

3

A Reading of Aristotle's Objections to Plato's Theory of Ideas

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the objections that Aristotle raised against the central pillar of Plato's philosophy: His theory of Ideas. Plato had posited two worlds: the world of Essential forms, in contrast to the world of appearances. Aristotle raised a number of portent objections to this theory. This critique of Plato by his most prominent student is the line of great divide in the history of not only ancient Greek thought, but also (has reverberated through) the whole of Western thought in its various epochs to date. This study examines anew the significance of these objections that Aristotle raised against a Master he so profoundly respects and idolizes. It would appear that both these original and unique visions of reality at the fountain-head of Western thought aptly complement each other. Together, both weaved a tapestry so rich, complex and at once versatile and comprehensive as to bear the weight of catching in its web all that is: the very self presenting of being in its manifold modes.

Key Words: Ideas, Forms, Critique, Appearance, Being, Good, Universals, substance.

Introduction

A number of commentators had some rather hard things to say of Aristotle's attitude towards his master and mentor, Plato. Werner Jaeger said that Aristotle had accepted Plato's doctrines with his whole soul, and the effort to discover his own relation to them occupied all his life, and is the clue to his development.

It is possible to discern a gradual process, in the various stages of which we can clearly recognize the unfolding of his...essential nature... Just as tragedy attains its own special nature... 'out of the dithyramb' by leading the latter through various forms, so Aristotle made himself out of the Platonic philosophy'¹

Aristotle had often been referred to as "the foal that kicked his mother." Joseph Owens says 'It seems now possible to trace [Aristotle's] progress from sharp and rather schematic criticism of Plato to an avowed sympathy with Plato's general metaphysical program.'² John Burnet is of the opinion that 'in the first place, it is certain that he [Aristotle] never understood the teaching of the head of the academy.'³ 'Yet... he [the same Aristotle] says Plato was 'a man whom the wicked have no place to praise; he alone, unsurpassed among mortals, has shown clearly by his own life and by the pursuits of his writings that a man becomes happy and good simultaneously.'⁴

In book VI (E) of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle makes a division of substances into changeable and unchangeable. In book XII however, he distinguishes three substances:

- a. Sensible and perishable
- b. Sensible and eternal (the heavenly bodies)
- c. Non-sensible and eternal

Metaphysical science therefore for Aristotle is concerned with *being*. It studies *being* primarily in the category of substance, not *accidental being* the subject of *no science*,⁵ nor being as truth and falsity, as these exist in the judgment and not in things.⁶

1 Jaeger Werner. *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development*. (Oxford University Press; 1934). Pg. 15.

2 Joseph Owens. "The Platonism of Aristotle," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 51 (1966), 125-50.

3 Burnet John. *Platonism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1928). Pg. 56

4 Aristotle, Fragment 673, *Olympiodorus, Commentarius in Gorgiam* 41.9.

5 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Book VI 1026a 6, -1026b4.

6 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book VI.1027b. 17-33.

Herein established, is the *principle of non-contradiction* which, though not deductible, is that which governs all being and all knowledge.⁷ If *Metaphysics* studies substance, non-sensible substances, we need to determine what these are. The objects of *Mathematics* for instance, are they substances, universals or the transcendental ideas of being and unity? According to Aristotle they are not. It is against this gestalt background that we must situate his criticism of Plato's theory of Ideas.

The Critique of the Forms in the Nicomachean Ethics

Aristotle has no shortage of complaints about Plato's theory of forms. Aristotle's introduction to his critique of Plato's forms is found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

We had perhaps better consider the universal good and discuss thoroughly what is meant by it, although such an inquiry is made an uphill one by the fact that the forms have been introduced by friends of our own. Yet it would perhaps be thought to be better, indeed to be our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches us closely, especially as we are philosophers; for, while both are dear, piety requires us to honor truth above our friends.⁸

This is Aristotle's way of saying fidelity to truth is the touch stone of the lovers of wisdom. Friendship and the closest of relationship should not stand in the way of proclaiming Truth. In as much as Aristotle respects Plato, his teacher, and holds him in high esteem as friend, the pursuit of truth does not shield Plato from the sharp barbs of the critique of his stagirites disciple as shown below:

Critique i: there is not *one all-inclusive* good⁹

Critique ii: good is said in as *many ways* as *being*¹⁰

Critique iii: there is not *one good* of all sciences¹¹

7 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IV.1005b-18-30.

8 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096a11-1096a16.

9 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096a11.

10 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096a 23.

11 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096a 29.

