A Brief Survey of

Platonic and Aristotelian Thought

The enterprise of Western philosophy is generally regarded as being indebted in an extensive way to ancient Greek philosophy and especially to two luminary figures in that tradition—that of Plato and Aristotle[1]. These two individuals are credited by some with being the first systematic philosophers in that they produced works which attempted to answer, in a more organized and comprehensive way, the broad and complex questions of what is ultimate reality, how do we know what we claim we know, and what is a well-lived life? In reading and grappling with their ideas, it is said, we come to understand that debt and, thereby, to grasp the Western tradition of thought with greater clarity.

This paper is a brief exposition on Plato's and Aristotle's metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. It will be necessary to present a synthetic perspective of these topics simply because of the volume of material to cover. I will begin by addressing the work of Plato; I will be summarizing his perspective in the areas enumerated and I will do the same for Aristotle's work. It is the purpose of this essay to present a very brief introduction into their ideas.

Section I: Plato

In order to set the scene, a rather long, but important word from Frederick Copleston needs to be quoted about Pre-Socratic philosophers and their concern about the problem of the One and the Many and its importance for Plato and Aristotle:

> It is often said that Greek philosophy centers round the problem of the One and the Many. Already in the very earliest stages of Greek philosophy we find the notion of unity: things change into one another—therefore there must be some common substratum, some ultimate

[1] In fact, Alfred North Whitehead said, "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."

principle, some unity underlying diversity. Thales declares that water is that common principle, Anaximens air, Heraclitus fire: they choose different principles, but they all three believe in one ultimate principle. But although the fact of change—what Aristotle call "substantial" change— may have suggested to the early Cosmologists the notion of an underlying unity in the universe, it would be a mistake to reduce this notion to a conclusion of physical science. As far as strict scientific proof goes, they had not sufficient data to warrant the assertion of any particular ultimate principle, whether water, fire or air. The fact is, that the early cosmologists leapt beyond the data to the intuition of universal unity: they possessed what we might call the power of metaphysical intuition, and this constitutes their glory and their claim to a place in the history of philosophy. If Thales had contented himself with saying that out of water earth evolved, "we should," as Nietzsche observes, "only have a scientific hypothesis: he reached out to a metaphysical doctrine, expressed in the metaphysical doctrine, that Everything is One.

Let me quote Nietzsche again, "Greek philosophy seems to begin with a preposterous fancy, with the proposition that water is the origin and mother-womb of all things. Is it really necessary to stop there and become serious? Yes, and for three reasons: Firstly, because the proposition does enunciate because it does so without figure and fable; thirdly and lastly, because in it is contained, although only in the chrysalis state, the idea—Everything is one. The first-mentioned reason leaves Thales still in the company of religious and superstitious people; the second, however, takes him out of this company and shows him to us as a natural philosopher; but by virtue of the third, Tales becomes the first Greek philosopher." This holds true of the other early Cosmologists; men like Anaximeses and Heraclitus also took wing and flew above and beyond what could be verified by mere empirical observation. At the same time they were not content with any mythological assumption, for they sought a real principle of unity, the ultimate substrate of change: what they asserted, they asserted in all seriousness. They had the notion of a world that was whole, a system of a world governed by law. Their assertions were dictated by reason or thought, not by mere imagination or mythology; and so they deserve to count as philosophers, the first philosophers of Europe.

But though the early Cosmologists were inspired by the idea of cosmic unity, they were faced by the fact of the Many, of multiplicity, of diversity, and they had to attempt the theoretical reconciliation of this evident plurality with the postulated unity—in other words, they had to account for the world as we know it. While Anaximenes, for example, had recourse to the principle of condensation and rarefaction, Parmenides, in the grip of his great theory that Being is one and changeless, roundly denied the facts of change and motion and multiplicity as illusions of the sense. Empedocles postulated four ultimate elements, out of which all

