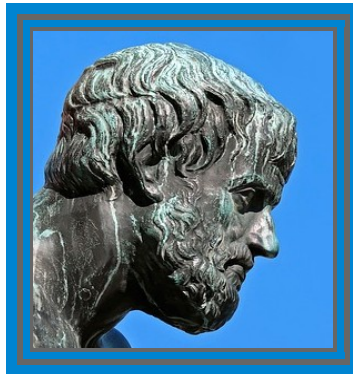


*Tarde benefacere nolle est; vel tarde velle nolentis est.*¹

Classical Thought²



Aristotle (384BC-322BC) 2

We learned last week that Aristotle, like Plato, used the idea of the *form* or *formula* common to all the particulars in a certain class. Aristotle, however, did not use the word *form* in the same way as Plato.

Aristotle's Forms

For Plato the realm of the *forms* was not the same as the world of time and space. It was apart from the time and space world. Aristotle uses the term *form* for something that is intelligible within the world of time and space. Aristotle's *forms* were not ideals outside of this world. He used the same word but the meaning was different and he did not follow the dualistic³ metaphysics of Plato. He said: “We can **distinguish** *form* from matter but cannot **separate** *form* from matter.” By this he meant that, for instance, we cannot separate the colour of an object from its texture or shape but this does not mean the colour, shape etc. are all the same thing. They can be distinguished from one another. Aristotle decided that reality is composed of individual things such as rocks, trees, animals and human beings: these are *particulars*. Each particular is a substance and reality is made up of particular substances not universal abstractions. Every substance can be analysed into two aspects according to Aristotle. These are:

its whatness (*form*) – that which makes things like other things
its thisness (*matter*) – that which gives things their individuality

This idea can be made clear by an example. Consider yourself. You are a human being. That is your “whatness” - what you are – but this does not define you completely. You may be a builder, a philosopher, a child etc. But even if we knew everything that it was possible to know about the classes you fall into (*all* your “whatness”) we would still not have defined you uniquely. Even if there were two *completely* identical people we could still distinguish between them. We would do this on the basis of the *matter* of which you are made which would be different and the space which you occupy which would also be different. This is the “thisness.”

1 To be slow in bestowing a favour, is to be unwilling to do it; or to be slow to will, is to be unwilling. Seneca.

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 2 Week 5 Day 4.

Aristotle said: “What makes things like other things is their form; what gives individuality is their matter.” He believed that “every particular thing that exists is **formed matter.**”

Another helpful example to understand what Aristotle meant is a knife and a spoon. Why is a knife different from a spoon? Spoons do not make good knives because a knife is for cutting and a spoon is for scooping. If we were to use a spoon for cutting we would be using it contrary to the nature of its *form*. Knives and spoons have different forms because they have different purposes. The unity brought to a complex thing is the purpose to which it is put – this makes it what it is.

Explaining Change

The Aristotelian idea is that matter becomes whatever opens the door to the opportunity of the purpose it serves. For instance Sand is matter. It presents the opportunity of being made into glass. What is the purpose of glass? We could say to make a window. A window also has a purpose to allow us to see out of our house... and so on. There is a hierarchy of purposes. What Aristotle is pointing out here is that everything has its history and its future. We can look back at its matter and forward to the purpose it will serve. Aristotle calls the form of anything its *actuality*. Matter from which it is made he calls its *potentiality*. Aristotle felt he could give an account of how things endure through change in this way: when *a* changes into *b* the *matter* endures and the *form* changes. Aristotle used this idea to explain, for instance, the perplexing fact that your body changes over time although your identity remains the same. An acorn has, he argued, the purpose or potentiality of becoming an oak tree. It does not yet have the *form* of an oak tree. The matter is the same but the *form* changes. Every individual is in the process of development and change. The *form* of oak-tree-ness is acting on the matter of the acorn to the form of an oak tree.

From this we can see that Aristotle's definition of matter is not the same as ours. His idea of matter is not matter in the atomists' sense. To Aristotle matter is the potential for *form*. To Aristotle *form* is a kind of driving force that works its way to fulfilment. In Plato's thinking the Demiurge impresses the dough-like matter with the *form*: the form comes from outside the matter. In Aristotle's thinking the form comes from within the matter. It is an inherent driving force, the *entelechy* or guiding principle that drives towards the *telos* (τέλος), the end or objective.

We can see how Aristotle understands this to work in a natural object such as an oak tree but what about something non-living such as a table? The table does not grow naturally: a carpenter has to shape a table. Along the line it does not always look like a table. What guides the development of the table? The intelligence of the carpenter. In an artefact, according to Aristotle, the unity is given by the intelligent design or purpose of the inventor or maker. Everything has its form or matter. All the stages are unified according to the purpose it is going to serve. This can be natural and spontaneous (as in the oak tree) or in the case of an artefact it is an external intelligence.

Exercise:

Briefly describe the differences between Aristotle's and Plato's use of the word form. You might like to do this as a diagram or chart or as two simple lists