Critique iv: the *thing itself* objection¹²

Critique v: the *eternal good* objection¹³

[I] The men who introduced this doctrine did not posit Ideas of classes within which they recognized *priority* and *posteriority* (which is the reason why they did not maintain the existence of an Idea embracing all number); but things are called good both in the category of substance and in that of quality and in that of relation, and that which is *per se*, that is, substance, is prior in nature to the relative (from the latter is like an offshoot and accident of what is); so that there could not be a common *Idea* set over all these goods.¹⁴

[II] Further, since things are said to be good in as many ways as they are said to be (for things are called good both in the category of substance, as God and reason, and in quality, for example, the virtues, and in quantity, example, that which is moderate, and in relation, example, the useful, and in time, example, the right opportunity, and in place, example, the right locality and the like), clearly the good cannot be something universally present in all cases and single; for then it would not have been predicted in all the categories but in one only.¹⁵

[III] Further, since of the things answering to one *Idea* there is one science, there would have been one science of all the goods; but as it is there are many sciences even of the things that fall under one category, example, of opportunity (for opportunity in war is studied by strategy and in disease by medicine), and the moderate in food is studied by medicine and in exercise by the science of gymnastics.¹⁶

[IV] And one might ask the question, what in the world they mean by *a thing itself* if in man himself and in a particular man the account of man is one and the same. For in so far as they are men, they will in no respect differ; and if this is so,

12 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096a 34.

13 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096b 3.

14 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096a11.

15 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096a23.

16 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096a 29.

neither will there be a difference in so far as they are good.¹⁷

[V] But again it will not be good any the more for being eternal, since that which lasts long is no whiter than that which perishes in a day. The Pythagoreans seem to give a more plausible account of the good, when they place the one in the column of goods; and it is they that Speusippus seems to have followed.¹⁸

Critique vi: the *goods-in-themselves* objection¹⁹

[VI] But let us discuss these matters elsewhere; an objection to what we have said, however, may be discerned in the fact that the Platonists have not been speaking about all goods, and that the goods that are pursued and loved for themselves are called good by reference to a single *form*, while those which tend to produce or to preserve these somehow or to prevent their contraries are called so by reference to these, and in a different sense. Clearly, then, goods must be spoken of in two ways, and some must be good in themselves, the others by reason of these. Let us separate, then, things good in themselves from things useful, and consider whether the former are called good by reference to a single Idea. What sort of goods would one call good in themselves? Is it those that are pursued even when isolated from others, such as intelligence, sight, and certain pleasures and honor? Certainly, if we pursue these also for the sake of something else, yet one would place them among things good in themselves. Or is nothing other than the Idea good in itself? In that case the *form* will be empty. But if the things we have named are also things good in themselves, the account of the good will have to appear as something identical in them all, as that of whiteness is identical in snow and in white lead. But of honor, wisdom, and pleasure, just in respect of their goodness, the accounts are distinct and diverse. The good, therefore, is not something common answering to one idea.²⁰

¹⁷ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096a 34.

¹⁸ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096b 3.

¹⁹ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096b 7.

²⁰ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096b7.

Critique vii: the *how are goods one* objection²¹

Critique viii: the *neither practicable nor possess-able good* objection²²

[VII] But then in what way are things called good? They do not seem to be like the things that only chance to have the same name. Are goods one, then, by being derived from one good or by all contributing to one good, or are they rather one by analogy? Certainly as sight is in the body, so is reason in the soul, and so on in other cases. But perhaps these subjects had better be dismissed for the present; for perfect precision about them would be more appropriate to another branch of philosophy.²³

[VIII] And similarly with regard to the Idea; even if there is someone good which is universally predictable of goods or is capable of separate and independent existence, clearly it would not be achieved or attained by man; but we are now seeking something attainable. Perhaps, however, some one might think it worthwhile to have knowledge of it with a view to the goods that are attainable and achievable; for having this as a sort of pattern we shall know better the goods that are good for us, and if we know them shall attain them. This argument has some plausibility, but seems to clash with the procedure of the sciences; for all of these, though they aim at some good and seek to supply the deficiency of it, leave on one side the knowledge of the good. Yet that all the exponents of the arts should be ignorant of, and should not even seek, so great an aid is not probable. It is hard, too, to see how a weaver or a carpenter will be benefited in regard to his own craft by knowing this 'good itself', or how the man who has viewed the Idea itself will be a better doctor or general thereby. For a doctor seems not even to study health in this way, but the health of

21 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096b 27.

22 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096b 32.

