

## Chapter Five Aristotle's Criticism of Platonic Idealism and the Concepts of Form and Matter

### **Key Words**

Aristotle, third man argument, form and matter coexistence, first philosophy, transcendentalism.

### **Introduction**

This chapter primarily deals with Aristotle's criticism of Platonic idealism and his development of an alternate metaphysics. Here he proposes a dualism of form and matter. We shall begin with an assessment of Aristotle's intellectual contributions and then examine the salient features of his refutation of Plato's Idealism. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Plato proposes an uncompromising idealism and monism, which posit essences or forms as the only realities and treated everything else as unreal and relegated the material world to the realm of mere appearances. Aristotle's theory retains some of his teacher's insights, as he too considers the forms as ultimate realities, but rejects the master's transcendentalism and makes the forms immanent to the objects of the material world. He employs concepts like potentiality and actuality in order to explain this fruitful coexistence of form and matter.

Aristotle was born at Stagira, in Macedonian in the year 384 B.C as the son of a physician and all his initial training were in the science of medicine which left a significant mark on his later thinking and life. He studied under Plato for several years and was a prominent member of Plato's Academy. But he later became a critic of Platonism, particularly of the master's transcendentalism. Aristotle was reported to have stated that wisdom will not die with Plato. After Plato's death he was forced to leave the Academy and eventually established his own school the Lyceum. Unlike Academy, where the importance was to abstract philosophical and mathematical thinking, the Lyceum gave equal importance to enquiries in physical sciences, aesthetics and politics.

### **Aristotle's Intellectual Contributions**

Aristotle has contributed immensely to a variety of disciplines and areas of study as they spread across a vast intellectual domain ranging from biology to aesthetics. His contributions are foundational in the world of natural sciences, particularly in biology, as

he has done extensive experimental work and classified the living world into different categories that enabled future work. Aristotle also laid foundations to the study of logic as a science and art of thinking and also to Ethics as a science of life. His works on aesthetics were seminal contributions to the discipline and referring to his intellectual contributions Russell makes the following observation:

Aristotle, as a philosopher, is in many ways very different from all his predecessors. He is the first to write like a professor: his treatises are systematic, his discussions are divided into heads, he is a professional teacher, not an inspired prophet. His work is critical, careful, pedestrian, without any trace of Bacchic enthusiasm. [Russell: *A History of Western Philosophy*]

### **Aristotle's Criticism of Plato**

Aristotle has stated that, "Wisdom will never die with Plato", and on another occasion he said, Plato is dear, but truth is dearer. As mentioned above, while Academy was dedicated to speculative and political philosophy, Lyceum took biology and natural sciences seriously. But metaphysics or first philosophy occupies a central role in his scheme of things as well. According to him, mathematical and physical sciences treat of the quantity, quality, and relations of things. On the other hand, the first philosophy deals with the category of substance and also studies the causes of things. It enquires into the nature of being without considering the conditions imposed by space and time. The absolute and necessary being, as understood by Aristotle, is the eternal essence of things as opposed to the relative, contingent, and accidental. In this regard he agrees with Plato to a great deal.

Aristotle's major criticism of Plato's philosophy targeted the latter's idea of universal essences. For Plato they are universal and objective realities and they exist independent of objects. They are eternal and imperishable and the objects in the world are fundamentally unreal and are mere copies of these eternal essences. Aristotle agrees with Plato on many counts. But he opposes the latter's transcendentalism, which maintains that the essences are apart from the things. According to Aristotle, essences or forms are immanent to things.

As Russell says, Aristotle considered them as common nouns and not as objective realities and things. Any name capable of universal application to the members of a class represents a universal. Opposing Plato's theory, which posits them as abstract original forms to which objects "participate", Aristotle initiates the third man argument.

### **Third Man Argument**

This argument aims at criticizing Plato's theory of ideas, which according to Aristotle states that, "a man is a man because he resembles or participates in the idea of man in the world of essences." Aristotle states that, if a man is a man because he resembles the ideal man, there must be a still more ideal man to whom both ordinary men and the ideal man are similar. Aristotle intends to demonstrate that the notion of imitation or copying used in the theory of forms runs into logical difficulties. In order to explain the similarity between a man and the form of man, one needs to construe a third form of man, and this always requires another form and hence the theory of ideas leads to *ad infinitum*.

Aristotle further asks whether the ideal man is an ideal animal. If he is, there must be as many ideal animals as there are species of animals. Again, how does the perfect and the eternal world be held responsible for the imperfect and perishable world of material objects?