> things are built up under the action of Love and Strife, and Anaxagoras maintained the ultimate character of the atomic theory and the quantitative explanation of qualitative difference, thus doing justice to plurality, to the many while tending to relinquish the earlier vision of unity in spite of the fact that each atom represents the Paramedian One.
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> We may say, therefore, that while the Pre-Socratics struggled with the problem of the One and the Many, they did not succeed in solving it. The Heraclitan philosophy contains indeed, the profound notion of unity in diversity, but it is bound up with an over-assertion of Becoming and the difficulties consequent on the doctrine of Fire. The pre-Socratics accordingly failed to solve the problem, and it was taken up again by Plato and Aristotle, who brought to bear on it their outstanding talent and genius.
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> . . . Greek thought develops and though we can hardly over-estimate the native genius of men like Plato and Aristotle, it would be wrong to imagine they were uninfluenced by the past. Plato was profoundly influenced by Pre-Socratic thought, by Heraclitean, Eleatic and Pythagorean systems; Aristotle regarded his philosophy as the heir and crown of the past; and both thinkers took up philosophic problems from the hands of their predecessor, giving, it is true, original solutions, but at the same time tackling the problems in their historic setting.[2]

In this passage, Copleston argues that the early Greek philosophers held that there was some kind of unity underlying the diversity they saw in the cosmos. Though they had different theories as to what this was, they were still faced with the puzzling relationship that the One (unity) had with the many (diversity). According to Copleston, the pre-Socratics attempted to solve the problem but did not succeed. It is here that Aristotle and Plato come on the scene, influenced by this rich past to offer their own original solutions to the vexing question of that relationship. So we begin with Plato's metaphysics.

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[2]Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (Westminster, Maryland.: The Newman Bookshop, 1946) Volume I, pp. 76-80.

Platonic Metaphysics

There is some difficulty in documenting Plato's metaphysical system. First of all, Plato's Dialogues were composed over an expanse of indefinite time during which his ideas are introduced and evolve through his "spokesman," Socrates.[3] In addition to this somewhat veiled development of thought, it is difficult to know exactly when and where the historical Socrates left off and Plato began (the so-called Socratic problem); thus I will avoid dogmatism on that subject. For the purposes of this paper rather than attempt to solve both of these difficulties, I will speak simply of the Dialogues as containing the philosophy of Plato.

At the heart, I think, of Plato's metaphysics is the conviction that there must be facts that are in some way independent of our opinions and about which we must be correct or incorrect. Plato holds to the position that the object of true knowledge must be stable and abiding and that it is the object of reflective thought rather than the objects of our senses. It is his view that these facts must be facts about Forms.

Plato's view of reality emerges when he confronts a philosophical problem that deals with the notion of what appears to be real and what is real (appearance and reality); Plato expresses this difference by use of the terms Becoming and Being. In Plato's view Being is transcendent (beyond space and time) and not in process, whereas Becoming is in space and time and in process. We can see Plato making the distinction in the following passage:

> . . .we must make a distinction and ask, what is that which always is and has no becoming, and what is always becoming and never is? That which is apprehended by intelligence and reason is always in the same state, but

[3]There is general agreement among scholars that Plato's *Dialogues* can be divided into three periods: Early, Middle, and Late. The periods, roughly speaking, represent a development in Plato's thought.

> that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason is always in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is.[4]

More light on the subject is presented in the *Republic* where Plato restates his preference preference for the unchanging and the stable in the following dialogue:

> . . .And we agreed earlier that, if any such object were discovered it should be called the object of belief and knowledge. Fluctuating in that half way region, it would be seized upon by the intermediate faculty.
>
> Yes.
>
> So when people have an eye for the multitude of beautiful things or of just actions or whatever it may be, but can neither behold Beauty nor Justice itself nor follow a guide who would lead them to it, we shall say that all they have is beliefs, without any real knowledge of the objects of their belief.
>
> That follows.
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> But what of those who contemplate the realities themselves as they are forever in the same unchanging state? Shall we not say that they have, not mere belief, but knowledge?
>
> That too follows.
>
> And, further, that their affection goes out to the objects of knowledge, whereas the others set their affections on the objects of belief; for it was they, you remember, who had a passion for the spectacle of beautiful colors and sounds, but would not hear of Beauty itself being a real thing.
>
> I remember.
>
> So we may fairly call them lover of belief rather than of wisdom—not philosophical, in fact, but philodoxical. Will they be seriously annoyed by that description?
>
> Not if they will listen to my advice. No one ought to take offense at the truth.
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> The name of the philosopher, then, will be reserved for those whose affections are set in every case, on the reality.[5]

The following diagram may help illustrate the relationship between forms that are contained in the world of Becoming.

