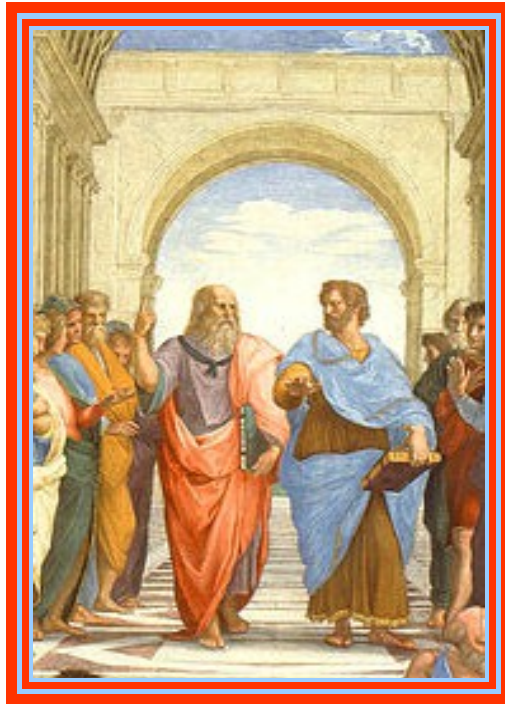


*amicus meus, inimicus inimici mei.*<sup>1</sup>

## Classical Thought<sup>2</sup>



### Plato, Aristotle and their Contemporaries

Plato	Aristotle
A transcendent <i>form</i> beyond time and space	A immanent dynamic <i>form</i> which is part of time and space
Stressed unity, the one	Stressed diversity, the many
Epistemology: rationalism	Epistemology: empiricism
Dualistic understanding of the world with a realm of the <i>forms</i> which is beyond the cosmos	Wanted to remove dualism and concentrate on nature – the here and now, not something beyond the cosmos
Favoured the idea of unchanging forms and ideals	Wanted to explain change
Held to a normative, absolute ethic	Held to a teleological mediating ethic: the golden mean
Utopian	More pragmatic
Believed in a better world beyond that of ordinary experience	Had a matter of fact approach to the world of daily experience

1 This is an ancient proverb not originally in Latin. It appears in English somewhere in this lesson. Can you find it? Answer on last page.

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.

## Plato, Aristotle and Christianity

Plato and Aristotle were intelligent men but they did not agree. Their opinions were contrasted. They both wanted to maintain objectivity rationality and morality of the world and to do this in a systematic philosophical perspective. They approached this in different ways as you can see from the table above which summarised what we had learned about them so far. The ideas of Plato and Aristotle were enduring and their philosophical perspectives lasted for over 1000 years. Neither of the approaches outlined in the table above are Christian nor do they offer an adequate account of reality or how we know what we know. Nevertheless over and over again Christians have tried to tie their philosophy to one or the other of their philosophies producing over the following millennium Christian versions of Platonism and Christian versions of Aristotelianism. The reason for this is partly that Plato and Aristotle were opposed to the philosophies of their day and Christians likewise opposed those views. Because Christians wanted oppose these views it is understandable that they looked to Plato and Aristotle therefore. The early church fathers sometimes even gave them equal authority with Christian writers, considering them to have been some sort of Christians before Christ. It often happens that if people have a common enemy they think they have something that constructively binds them together – “my enemy's enemy is my friend” it is said. But Plato and Aristotle are not on our side! Both were seeking secular non-religious non-God glorifying answers to the problems of reality, knowledge and ethics and both came up with inadequate systems.

## The opponents of Plato and Aristotle

We have looked at the ideas of Plato and Aristotle's opponents in previous lessons:

Approximate date (BC) of activity	Name or school	Philosophical ideas	Previous lesson
450	Sophists and Cynics	wanted to get rid of the artificiality of civilization and get back to nature	Term 2 week 1 day 4
425	Democritus	materialist atomist who thought all reality was matter falling through space	Term 1 week 8 day 4
400	Aristippus	hedonist	Term 2 week 2 day 4

The philosophers in the chart above were all teaching around 450 to 400 BC. For biblical context notice that Malachi prophesied in this generation about 450BC or later, and the closing of the Old Testament canon happened in this generation. Look at your synchronological chart to see how this all fits in.