Plato's transcendentalism conceived Ideas as real beings existing apart from the individuals, which express them. Aristotle finds this position objectionable. He asks, if the general Idea is the substance of the particulars or the essence of the things, how can it exist apart from that of which it is the substance and the essence? He affirms that the general cannot exist outside of and along side of the particular. According to him ideas considered as such and apart from the things, are not real beings or substances.

Opposing Plato he maintains that the phenomenal world is not unreal and argues that both form and matter coexist in the world of objects. Their coexistence is responsible for the existence of the world we live. Since he considers this world as real he finds it worthwhile in pursuing knowledge about it. This makes natural scientific investigations meaningful and important. He maintains that genuine scientific knowledge is not a mere acquaintance with facts as knowledge consists in knowing the reasons and causes of things and it should explain why they cannot be other than what they are. The theory of form-matter coexistence answers these fundamental questions.

Aristotle asserts that ideas do not and cannot exist apart from things. On the other hand, they are inherent or immanent in things. The idea is the form of the thing, and cannot be separated from it except by abstraction. It is the essence of the particular and with it constitutes an indivisible whole. For example, Aristotle would hold that there is manness because there are actual men in this world. There is parenthood, because there are parents. Russell elucidates Aristotle's argument of immanence with an interesting

simile. He says that, when we say "there is such a thing as the game of football," it will be nonsensical to assume that football could exist without football-players. Russell in his usual style of language analysis explains Aristotle's position in the following way.

And this dependence is thought to be not reciprocal: the men who play football would still exist even if they never played football; things which are usually sweet may turn sour; and my face, which is usually red, may turn pale without ceasing to be my face. In this way we are led to conclude that what is meant by an adjective is dependent for its being on what is meant by a proper name, but not vice versa. This is, I think, what Aristotle means. His doctrine on this point, as on many others, is a common-sense prejudice **pedantically expressed.**

Aristotle's **concept of matter** is unique. According to him matter is coexistent with form and different forms design matter differently in the process of evolution of objects. It is something that changes and Aristotle believed that each concrete instance of matter has an inner purpose. It is destined to become something. But Aristotle also maintains that matter has no reality apart from the form, as matter without the Idea is also an abstraction like Idea apart from particular object.

We shall take a concrete example of a pen in order to understand the concept of matter and matter-form relationship. Let us consider the form and matter of a ball pen. The form of the ball point pen is constituted by the properties of the pen, it has a ball point, it has ink in it, it can be used to write and can be held by the hand. Matter on the other hand is the material stuff to which these properties are attached to, the material by which the pen is made up of etc. The form of the pen, he affirms, is inherent in the material stuff. The former does not have an existence apart from and independent of the latter or many such pens. But in a unique manner, the form is independent, as it does not depend on any particular pen in this world. At the same time, Aristotle is not prepared to separate the form completely from the actual pens in the world.

Aristotle's philosophical perspective advocates avoiding the extremes and adopting a middle path. His metaphysical theory thus adopts a position, which avoids the extremes of Platonism and Atomism. He rejects Plato's view, which considers essences alone as real and the material world as illusion. As a consequence of his idealism, Plato also affirmed that all change is an illusion. The Atomists, on the other hand, advocated a unique form of materialism, which holds that everything is made up of atoms. According to them, the ultimate reality is constitutive of atoms and they try to explain the nature of reality and world in quantitative terms. They hold that atoms have no natural properties and all qualities and nature of objects result from a combination of atoms. Atoms

themselves have no natural qualities. To this Aristotle responds by arguing that, if qualities and properties are not actually there but are only illusions, then the sensible world cannot be trusted. Aristotle holds that everything that exists has a definite nature and hence is potential to become something.

Aristotle explains matter in terms of substantial material elements: earth, water, fire, air and ether. These five basic elements have qualities and each is distinguished from the other in terms of their unique quality and hence things have definite nature. Hence the Atomists' doctrine is unacceptable for him. Aristotle says that these qualities can transfer through matter.

One important aspect of Aristotle's metaphysics is his conception that all change is evolution. He maintains that all change is evolution. Form and matter, according to him, eternally coexist as they cannot be separated from one another. The form of an object changes when it evolves into another thing. For example, seed into tree. Here matter remains more or less the same and different forms design the matter differently. In this process of evolution, the seed becomes a tree; it realizes its purpose. Aristotle here provides a teleological explanation of the universe in terms of the matter-form relationship.