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[4]Plato, *Timaeus*, 27D-28A.
[5]Plato, *the Republic*, 479-480A.

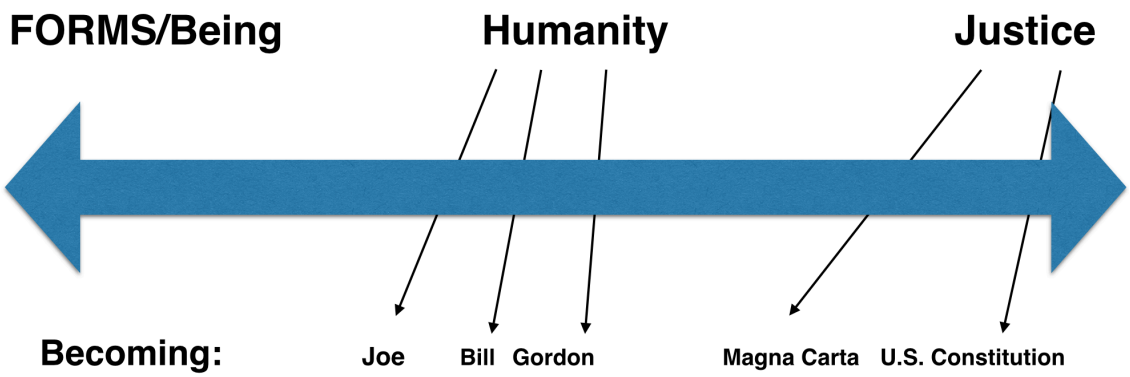

Diagram #1: Visualizing how Being and Becoming are related in Plato's metaphysical system.

The Forms (or Ideas) are a corresponding reality to the objects of sense: in correspondence to the objects in the world of Becoming (acts of justice, acts of love, or instances of beauty) there exist Forms in the world of Being (Justice, Love, and Beauty). These forms are in a sense "out there" having an existence independent of our minds. It is not hard to see that Plato offers this as a solution to the problem of the One and Many.

Plato offers two explanations of how the Forms give essence to the particulars. One way is that the sensible objects are copies of the Form (which by the way could be "blended" with other Forms). A second way Plato explains the relationship is that the object of sense is in some way to participate in its Form. This two-fold account is important, as we shall see later, because it is at this point Aristotle offers a critique of his mentor's metaphysics.

And ultimately, there is one more "something" that is above the Forms themselves which is called "the essential Form of the Good." This ultimate source of reality is above all knowledge and all reality. Now we turn to Plato's account of how we know what we know.

Plato's Epistemology

There is an agreement among scholars that Plato's epistemology is not clearly spelled out in any one particular Dialogue but rather has a number of starting points and ranges across a vast array of concerns and topics. As I suggested under the previous heading of Plato's Metaphysics, Plato is a realist epistemically in an important sense. That is, what he has is knowledge of what is ultimately real (independent of anyone's opinion), rather than knowledge of appearances. Nicholas White after tracing the historical development of Plato's epistemology (and metaphysics), describes in retrospect Plato's thought in these terms:

> As far as his epistemology is concerned, the forms are in a certain way (though not in all ways) a means to an end. The end is that it be clear that there is a world, somewhere or other, which is in some radical manner independent of what anyone may happen to believe.[6]

Plato's Theaetetus dialogue is an examination of the notion that sense perception is knowledge. He concludes that the deliverances of the senses are not enough to secure knowledge. His point is that in thinking about those perceptions—recollecting, comparing, etc.—we can realize that what we know or surmise is intractably connected to our thought. Thus, knowledge and opinion are a product or cooperative enterprise of reason and perception. Plato will go on to say that knowledge is to be had in the stable rather than in the changing—in the analysis of the Forms.