Plato and Aristotle established alternative philosophies but did not eliminate the other options from the field. Looking at the synchronological chart we see that Plato died in 347BC and Aristotle in 322BC. Around 325 to 300BC three schools of philosophy arose. They were all resurgences or continuations of philosophies that preceded Plato and Aristotle:

Name or school	Philosophical ideas	Previous lesson
Pyrrho	Sceptic, a relativist and like the sophists	Term 2 week 1 day 4
Zeno	Stoic, taught that we should live in accordance with nature like the cynics	Term 2 week 3 day 4
Epicurus	new form of hedonism which was qualitative	Term 2 week 2 day 4

Between advent of Christ and end of classical schools there were no new radical ideas, only modification of previous theories. During the Roman period there were seven<sup>3</sup> major schools of philosophy:

School	Ideas
Scepticism Sophism Eclecticism	<b>Relativism</b> : nothing can be known for sure, bit of truth in everything
Epicureanism (garden philosophers) <sup>4</sup>	<b>materialistic</b> hedonism atomism (like Democritus) and qualitative Hedonism – the virtue of moderation
Platonists (the Academy) <sup>5</sup>	<b>Dualism</b> , rationalism, idealism
Aristotelianism (the Lyceum) <sup>6</sup> known as the Peripatetics <sup>7</sup>	<b>teleology</b> of nature, empiricism, actualisation of forms
Stoicism (and Cynicism)	harmony with <b>nature</b> = reason =virtue

The coloured type will help you identify the links between the schools of thought. You can see from the words in bold in the second column that we can summarise them as: relativism, materialism, dualism, teleologism and naturism.

The Bible tells us there is “nothing new under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1:9) These schools exhaust the possibilities of approach to philosophy. There are only a finite number of possible world-views.

### Why do people adopt a particular world-view out of these options?

Not everyone sees the world in the same way. Our perspective is set by our ethics and values and to this our temperament is the key. We may go back and rationally reconstruct our philosophy showing ethics as a *consequence* of our world-view. We begin with ultimate reality and so on when we explain and set out our philosophy, describing ethics as an application of our philosophical convictions. In reality however, our life-style, values and personality incline us to a particular view. We seek a view of reality and knowledge which will *justify* intellectually the lifestyle and ethics we

3 Or five if you count the Sceptics, Sophists and Eclectics together.

4 So called because they met in a garden.

5 Name of Plato's school

6 Name of Aristotle's school

7 So called because Aristotle like to walk about with his students following him as a method of teaching.

choose.

As Christians we note that unless a person is born again, regenerated by the Holy Spirit, they are *not* temperamentally disposed to believe in a personal, absolute, sovereign creator who is holy in all his ways and upon whom they depend for everything. One has to have a change of heart, lifestyle, values, personality and temperament – one must be born again to affirm a Christian philosophy of life, reality, and knowledge. But even among those who are not born again there are differences of temperament. Plato was perfectionist: Aristotle a realist.

Exercise:

Can you fill in the blanks in the chart? You can check your answer by looking at the first page. You do not have to get the exact words but if you can express the concepts you are doing very well.

Plato	Aristotle
	A immanent dynamic <i>form</i> which is part of time and space
Stressed unity, the one	
	Epistemology: empiricism
Dualistic understanding of the world with a realm of the <i>forms</i> which is beyond the cosmos	
	Wanted to explain change
Held to a normative, absolute ethic	
	More pragmatic
Believed in a better world beyond that of ordinary experience	

Answer: My enemy's enemy is my friend.