

A Study on the Significance of Aristotle Western Philosophy

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Abstract – The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) made significant and lasting contributions to nearly every aspect of human knowledge, from logic to biology to ethics and aesthetics. Though overshadowed in classical times by the work of his teacher Plato, from late antiquity through the Enlightenment, Aristotle's surviving writings were incredibly influential. In Arabic philosophy, he was known simply as "The First Teacher"; in the West, he was "The Philosopher."

Aristotle was born in 384 B.C. in Stagira in northern Greece. Both of his parents were members of traditional medical families, and his father, Nicomachus, served as court physician to King Amyntus III of Macedonia. His parents died while he was young, and he was likely raised at his family's home in Stagira. At age 17 he was sent to Athens to enroll in Plato's Academy. He spent 20 years as a student and teacher at the school, emerging with both a great respect and a good deal of criticism for his teacher's theories.

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INTRODUCTION

It was at the Lyceum that Aristotle probably composed most of his approximately 200 works, of which only 31 survive. In style, his known works are dense and almost jumbled, suggesting that they were lecture notes for internal use at his school. The surviving works of Aristotle are grouped into four categories. The "Organon" is a set of writings that provide a logical toolkit for use in any philosophical or scientific investigation. Next come Aristotle's theoretical works, most famously his treatises on animals, cosmology, the "Physics" (a basic inquiry about the nature of matter and change) and the "Metaphysics" (a quasi-theological investigation of existence itself).

Third are Aristotle's so-called practical works, notably the "Nicomachean Ethics" and "Politics," both deep investigations into the nature of human flourishing on the individual, familial and societal levels. Finally, his "Rhetoric" and "Poetics" examine the finished products of human productivity, including what makes for a convincing argument and how a well-wrought tragedy can instill cathartic fear and pity.

After the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C., anti-Macedonian sentiment again forced Aristotle to flee Athens. He died a little north of the city in 322, of a digestive complaint. He asked to be buried next to his wife, who had died some years before. In his last

years he had a relationship with his slave Herpyllis, who bore him the son, Nicomachus, for whom his great ethical treatise is named.

Aristotle's favored students took over the Lyceum, but within a few decades the school's influence had faded in comparison to the rival Academy. For several generations Aristotle's works were all but forgotten. The historian Strabo says they were stored for centuries in a moldy cellar in Asia Minor before their rediscovery in the first century B.C., though it is unlikely that these were the only copies.

In 30 B.C. Andronicus of Rhodes grouped and edited Aristotle's remaining works in what became the basis for all later editions. After the fall of Rome, Aristotle was still read in Byzantium and became well-known in the Islamic world, where thinkers like Avicenna (970-1037), Averroes (1126-1204) and the Jewish scholar Maimonides (1134-1204) revitalized Aristotle's logical and scientific precepts.

In the 13th century Aristotle was reintroduced to the West through the work of Albertus Magnus and especially Thomas Aquinas, whose brilliant synthesis of Aristotelian and Christian thought provided a bedrock for late medieval Catholic philosophy, theology and science.

Aristotle's universal influence waned somewhat during the Renaissance and Reformation, as

religious and scientific reformers questioned the way the Catholic Church had subsumed his precepts. Scientists like Galileo and Copernicus disproved his geocentric model of the solar system, while anatomists such as William Harvey dismantled many of his biological theories. However, even today Aristotle's work remains a significant starting point for any argument in the fields of logic, aesthetics, political theory and ethics.

Although Aristotle's philosophy is the object of academic study worldwide, it is thought that most of his works have been lost over the centuries. Those that survived through the medieval manuscripts are thought to represent only one third of works created by the celebrated ancient Greek philosopher. The surviving works are collected in the so-called Corpus Aristotelicum. Some, however, are believed not to be composed by Aristotle himself but rather under his supervision and direction, while some are thought to be a product of his successors at the Lyceum. The Corpus is broken down into five sections – Logic, Physics, Metaphysics, Ethics and politics, and Rhetoric and poetics. Aristotle's works are sometimes also divided into exoteric and esoteric. The first group of works refers to those that were intended for the public, while esoteric works were used mostly within his school such as the treatises. The Corpus Aristotelicum are exclusively treatises. Esoteric works, on the other hand, are lost although a few dialogues survived in fragments.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ARISTOTLE WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

Aristotle's emphasis on good reasoning combined with his belief in the scientific method forms the backdrop for most of his work. For example, in his work in ethics and politics, Aristotle identifies the highest good with intellectual virtue; that is, a moral person is one who cultivates certain virtues based on reasoning. And in his work on psychology and the soul, Aristotle distinguishes sense perception from reason, which unifies and interprets the sense perceptions and is the source of all knowledge.

