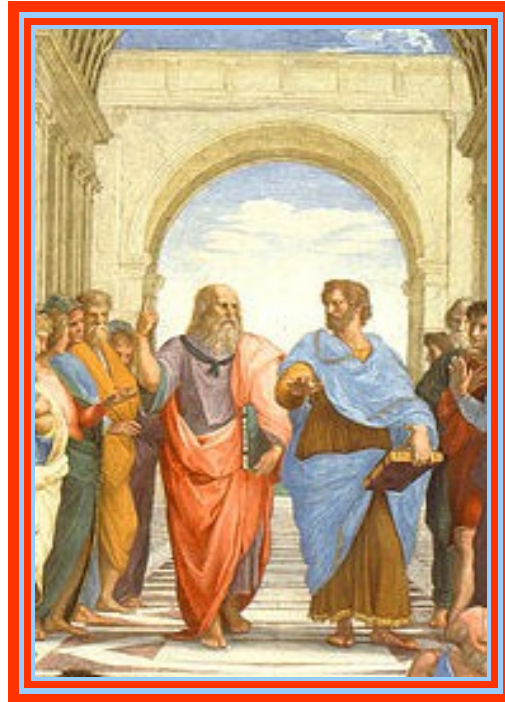


Auream quisquis mediocritatem diligit, tutus caret ob soleti Sordibus tecti; caret invidenda sobrius aula..¹

Classical Thought²



Aristotle 4: Plato and Aristotle

Aristotle's Epistemology

Aristotle's theory of knowledge is not convincing. Although too complicated to go into here, his answer to the question, "How do we know about the *forms* that are embedded in the particulars?" amounts to saying that the mind somehow deduces the *forms* from the particulars. He cannot explain how it does this.

Aristotle's Ethic

Aristotle said that man, unlike animals, can look beyond the present experience to the consequences of his choices. Even though, said Aristotle, man is an advanced animal, he can live differently to animals by making choices that are not governed by his immediate desires. Man can see alternatives. In order to make these choices man needs a standard to make them by. Aristotle did not want an ethic that comes from supernatural revelation because he was an empiricist – he thought that what we know is based only on our experience and observation. So to learn about what is good and what is bad, according to Aristotle, we need a standard of ethics that comes through experience. Aristotle said that what we learn through experience will not give us precise answers in ethics. Precision is available in logic but not in ethics. Aristotle said we need to look at people's opinions and analyse them but this will leave some room for disagreement and uncertainty. Ethics, he said, is not like geometry and ethical conclusions can not be totally conclusive. However, Aristotle did not

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- 1 Whoever loves the golden mean is serene, and exempted equally from the filth of an old mansion and the cares of a splendid court. Horace.
 - 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.

think these things were completely relative. He thought there *was* an absolute truth about ethics but it could not be definitely and precisely stated. Every science needs to go through a process of improvement and refinement according to Aristotle. This is true of physics or biology and Aristotle thought it was also true of ethics. According to Aristotle we can know truths about ethics but we are in a constant process of refining and approximating, trying to know the reality of what is good. When we study ethics we take a step beyond the study of the natural world. Ethics is practical as well as theoretical since in the light of Ethics we aim to change personally and to change the world. Aristotle was developing a *system* of philosophy so when he reflected on the nature of the good (ethics) he tried to relate his discussion to his understanding of metaphysics. In metaphysics he considered the final *form* or purpose of a thing. So, naturally, in ethics he considered that finding what is good for something is to know its function or purpose. Everything has a proper function. A knife should cut, water should quench thirst and so on. Something is good when it performs its function well. Just like knives or water, man also has an end or purpose. When he performs it well then, according to Aristotle, he is good, just as a good table is one that does what its maker intended it to do. This leads to the question: what is man's end or purpose? According to Aristotle man's function is that he is a *rational* animal therefore he must live a life in accordance with a *rational* principle.

The Golden Mean

Aristotle thought there was a right and wrong that was relative to each individual and yet he did think he could abstract something common from all those relative rights and wrongs for individuals which he called the Golden Mean. If we try to live in a rational way, according to Aristotle, we are going to realise certain character traits which are marked by moderation. Moderation, peace of mind, and inner tranquillity were character traits that had been promoted in Greek society for many years and Aristotle was trying to give a metaphysical account of this. To be rational, he said, is not to be excessive. We should avoid extremes. In the human character we can have either excess at one extreme or deficiency at the other. He gave the example of facing death to illustrate what he meant. It would be excessive to be a coward and fear it too much. On the other hand not to fear it enough and to be foolhardy would be a deficiency of character. The “golden mean” is to be courageous in the face of death but not cowardly or foolhardy. In Aristotle's ethic every virtue for man has to illustrate his function as a rational animal and will thus be a mean between the extremes of excess and deficiency.

A Problem with Aristotle's Golden Mean

Aristotle gave an example by describing what he calls a large-souled or magnanimous man. This is what he thought of as a truly good man who fulfilled his ideal of keeping to the golden mean. The problem with this description is that when we read it nowadays we do not think he sounds a very like a very good person! In fact the description reads as if it is that of a self centred man and proud man.

Aristotle's golden mean is culturally relative and individually relative and this is demonstrated by his example. What he considers moderate you or I might consider deficient or excessive. Aristotle never understood that where you place the middle line is a matter of personal judgement as everyone thinks his ideas are in the middle of the road. The Golden Mean sounds good as an abstract idea but since everyone's golden mean is different there is no authority, no absoluteness to his ethic.

Aristotle on Politics

Aristotle said that man must live in a community to live well because man is not just a rational animal he is a political animal. What sort of community we should live in according to Aristotle? Since man is a *political* animal, said Aristotle, he should live in a *πόλις*, *polis* that is a city-state. What kind of government should the *polis* have? Since Aristotle believed that any “good” is a mean

between two extremes and he also thought you could not know any *ideal* separately from this world, he researched all the kinds of government and looked for the mean between the extremes.