In addition, Plato does concern himself with a number of problems and questions which are epistemic in nature such as: 1) the distinction between knowledge and belief, 2) is true belief a necessary condition of knowledge, 3) is knowledge known by

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[6]Nicholas P. White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976. Pp.220-221.

acquaintance, 4) the problem of false belief, and most importantly, 5) by what methods do we arrive at knowledge? It would be appropriate to discuss some of these considerations briefly.

In the *Meno* dialogue, Plato (again, through his mouthpiece, Socrates) is mainly discussing whether or not virtue can be taught. But then his dialogue with a slave-boy digresses into inquiring about whether the slave-boy can, by being questioned, rediscover latent knowledge about geometry. The point Plato seems to be making is that Socrates did not teach the slave-boy (who was able to answer correctly); Socrates'' questioning merely discloses that the boy already knew the answers. Socrates argues from this to the doctrine that we can recollect what was known before birth and we see some of this in the passage below:

> S: Pay attention then whether you think he is recollecting or learning from me.
> M: I will pay attention.
> S: Tell me now, boy, you know that a square figure is like this—I do…
>
> S: The opinions have now just been stirred up like a dream, but if he were repeatedly asked these same questions in various ways, you know that in the end his knowledge about these things would be as accurate as anyone's—It is likely.
> S: And in not find knowledge within oneself recollection?--Certainly.
> S: Must he not either have at some time acquired the knowledge he now possesses, or else have always possessed it?--Yes.
> S: If he had it, he would always have known. If he acquired it, he cannot have done so in his present life. Or has some taught him geometry? For he will perform in the same way about all geometry, and all other knowledge. Has some taught him everything? You should know, especially as he has been born and brought up in your house…
> S: If he has not acquired them in his present life, is it not clear that he had them and learned them at some other time?--It seems so
> S: Then that was the time when he was not a human being?--Yes…
> S: Then that was the time when he was not a human being?--Yes…
> S: Then if the truth about reality is always in our soul, the soul would be immortal so that you should always confidently try to seek out and recollect what you do not know at present—that is, what you do not recollect?[7]

[7]Ibid. pp. 15-17.

In the Republic Plato argues that particular things are copies of the Forms, and that knowledge is different from belief by reference to their different objects. Using particularly the mechanism or the analogy of the Cave, we see that knowledge must be what is timeless and changeless and have an absolutely certain starting point. Scholars debate whether this account is saying that true belief plus and account is a basis for knowledge in Plato's system, but it seems that the most likely that an accurate interpretation of Plato is that true belief itself can only be understood in terms of knowledge already possessed.

Plato's Ethics

A central concern of Plato is social and political theory (especially in the Republic), but he also articulates a moral theory for the individual. His idea is that in order to understand what Justice is for an individual, we must understand what Justice means for the state. I think it is fair to describe Plato as a teleological moralist for the simple reason that he thinks that virtue is best understood in terms of the overall good or well-being it advances. The individual, of course, needs to reside in the Ideal (Just) society—the Republic—where the virtues (skills to accomplish what our purpose is) have an opportunity to flourish.

The soul of man involves three parts: a part that is impulsive and desirous, a part that is thoughtful and reasonable, and a part that fights the impulses and listens to the reasonable side. It is Plato's view that attaining the thoughtful life rather than the passionate life if only we can do it attains happiness.

Section II: Aristotle

Aristotle, the orphaned son of a Greek court physician joined the Academy at approximately the age of seventeen and continued there as one of Plato's students for the next twenty years, until the death of Plato. Like Plato who learned from Socrates and developed his own ideas, Aristotle also learned and developed his own ideas. Aristotle, however, was a bit more vocally critical of his mentor's ideas than was Plato.

Aristotle's Metaphysics

As Aristotle's views developed, his biggest problem with Plato's metaphysics was the problem of separation (or apartness). How could the ultimate causes of things (the Forms) be transcendent or beyond and yet be the causes of the "whatness" of sensible things? And additionally, how could these transcendent and unchanging Forms produce motion and change?

Plato's account indicates that the explanation for these questions is found in imitation (the sensible things copied the Forms) and participation (the sensible thing participated in its Form). But this was merely "empty words and poetical metaphors" as far as Aristotle is concerned.