Aristotle famously rejected Plato's theory of forms, which states that properties such as beauty are abstract universal entities that exist independent of the objects themselves. Instead, he argued that forms are *intrinsic* to the objects and cannot exist apart from them, and so must be studied in relation to them. However, in discussing art, Aristotle seems to reject this, and instead argues for idealized universal form which artists attempt to capture in their work.

It is reported that Aristotle's writings were held by his student Theophrastus, who had succeeded Aristotle in leadership of the Peripatetic School. Theophrastus's library passed to his pupil Neleus. To protect the books from theft, Neleus's heirs concealed them in a vault, where they were damaged somewhat by dampness, moths and worms. In this hiding place they

were discovered about 100 BCE by Apellicon, a rich book lover, and brought to Athens. They were later taken to Rome after the capture of Athens by Sulla in 86 BCE. In Rome they soon attracted the attention of scholars, and the new edition of them gave fresh impetus to the study of Aristotle and of philosophy in general. This collection is the basis of the works of Aristotle that we have today. Strangely, the list of Aristotle's works given by Diogenes Laertius does not contain any of these treatises. It is possible that Diogenes' list is that of forgeries compiled at a time when the real works were lost to sight.

The works of Aristotle fall under three headings: (1) dialogues and other works of a popular character; (2) collections of facts and material from scientific treatment; and (3) systematic works. Among his writings of a popular nature the only one which we possess of any consequence is the interesting tract *On the Polity of the Athenians*. The works on the second group include 200 titles, most in fragments, collected by Aristotle's school and used as research. Some may have been done at the time of Aristotle's successor Theophrastus. Included in this group are constitutions of 158 Greek states. The systematic treatises of the third group are marked by a plainness of style, with none of the golden flow of language which the ancients praised in Aristotle. This may be due to the fact that these works were not, in most cases, published by Aristotle himself or during his lifetime, but were edited after his death from unfinished manuscripts. Until Werner Jaeger (1912) it was assumed that Aristotle's writings presented a systematic account of his views. Jaeger argues for an early, middle and late period (genetic approach), where the early period follows Plato's theory of forms and soul, the middle rejects Plato, and the later period (which includes most of his treatises) is more empirically oriented.

Aristotle's writings on the general subject of logic were grouped by the later Peripatetics under the name *Organon*, or instrument. From their perspective, logic and reasoning was the chief preparatory instrument of scientific investigation. Aristotle himself, however, uses the term "logic" as equivalent to verbal reasoning. The *Categories* of Aristotle are classifications of individual words (as opposed to sentences or propositions), and include the following ten: substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, situation, condition, action, passion. They seem to be arranged according to the order of the questions we would ask in gaining knowledge of an object. For example, we ask, first, what a thing is, then how great it is, next of what kind it is. Substance is always regarded as the most important of these. Substances are further divided into first and second: first substances are *individual* objects; second substances are the *species* in which first substances or individuals in here.

DISCUSSION

Notions when isolated do not in themselves express either truth or falsehood: it is only with the combination of ideas in a proposition that truth and falsity are possible. The elements of such a proposition are the noun substantive and the verb. The combination of words gives rise to rational speech and thought, conveys a meaning both in its parts and as a whole. Such thought may take many forms, but logic considers only *demonstrative* forms which express truth and falsehood. The truth or falsity of propositions is determined by their agreement or disagreement with the facts they represent. Thus propositions are either affirmative or negative, each of which again may be either universal or particular or undesignated.

A definition, for Aristotle is a statement of the essential character of a subject, and involves both the genus and the difference. To get at a true definition we must find out those qualities within the genus which taken separately are wider than the subject to be defined, but taken together are precisely equal to it. For example, "prime," "odd," and "number" are each wider than "triplet" (that is, a collection of any three items, such as three rocks); but taken together they are just equal to it. The genus definition must be formed so that no species is left out. Having determined the genus and species, we must next find the points of similarity in the species separately and then consider the common characteristics of different species. Definitions may be imperfect by (1) being obscure, (2) by being too wide, or (3) by not stating the essential and fundamental attributes. Obscurity may arise from the use of equivocal expressions, of metaphorical phrases, or of eccentric words. The heart of Aristotle's logic is the syllogism, the classic example of which is as follows: All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal. The syllogistic form of logical argumentation dominated logic for 2,000 years until the rise of modern propositional and predicate logic thanks to Frege, Russell, and others.