Aristotle recognised good forms of government and perverted forms. For instance, you could have rule by one person: the good form would be monarchy the perverted form would be tyranny. Or you could have a few rulers: the good form of this is aristocracy and the bad form oligarchy. Then you could have many rulers. Here Aristotle's good version is polity (by which he meant rule by the many in the interests of the state as a whole) and the perverted version is democracy. By democracy Aristotle meant the rule of the many where each individual is looking out for his own interests. According to Aristotle in polity the balance of power is the hands of the middle class. Aristotle's view of democracy was coloured by the difficulties of the way in which it was carried out in ancient Athens and by the mismanagement of the state of Athens during the Peloponnesian War. There was no permanence to the law in Athens since the laws would change from day to day depending on what the democracy voted on. Aristotle said that a body of laws was needed that would make rule of the state predictable. But since we cannot have a body of laws that cover every case the laws need to be supplemented. Then the “many” should be trusted.

The School of Athens

Philosophers have world-views not just isolated insights. Plato and Aristotle represent two different pagan world-views. There is a famous fresco *The School of Athens* in the Apostolic Palace in Vatican city by Raphael (1483-1520.) The painting represents many of the classical philosophers and Plato and Aristotle are in the centre – see the detail from the fresco above. Plato is pictured gesturing heavenwards with one finger pointing up. Aristotle is gesturing downwards with an open hand. Plato's gesture is taken to represent his rational approach with the idea that there is one universal and it is outside of time and space. Plato's philosophy emphasised stopping and reflecting rather than relying on your senses. Aristotle's gesture is taken to represent his empirical approach that emphasises the particulars in this world. His philosophy emphasised looking and seeing and he thought knowledge would arise in a natural way.

This difference of approach shows up clearly in the subject matter of their writings. Aristotle wrote about, animals, insects, (not things that would have interested Plato) and so on, relying on observations – or at least what he thought were reports of observations. Sometimes these observations were not what he thought and led him into superstition. Aristotle was interested in logic and developed the science of syllogism in a period when other Greek philosophers were too concerned with logical consistency to make sure that what they said was tied to the facts of the world.

Christians do not prefer either Aristotle or Plato. Both were wrong: empiricism by itself cannot stand, nor can rationalism. We need not only consistency (Plato) but factuality (Aristotle) in our thinking. In this we can see Aristotle, as it were, correcting Plato.

There were temperamental differences between Plato and Aristotle. Their theories of knowledge tie in with their different views of reality. Plato's dualism led him to think that what is intelligible is *outside* time and space. For this reason you would not expect him to put a lot of research into what is *in* time and space. Aristotle thought that what gives intelligibility to any particular its natural context, the hierarchy of purposes. For this reason you would not expect Aristotle to be greatly impressed with people that have intuitive concepts that are clear and distinct and related to each other that Plato described. Plato was a perfectionist who was looking for the *ideal*; the way things should be if they operated properly. His politics is an idealised society which even he realised could never be actually achieved. Aristotle, on the other hand, was more of a realist, more practical, following observations and experience. When Aristotle wrote on politics he examined all the different political orders available in his day rather than stopping and working out which would be

the best. He looked at actual, existing, forms of government. Plato wanted mathematical certainty and proof. He liked things to be neat, tidy and *ideal*. Against that *ideal* he thought we could then evaluate our fluctuating experience. Aristotle was not interested in a mathematical approach. He was more like a biologist than a mathematician. How did things happen the realm of nature was what interested him. Plato distinguished between the world as we experience it and the world as it *should be* the world of the *forms*. He therefore had two worlds; he was dualistic in his approach. Aristotle said no, if there are universals they must all be embodied in the particulars of this world. They are not outside this world in some realm we recollect from our soul's previous life in the world of *forms*; he was empirical in his approach.

Both Plato and Aristotle had a great influence in Western culture down to the present. In the Middle Ages their pagan ideas were constantly polluting what should have been Christian thought and the effects were not wholesome.

Exercise:

Briefly list the characteristics of Plato's philosophy and the characteristics of Aristotle's philosophy. How did they differ?

Specimen answer on the next page.

Specimen answer:

Plato's philosophy emphasised stopping and reflecting rather than relying on your senses. . Plato was a dualist, distinguishing between the world as we experience it and the world as it *should be* – the world of the *forms*. The *forms* accounted for the problem of the one and the many by providing an *ideal* of physical objects that accounted for their similarities. Plato believed that the human soul pre existed in the realm of the *forms*. It recalled the forms it had encountered in that realm before arriving in this world and recognised objects in the world as belonging to the various *forms*. The realm of the forms was outside time and space. Plato was a perfectionist who was looking for the *ideal*; the way things should be if they operated properly. His politics is an idealised society which even he realised could never be actually achieved. Plato, influenced by the ideas of Pythagoras, wanted mathematical certainty and proof. He liked things to be neat, tidy and *ideal*. Against that *ideal* he thought we could then evaluate our fluctuating experience of everyday life.

Aristotle's philosophy emphasised looking and seeing and he thought knowledge would arise in a natural way. He too believed in *forms* but considered that the forms were embedded in the particular objects rather than existing in some other realm. His empirical approach shows up clearly in the subject matter of his writings. He wrote about, animals, insects, (not things that would have interested Plato) and so on, relying on observations – or at least what he thought were reports of observations. Sometimes these observations were not what he thought and led him into superstition. Aristotle was interested in logic and developed the science of syllogism in a period when other Greek philosophers were too concerned with logical consistency to make sure that what they said was tied to the facts of the world.

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