Aristotle presents his solution to the problem by retaining the notion of Forms, but instead of there being transcendent Forms, Aristotle viewed them as being immanent. The Forms exist within the particular thing. So in Aristotle's view, what is the real is the combination of the Form (immanent, rather than "out there") and the sensible thing. Everything in the natural world is composed of form and matter. Another way of saying this is that the essences of things are locked up inside the particular, sensible things.

This, however, is not the case with God according to Aristotle. God is Pure Form. He is the unchanging changer who has not potential for change. He is the unmoved mover and, of course, is not composed of matter.

According to Aristotle there are four principles that are necessary to explain a thing. The material cause is what the thing is made of. The formal cause is its essence of whatness. The efficient cause is what brings about the existence of the thing. And the final cause is the purpose or teleology of the entity.

What is important to see is that although Aristotle does offer a critique of Plato's metaphysics, his own theory is quite similar in some respects. Both are realists and both believe that Forms are to be identified with true reality; Forms are key to rational discourse and real knowledge. The big difference is that while Plato sees these Forms as transcendent and separate from sensible things, Aristotle sees them as immanent in sensible things.[8]

Aristotle's Epistemology

While Aristotle does reject the transcendence of the Forms (in favor of the immanence of the Forms), he does maintain the view that knowledge is the knowledge of the universal and of the real. He, in effect, asks the epistemic question—how does the Form make the sensible object knowable if it is not in the sensible object?

I do not at this point take Aristotle as an epistemic empiricist of the Lockian variety. The changing natures of the sensible objects pose the problem of real knowledge. His view of Forms indicates that he was not a nominalist in the sense that he would have viewed the Forms as <u>not</u> having an independent existence or as a designation

[8]This issue will continue on in the history of philosophy through the history of philosophy through the nominalist and conceptualist challenges.

or expression that we use to lump things together. But in some sense he was epistemically an empiricist. The concepts of the Forms come from the experience of particular sensible objects. This is accomplished through induction; the induction leads to establishment of the universals in the mind and the universals are the concepts through which we have knowledge.

Aristotle's Ethics

Fundamentally Aristotle's ethics are teleological. By that I mean they are directed toward the goal of the Good. He is interested in action toward the goal of the Good. He is interested in action toward the good of the man. Right and wrong actions are discerned in terms of whether they help the person toward that good. Just what that good is cannot be precisely stated or calculated. Ethics aren't like mathematics.

Happiness is the ethical end. This happiness is what is distinctive to human beings as opposed to other living beings and, in order for it to be real happiness it must be experienced over a lifetime—not just intermittently. So the life of activity in accordance with virtue[9] is the good to be sought by man. So the prudent man must be able to see what he should do (what is truly good) in a particular circumstance and, though this isn't easily calculated, it involves avoiding the extremes of deficiency and excess. This doctrine of the "mean" isn't meant as commitment to mediocrity as the ideal in ethics, but rather implies discernment as to whether one's actions become wrong if they lack sufficient virtue or wrong if they err to excess. An example of this might be the virtue of courage lying between the extremes of cowardice and impulsive bravado.

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[9]Copleston argues that virtue in Aristotle's ethical system is deeply affected by contemporary Greek cultural tastes. P. 341.

Practical wisdom, then, is the kind that if A is desired and B leads to A, then B should be done. Aristotle avoids the extreme of over emphasis on purely intellectual pleasure or that all pleasures is bad. Just what causes him to do this is not clear, except perhaps as an induction from experience or common sense or common grace (if seen from a theological perspective).

Concluding Remarks

In a profound sense both Plato and Aristotle were metaphysical realists. They believed that reality was knowable and that Forms were key to understanding it. They differed, however, on whether these Forms existed transcendently as in the case of Plato or immanently as in the case of Aristotle. For Aristotle, the key was in the separation between the Forms and particulars. He couldn't see how Forms could act on sensible objects if they were separated. With respect to ethical theories, both Aristotle's and Plato's moral theories are teleological in character, in that they place emphasis on the good or happiness that is strove for in the action. Plato, it seems, placed more emphasis on the importance of the just state as necessary to produce just people.

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