23 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096b 27.

man, or perhaps rather the health of a particular man; for it is individuals that he is healing. But enough of these topics.²⁴

The Critique of the Forms in the *Metaphysics*

In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle's critique of Plato's *forms* are as follows:

1. They (the forms) are causally inert, and so cannot explain change or generation²⁵
2. Postulating *forms* offends theoretical economy²⁶
3. *Forms*, if ever they existed, would be epistemologically otiose²⁷
4. Introducing *forms* as paradigms is empty metaphor²⁸
5. *Forms* cannot be essences if they are separated, since essences are intrinsic features²⁹
6. *Forms* are irrelevant to human conduct, and so must be set aside from inquiries into virtue³⁰
7. Above all one might ask what in the world the *forms* contribute to our understanding of perceptible things.³¹
8. At his most caustic, Aristotle recommends a *good-bye to the forms*, since 'they are jibber-jabber and even if they do exist they are wholly irrelevant.'³²

The Objection Concerning *Koina* or Universals

Some of Aristotle's significant objections to Plato's theory of *Ideas* concerns *Koina* or Universals:

1. Socrates was right to attend to the universal
2. For 'without the universal, it is not possible to attain knowledge'³³

24 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6 1096b 32.

25 Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, 991b1-4, 1033b26-28.

26 Aristotle. *Physics*, 259a8.

27 Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, 991a12-14.

28 Aristotle. *Metaphysics* 991a20-23.

29 Aristotle *Metaphysics* 991b1.

30 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096b32-4.

31 Aristotle. *Metaphysics* 991a8-10.

32 Aristotle. *Metaphysics* 1086b2-5.

33 Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, 1086b-6.

3. 'Nevertheless Socrates surely never separated them from particulars; and in not separating them, he thought rightly'³⁴
4. That he thought rightly, Aristotle insists, can be appreciated by observing how those who do separate universals from particulars, the Platonists, go awry.³⁵

The Separation of Universals from Particulars

Another cluster of Aristotle's objections to Plato concern the *Separation* of Universals from Particulars:

1. By separating universals, the Platonists end up swallowing the view that Universals and particulars are practically (or, very roughly, scedon) the same nature'.³⁶
2. Or, more weakly, the problematic of their separation.

They at the same time make the Ideas, as substances, universals, and again, as separate, also as belonging to the class of particulars. Separation is the cause of the difficulties which result in regarding Ideas. These things were shown to be problematic earlier, because this cannot be. The reason why those who say that substances are universal conjoin these things into the same is that they made substances not the same as perceptible. They thought that in the case of sensible, particulars are in flux and that none of them remains, whereas they thought of universals as beyond these and as being something else. Just as we said earlier, this is something Socrates set in motion, because of his definitions, but even so he at any rate did not separate them out from particulars. And he thought rightly in not separating them. This is very clear from the results (erga):

for while without the universal, it is not possible to attain knowledge, separation is the cause of the difficulties which accrue concerning the Ideas. They

34 Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, 1086b3-5.

35 Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, 1086b5.

36 Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, 1086b10-11.

(Socrates' successors) regarded it as necessary, if there are going to be substances beyond (para)the sensible and flowing substances, that they be separate; but they did not have others and instead selected the things predicated universally, with the result that universals and particulars were practically the same sorts of natures.³⁷

In the ninth chapter of the first book of the *Metaphysics*, Again in the fifth chapter of the thirteenth book Aristotle raises the question almost with a tinge of sarcasm of Plato's theory of *Ideas* rendered in the Barnes (ed.) translation as *forms*. *What on earth do the Forms contribute to sensible things, either to those that are eternal or to those that come into being and cease to be?* According to Aristotle, Plato's forms cause neither movement nor any change in sensible things. The *forms*, since they are not inherent in things, they are therefore not the substance of things. As such, they do not contribute in any way towards knowledge of the other things. They are therefore neither the causes of particular things nor are they in particular things.³⁸ Further down Aristotle says to say that they (the *forms*) are patterns, and the other things share them is to use empty words and poetical metaphors. The *forms*, says Aristotle are pattern not only of sensible things but also of themselves. I do not find this very convincing. If for instance the Ideal man is conceived to as being a copy of concrete man on the ideal plane, in the ordinary meaning of the word *ideal*, as actual man raised to the highest level of development, then '*deal* man will be sensible'. But it is doubtful if Plato meant this. Even if Plato implied this through the unfortunate uses of phrases on occasions, this notion is not very necessary to his theory of *forms*. For according to Plato the ideal Forms are subsistent concepts or *Ideal types*, and so the subsistent concept of man will contain corporeality for example, but there is no reason why it should itself be

37 Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, 1086b7-11.

38 Aristotle *Metaphysics*, 991a also 1079b10-1080a.

corporeal, for corporeality and sensibility are *de facto, ex-hypothesi*, excluded when the postulated *Ideal* man means or denotes an idea. So when Aristotle quibbles that the form of genus must be a genus of forms, I think that Aristotle treats Plato unfairly. Also, when he cites the *Phaedo*³⁹ as an instance of the forms as causes both of being and becoming, so that he finds faults when the form exists, still the things that share in them do not come into being, unless there is some (other) efficient cause. And, also to find besides, that many other things come into being of which there are no *forms*.