Though the forms are eternal and non-perishable—and here Aristotle subscribes to the Platonic view—he maintains that they are nevertheless not transcendent. It is often stated that Aristotle has brought forms from heaven to earth. According to him, they are not apart from things but in them. They are not transcendent, but immanent. On the other hand, matter too is equally real and eternal. It is not non-being, but dynamic and is in the process of change. Matter realizes the form or idea of the thing in the process of evolution. Aristotle explains the problem of change in the world with this dualism of form and matter and their constant coexistence.

Here Aristotle significantly deviates from Plato's position, which held that all change is illusion. According to Plato the material world is a copy and hence no knowledge is possible about it. We can form only opinions about it. Aristotle, on the other hand considers the material world as real and explains it in terms of the above described form-matter coexistence. His conception of change becomes relevant in this context. His theory of change is different from most of his predecessors. Unlike Plato and Parmenides, he never treated change as unreal and an illusion. But he does not agree with Heraclitus and others who find nothing but blind change as real. Aristotle adopts a middle path and affirms that all change is not illusion. Change is not blind, but purposeful and meaningful.

Every entity in nature is actually something and has the potential to become something else. For example, the seed is actually a seed but it has the potential to become a tree. According to Aristotle, in the seed state, the form of seed fashions or shapes in order to make it an actual seed. But as the seed progresses to the tree, it gets shaped and designed by different other forms. Finally the seed actualizes its potentials and becomes a tree.

Aristotle thus considers both change and permanence are real. In change it is the form that changes while the matter remains the same. Change occurs when the arrangement of the matter changes. Even though the form of an object can change, it is form, not matter, that provides the order and permanence in the world. The matter of all things is ultimately the same.

Underlying this conception of change is his idea that all change is purposeful, because, according to him all change is evolution. He further explains this theory with a teleological explanation. He contends that the essential form of a thing determines what an object is and it guides the changes and development of that thing. Hence changes are not blind or illusory, but are intelligible. During evolution an organism realizes its purpose. Hence, there is no concept of complete change. Only some aspects of the form of a thing changes and as long as a thing remains in existence, its essential form remains the same. An apple seed will evolve into an apple tree and not to anything else. The form of the matter changes in those ways that are necessary for it to become an apple tree.

Again, while Plato rejected the world as illusion, for Aristotle it is real. The world is not just an imitation or a shadow, but a reality and hence it is possible to have knowledge about it. Consequently, Aristotle believes that studying the processes of the natural world is not worthless. This approach to the physical world and knowledge about it had encouraged the growth of natural sciences. We can see that the systematic study of natural sciences began with Aristotle's systematic approach to the knowledge about the natural world. It was he who initiated the classification of the living universe as species and genera, which even today lies at the foundation of elementary scientific enquiries.

### **Aristotle's Ethical Theory**

As mentioned above, Aristotle adopts a teleological approach and attempts to explain everything, including human reality with the assumption that the nature of reality, including the human world, can be explained teleologically; as the actualization of a

purpose. According to him, the purpose of human life is *eudemonia*. Before we explain what this constitutes, let us examine his conception of human reality.

Aristotle conceived ethics as a very important science and according to him it deals with actual human behavior. Unlike Plato, he affirmed that the empirical world and life in it are valuable. But unlike the materialists, he adopts a teleological conception of human life and hence conceived that there is a higher purpose to life, which needs to be realized in our present life in this world. Russell comments that, Aristotle's metaphysics, roughly speaking, may be described as Plato diluted by common sense. He is difficult because Plato and common sense do not mix easily.

## Quiz

1. According to Aristotle, what is the subject matter of first philosophy?  
(a) Quantity and quality of things (b) The category of substance (c) About the nature of material reality (d) About transcendental essences.
2. According to Aristotle, the absolute and necessary being is:  
(a) The eternal essence of things (b) The objects themselves are ultimately real (c) The atoms that constitute things (d) The transcendental ideas.
3. According to Aristotle, genuine scientific knowledge consists in:  
(a) Acquaintance with facts (b) Knowing the reasons and causes of things (c) Knowing the essences of things (d) Knowing to distinguish right from wrong.
4. Which of the following is not acceptable to Aristotle?  
(a) Ideas do not exist apart from things (b) Ideas are inherent or immanent in things (c) Ideas are transcendental (d) None of the above.
5. Which of the following is true of Aristotle?  
(a) Matter changes while form remains the same (b) Change occurs when the matter changes (c) Form provides the order and permanence in the world (d) All of the above

## Answer key

1. (b)
2. (a)
3. (b)
4. (c)
5. (c)

## Assignmentas

1. Describe Aristotle's criticism of Plato's idealism.

2. Discuss how does Aristotle explain the problem of change.

## **References and Further Reading**

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