Aristotle's editors gave the name "Metaphysics" to his works on *first philosophy*, either because they went *beyond* or followed *after* his physical investigations. Aristotle begins by sketching the history of philosophy. For Aristotle, philosophy arose historically after basic necessities were secured. It grew out of a feeling of curiosity and wonder, to which religious myth gave only provisional satisfaction. The earliest speculators (i.e. Thales, Anaximenes, Anaximander) were philosophers of nature. The Pythagoreans succeeded these with mathematical abstractions. The level of pure thought was reached partly in the Eleatic philosophers (such as Parmenides) and Anaxagoras, but more completely in the work of Socrates. Socrates' contribution was the expression of general conceptions in the form of definitions, which he arrived at by induction and analogy. For Aristotle, the subject of metaphysics deals with the first principles of scientific knowledge and the ultimate conditions of all existence. More

specifically, it deals with existence in its most fundamental state (i.e. being as being), and the essential attributes of existence. This can be contrasted with mathematics which deals with existence in terms of lines or angles, and not existence as it is in itself. In its universal character, metaphysics superficially resembles dialectics and sophistry. However, it differs from dialectics which is tentative, and it differs from sophistry which is a pretence of knowledge without the reality.

The axioms of science fall under the consideration of the metaphysician insofar as they are properties of *all* existence. Aristotle argues that there are a handful of universal truths. Against the followers of Heraclitus and Protagoras, Aristotle defends both the laws of contradiction, and that of excluded middle. He does this by showing that their denial is suicidal. Carried out to its logical consequences, the denial of these laws would lead to the sameness of all facts and all assertions. It would also result in an indifference in conduct. As the science of being as being, the leading question of Aristotle's metaphysics is, What is meant by the real or true substance? Plato tried to solve the same question by positing a universal and invariable element of knowledge and existence -- the forms -- as the only real permanent besides the changing phenomena of the senses. Aristotle attacks Plato's theory of the forms on three different grounds.

First, Aristotle argues, forms are powerless to explain *changes* of things and a thing's ultimate extinction. Forms are not causes of movement and alteration in the physical objects of sensation. *Second*, forms are equally incompetent to explain how we arrive at *knowledge* of particular things. For, to have knowledge of a particular object, it must be knowledge of the substance which is *in* that thing. However, the forms place knowledge outside of particular things. Further, to suppose that we know particular things better by adding on their general conceptions of their forms, is about as absurd as to imagine that we can count numbers better by multiplying them. Finally, if forms were needed to explain our knowledge of particular objects, then forms must be used to explain our knowledge of objects of art; however, Platonists do not recognize such forms. The *third* ground of attack is that the forms simply cannot explain the *existence* of particular objects. Plato contends that forms do not exist *in* the particular objects which partake in the forms. However, that substance of a particular thing cannot be separated from the thing itself. Further, aside from the jargon of "participation," Plato does not explain the relation between forms and particular things. In reality, it is merely metaphorical to describe the forms as patterns of things; for, what is a genus to one object is a species to a higher class, the same idea will have to be both a form and a particular thing at the same time. Finally, on Plato's account of the forms, we must imagine an intermediate link between the

form and the particular object, and so on *ad infinitum*: there must always be a "third man" between the individual man and the form of man.

CONCLUSION

For Aristotle, the form is not something outside the object, but rather *in* the varied phenomena of sense. Real substance, or true being, is not the abstract form, but rather the *concrete* individual thing. Unfortunately, Aristotle's theory of substance is not altogether consistent with itself. In the *Categories* the notion of substance tends to be nominalistic (that is, substance is a concept we apply to things). In the *Metaphysics*, though, it frequently inclines towards realism (that is, substance has a real existence in itself). We are also struck by the apparent contradiction in his claims that science deals with universal concepts, and substance is declared to be an individual. In any case, substance is for him a merging of matter into form. The term "matter" is used by Aristotle in four overlapping senses. *First*, it is the underlying structure of changes, particularly changes of growth and of decay. *Secondly*, it is the potential which has implicitly the capacity to develop into reality. *Thirdly*, it is a kind of stuff without specific qualities and so is indeterminate and contingent. *Fourthly*, it is identical with form when it takes on a form in its actualized and final phase.

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