Aristotle says that the *forms* are useless in the explanation of the movement of things. For if they are motionless and the objects of the world are copies of the *forms* then they ought to be motionless too. But they are not.

A Critique of Aristotle's Objections to Plato's Theory of Ideas

I do not particularly think that Aristotle does justice to Plato here in his criticism because I think that Plato was very well aware that his *forms* were not meant to be moving causes, after all he brought in the notion of the *Demiurge* to take care of that. Besides, he accounted for the world's dynamism in different ways. However I also think that Aristotle is in some ways justified in his criticism of Plato. For Plato's *forms* left an unbridgeable divide between sensible objects and the *Ideas*. It would have been expected that Plato would provide some sort of an internal essential principle, within the things/object itself, but Plato does not appear to do so. He left instead a dualism which like that of Descartes, almost two millennia later, will deprive the sensible world of most of its reality and meaning. And Descartes, like the *neo-Platonists* long after Plato, will again bring in the notion of a God to guarantee the world's existence or in their cases to locate the idea of man even if they were not positing an actual concrete man in the mind of God.

³⁹ *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters* edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. With an Introduction and Prefatory Notes. Bollingen Series LXXI. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996 *Phaedo*. 100d.

Aristotle's objection against Plato's Idea seems to be rungs on his ladder as a debating point towards his own enterprise of presenting his own thought as solving all the groping of his predecessors.

When Aristotle says that the theory of *forms* is an impossible one,⁴⁰ because the substance and that of which it is a substance can be apart. He points to a relation that Plato had tried to explain by terms like *participation* and *Imitation*. This criticism would be a serious one if separation meant local separation. But I think that the separation in the sense of *forms* need not be local separation. I think that it means *independent of*. Aristotle, I think, is looking at this from the point of his own theory according to which the *form* is the immanent essence of the sensible object. So he asserts that participation can mean no other that there is a real immanent *form*, co-constitutive of the object with matter. This, of course is something that Plato would not admit to. So in a sense Aristotle does point to a weakness, an inadequacy in Plato's theory, but I think that in doing so he also discloses the inadequacies of his own theory for he does not, I think, establish any transcendental ground for the fixity of essences. It is true that Plato is weak in providing the link as relation between the *forms* and that of which they are *forms* of. He was aware of that, hence the Demiurge. I wonder why Aristotle does not comment on that. He is silent on this perhaps for the ultimate cause of motion in the world was really the Final cause.

On the criticism that the *forms* will be individual objects like the objects of which they are *forms* will hold true only if Plato actually held that the *forms* were things. But I do not think that he did. In his attempt to organize and systematize the world of Ideas, he saw them as forming a whole, that is, one single system (a Hegelian enterprise before Hegel).

Aristotle, while admitting the general Platonic position that the universal element with the immanent essential form is the

40 Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, 991b1 pg. 3.

object of science, and of rational knowledge, he identifies this with the immanent essential *form* of the sensible object, which together with its matter makes up the object. The formal principle realizes itself in the object. For Aristotle then, the formal principle for instance, of an organism, its *entelechy*, expresses, realizes itself in organic functions of the object. It unfolds itself in matter, towards a *telos*- an end. The *end* being the adequate manifestation of the essence of the *idea* in the phenomenon.

Aristotle certainly broke fresh grounds in the philosophy of nature. He sees his doctrine of the *immanent* essence as a corrective to Plato's *transcendental* essence. His remarks about the emergence of finality in philosophy are to some degree unjust to Plato, and I think that he jettisoned much valuable things here. Plato's conception of providence, of divine reason immanent in the world, and operating in the world.

As regards Plato's notion of the exemplary, Plato did fail to work out a systematized view of absolute being as the exemplary cause of essences, as grounds of value, to realize as did Aristotle- that the immanent *form* is intelligent, that supreme actuality is supreme intelligence.

Aristotle passed over the profound truth in Plato's theory. Each thinker has his strong points. Each made a valuable contribution to philosophy, but neither gave the complete truth. In a way both could be said to be complementary, as Raphael's famous painting of the school of Athens in the Vatican Museums shows; Plato with hands *upraised*, and Aristotle with hands *downcast*, pointing to the earth.

It is not just a question of rejecting either Plato's doctrine for the Stagirite's thoughts or the other way round. It is, rather, I think, a matter of synthesizing and integrating the different but complimentary dimensions of thought as perspectives, emphasized by these two master thinkers at the very threshold of the dawn of Philosophy.

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