the context of a particular entity, complete knowledge is not possible for Aristotle either. For instance: look at the food chain. A Fish serves the purpose of being food for big fish then the big fish is food for a pelican but we cannot know everything about a particular little fish.

Both these philosophers are left with irrationality. Aristotle cannot fully give an account without irrational features and Plato tried to cover irrationality with a “flash of insight.”

Aristotle's Unmoved Mover

According to Aristotle everything that exists is a particular thing with four causes and the natural world as a whole is the total sum of sensible objects which are capable of spontaneous change. A chair is not part of nature because it needs an external efficient cause i.e. a carpenter. Tulips, ducks, cancer cells, and so on are all part of nature they are all changing all the time. Can this motion or change be eternal? asked Aristotle. Some philosophers said there was once a time when the world was not changing but Aristotle thought this an absurd idea. If there was a time when nothing was changing and then at some particular point things started changing there must have been something hindering them from changing up to that point, he argued. Since things started changing, at that moment the thing that was hindering must have itself changed – something changed so that change would begin! The idea that something had to change before change began Aristotle considered absurd and so he concluded that change and motion are therefore eternal.

However Aristotle thought that there does need to be some kind of explanation or force that moves the world of nature without itself being moved. There must, he said, be some way in which motion is transmitted into the physical world by something which is not itself moved. This he called the “unmoved mover.”

Aristotle conceived the universe as a series of concentric circles. These were astronomical belts around the world of which there were 53 levels. The fixed stars, moving stars, ether, atmosphere all occupied various bands. The outward band moves in a circular motion which causes friction on the next inward band. This in turn moves and causes friction on the next band in and so on and eventually the earth moves. How does the outermost band move? This is where the eternal unmoved mover comes in. The idea is pushed back another stage and an unmoved mover⁶ is postulated to

⁵ Term 1 Week 8 Day 4

⁶ Aristotle did not write consistently on this subject. At times he wrote as though there was an unmoved mover for each of the 53 levels of the heavens.

create motion. Aristotle considered there to be a kind of motion that arises from desire and love. This emulates or moves towards the object that is loved. In Aristotle's thinking the outer ring of the universe tries to emulate or move towards the unmoved mover because of love.

Thought thinking itself

What is this unmoved mover as imagined by Aristotle? He must be eternal, perfect, must not be moving. According to Aristotle the most good thing is thought. It is therefore the best thing to think about. Therefore, thought thinking itself is the unmoved mover. Thought thinking thought is cause of the universe moving because it is the object of desire. Circular motion of the universe is produced by the desire of the heavens to emulate thought thinking thought. Thought thinking itself has nothing that restricts its activity so it is pure and complete. (The ancients preferred circular motion to linear motion, finding it more satisfying.) Everything in the natural world is formed matter. Aristotle said that there is one thing that is pure *form* and that is thought thinking itself. If it thinks of the world it would not be perfect. It knows nothing of the world does not care about the world it is only aware of itself. It does not have any desire or compassion. Aristotle's "unmoved mover" did not create the world since the universe has been going on for all eternity. In Aristotle's view love literally makes the world go round!

This is not a personal God. It is just a necessity to finish Aristotle's philosophical system. It is such an abstraction that it makes no sense at all. The unmoved mover is not an object of worship but is remote transcendent, unconcerned with this world yet you will sometimes hear a version of Aristotle's argument used as an argument for the existence of God. However, Aristotle's argument has nothing to do with the biblical concept of God his unmoved mover is only a system demand for his theories. When Christian apologists try to argue for God's existence relying upon Aristotle's arguments we should remember exactly what is was he proved: not a creator, not a personal being, one who does not know about the world, not a God with personality, compassion not even a single God but perhaps many!

Aristotle and apologetics

In the middle ages, Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274) relied on Aristotle in his cosmological argument for God's existence. However, if anything is proved it is nothing like the God of the Bible and not a very good tool to defend the faith. The "first cause argument" is the popular version of Aristotle's argument. However, a chain of causes does not prove **one** first cause – there may be many. It does not prove anything about God being creator – the universe is eternal according to Aristotle and his idea of an unmoved mover is not a God who knows about this world.

Exercise:

1. How did Aristotle explain events such as a fall of rocks?
2. List Aristotle's four aspects or causes.
3. List the qualities of the unmoved mover.
4. How is the unmoved mover the cause of motion in the universe according to Aristotle?
5. How did Aristotle describe the only thing in the universe that he thought was pure *form*?
6. Why is the "first cause" argument derived from Aristotle not a very good one?

Answers on the next page.

Answers:

1. Aristotle said there an *entelechy* within rocks that moves them downwards as part of their tendency or final purpose.
2. Efficient cause, material cause, purpose, form or shape
3. He must be eternal, perfect, must not be moving. He knows nothing of the world, does not care about the world it is only aware of himself. He does not have any desire or compassion.
4. In Aristotle's thinking the outer ring of the universe tries to emulate or move towards the unmoved mover because of love.
5. Thought thinking itself
6. A chain of causes does not prove **one** first cause – there may be many. It does not prove anything about God being creator – the universe is eternal according to Aristotle. The unmoved mover is not a God who knows about this world.